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Recovering Catholic: How to Catholic without Being Roman Catholic

Archbishop Wynn Wagner
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Although the Roman Catholic Church dominates the news, sophisticated readers realize there are other Catholic churches—the Eastern Rite Catholic Church, the Coptic Catholic Church, the Maronite Catholic Church—but only a few will have heard of Archbishop Wynn Wagner's Old Catholic Church.

The Old Catholic Church, identified more accurately as "Communion" rather than Church, broke away from Rome because of a belief that the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) had no authority by divine right over the entire church. That movement originated in Holland in medieval times and began spreading several hundred years ago.

Wagner's work is not so much about what differentiates the Old Catholic Church from the Roman Catholic Church, but rather about Christian theology's central element that he believes transcends both hierarchy and bureaucracy—love in all its forms: eros, agape, phileo, etc. In an interesting chapter, "The Sound of One Praline Clapping," he discusses St. Paul's admonition in the New Testament's Corinthians: "but the greatest of these is love." Wagner then moves on to the relationship of that thesis to Jesus Christ's idea that we should "love our enemies."

"But Osama bin Laden?" Wagner asks. "…How do you do that? How do you even start?…The opposite of hate isn't love. The opposite of hate is acceptance." In this case of a person bent on destruction of all that does not adhere to Islamic law, readers will suppose that Wagner uses "acceptance" as an analogy for an "understanding" that bin Laden is God's creature too, deserving from Christians all that that classification implies.

Wagner often relates Christian theology to Buddhist philosophy as he constructs his argument for Old Catholic Christian faith. For example, he parallels the idea of sin with the concept of karma.

Recovering Catholic is written in a clear and conversational style, often leavened with humor. Wagner was once a member of the Roman Catholic Church, and while he mentions that he suffered abuse therein, he does not discuss the problem in depth. Many readers will long for a more detailed chronicle of his spiritual journey, including a discussion of why he chose to become a member of the clergy in the Old Catholic Communion.

Interestingly, Wagner also identifies himself as a married homosexual man, but he does not discuss the theology of the Old Catholic Communion in regard to homosexuality, divorce, or its other significant variations from the Roman church; he relies instead on broad statements. He writes, for example, "They say that God does not make a mistake in creating someone who is gay: it is a person, not a mistake. They say that people make mistakes like marrying the wrong person, but God knows how to forgive mistakes."

While Recovering Catholic is not a comprehensive theological discussion, given its clarity and brevity, the book could interest readers who struggle to reconcile the fundamentals of Christianity with the vagaries of modern society.

GARY PRESLEY (July 12, 2010)

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