

THE PERSPECTIVE OF PROVIDENCE

Paul Kengor, *A Pope and a President: John Paul II, Ronald Reagan, and the Extraordinary Untold Story of the 20th Century*. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2017.

A *Pope and a President* sounds like a craft cocktail inspired by American Catholicism: a dizzying blend of grenadine with Italian liqueur and Kentucky bourbon. However, it has little to do with alcohol, and still less with Italy or Kentucky. It is a book, written by notable Cold War historian and Reagan biographer, Paul Kengor.

A Pope and a President illuminates the inimitable partnership between two men, Pope John Paul II and President Ronald Reagan; an inimitable partnership that precipitated the fall of Soviet Communism, preserved the city of man, confronted the evils of the twentieth century, and counseled the nations in charity and truth. In this singular bond, there was no contradiction between the man from Poland and the man from Illinois, between the Catholic and the Methodist, between the playwright and the actor, between the Pope and the President. All these apparent contradictions were easily resolved in a common *telos*, a common purpose—only this noble *telos* is a story that has remained largely untold, hidden away in classified archives, until now.

When Kengor claims that he is writing the “untold story of the twentieth century” and chronicling the “end of atheistic communism,” he is not using mere hyperbole, but understands himself as writing a new, definitive account of the twentieth century. The reader cannot grasp the full import of the story until he understands that to *this* author, to *this* pope, and to *this* president, atheistic communism was not one political theory among others; it was an affront against the Church, the Gospel, Christian civilization and culture, and had widespread implications for the dignity of man, human rights, and the rights of nations.

How, then, does Kengor tell this “untold story of the twentieth century”? Certainly, the reader should be attentive to his prodigious research, keen analysis, and commitment to scholarly detail. The reader may likewise note the extensive measures by which he obtained documentation and information; Kengor accessed materials recently declassified by the United States government to ostensibly sketch a fuller, more complete image of history. For most readers, some of the information is old news (the assassination attempts of both Pope John Paul II and President Ronald Reagan), some of the information is new (Kengor purports to know who instigated the assassination attempt of Pope John Paul II), and some of the information is coalesced by way of conjecture (Kengor claims that the assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan prevented an immanent and potentially catastrophic invasion of Poland).

The “untold story of the twentieth century” affords readers a fresh perspective, a different lens by which we may understand the events of the past. Kengor suggests that any historical sketch of the twentieth century may be written in one of two ways. When the project considers the historical record as a secular science, dependent upon observation and experimentation no less than biology or physics, it may well dismiss the ineffable, the transcendent, and the divine. The other approach, adopted by Kengor in *A Pope and a President*, not only allows for providential designs, but assumes it.

The secular historian may deal with the twentieth century, so fraught with suffering and death, as but another period of secular history and the natural consequence of life after virtue. He may say that the twentieth century was the definitive end of religion and the beginning of another, more convincing espousal: atheism. He may say that the horrors of the twentieth century anticipated the grotesque abominations of the scandals of the Catholic clergy, albeit in the same century in which these offenses were proliferated and ignored.

The fanaticism of Marx became reality in Lenin. German nationalism became a monstrosity in Hitler. The century could be presented, not only as an ideological melee, but by the unprecedented rise and subsequent influence of ideologues. The historian might even describe the whole of the twentieth century with overt stoicism, relating historical facts already known and understood by the general polis in encyclopedic fashion. He may complete his project, as countless others have surely done, without mentioning God. In short, he may try to tell the story of a godless century with a godless horizon.

On the other hand, the historian may try to do what Paul Kengor has done in *A Pope and a President*. The writer may approach the twentieth century from above; as indeed the Catholic must. He may start from the heavens, and study the turbulent past in light of divine providence. In other words, he may affirm one definitive, albeit contentious, premise: God is operative in human history. To affirm that God exists was no small feat in the twentieth century; to affirm that he was operative, no small miracle. To assert that God has a plan “to reconcile to himself all things” or to “renew the face of the earth” was to contest the prevailing “-isms” of the age: Marxism, Socialism, Communism, Nazism, and so on. To consider the fall of what Reagan called the “Evil Empire” as mere happenstance is to try to tell the story of the twentieth century without God. But these men were either secondary causes in a much grander design or celestial pawns in some cosmic chess match; whatever the case, it is nonsense to suggest that the unfolding of this difficult century occurred as a result of confluence or coincidence.

No historical sketch of the twentieth century—or any century for that matter—is sufficient without the fundamental distinction between primary causality (God is the cause of creation) and secondary causality (God accomplishes his will through creatures). Time and again, Kengor refers to Pope John Paul II and President Ronald Reagan as secondary causes in the DP—an acronym used by the Reagan administration for the

“Divine Plan.” Kengor recounts the unexpected rise of both men in their respective countries and institutions, their improbable similarities and complementary differences, and the influence of faith on their global perspective, inner convictions, and eventual decisions. He recounts the sociopolitical climate of Eastern Europe, particularly the effects of totalitarian communism, realized in Soviet Russia and in other beleaguered nations like Poland. At long last, he recounts the basis of their relationship, a partnership undoubtedly forged by a common *telos* of political and spiritual proportions: to defend the dignity of man, human rights, and the rights of nations.

Kengor is content to follow these two men through the twentieth century until their political foresight and, as he describes, “mystical” sensibilities bow to the ineffable mystery of God. Whenever Pope John Paul II or President Ronald Reagan did something or experienced something contrary to expectation—whether it be the “dubious distinction” of surviving an assassination attempt, or the mutual interest and devotion to Our Lady of Fatima—Kengor tries to understand, from the perspective of providence, how these events changed the course of human history forever.

Though not intended to be “a religious apologetic,” the book nonetheless affirms what is so often found wanting in contemporary works of historical enquiry: the DP. It may even cause the reader to believe in the providential care of God, who—in his good pleasure—mixed together *A Pope* and *a President* for his eternal purposes.

Reviewed by Maximilian Jaskowak, O.P.

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