

[News](#)

[Opinion](#)

[Vatican](#)



George Weigel speaks at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., in March. (CNS/Catholic Standard/Jaclyn Lippelmann)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

November 27, 2018

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

In his most recent [column at First Things](#), titled "Vatican Autocracy and the U.S. Bishops," George Weigel, who once posed as the "authoritative biographer" of Pope John Paul II, writes:

I recently spent almost five weeks in Rome, during which I found an anti-American atmosphere worse than anything I'd experienced in 30 years of work in and around the Vatican. A false picture of the Church's life in the United States, in which wealthy Catholics in league with extreme right-wing bishops have hijacked the Church and are leading an embittered resistance to the present pontificate, has been successfully sold. And in another offense against collegiality, this grossly distorted depiction of American Catholicism has not been effectively challenged or corrected by American bishops enjoying Roman favor these days.

This paragraph provokes several plausible responses, the most obvious of which is to say that this picture was not "sold" so much as it was "discovered," one might even say "discerned." Weigel once defined natural law as the result of "disciplined reflection on the dynamics of human action," and something similar could be used to describe how Vatican officials came to the conclusion that "wealthy Catholics in league with extreme right-wing bishops have hijacked the Church" in the United States.

An even simpler response is found in a recent news story: "[Catholic Business Leaders Hold Back Donation to Vatican Amid Church Crisis](#)," as The Wall Street Journal headline had it. Legatus, an organization for Catholic CEOs, has decided to withhold the organization's tithe to the Holy See. Talk about throwing your money around or, in this case, *not* throwing your money around. I want to ask these titans of industry how their action is not merely an updated version of simony?

But the best response would be for Weigel to simply consult past issues of the National Catholic Reporter.

He could start with [Dan Morris-Young's account](#) of a meeting of the Napa Institute. He could follow that up with three reports by Tom Roberts, the [first](#) on the Knights of Columbus and their funding of efforts to turn the church into the Republican Party at prayer. Roberts' [second report](#) was on a conference at the Catholic University of America that tried to enlist Cardinal Peter Turkson, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, in the effort to baptize the writings of Charles Koch. The [third report](#) charted the rise of ideologically motivated funders who also try to shape the church and the country in conservative ways, funders Weigel no doubt knows. Or he could read Heidi Schlumpf's [account](#) of a meeting of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students or her [report](#) on Napa Institute's "Authentic Reform" conference this past October.

None of these were opinion pieces of the sort that I write. These heavily researched articles were the result of deep dives into government tax forms and old-style, shoe-leather reporting. I would hope the authorities in Rome would pay attention to this kind of journalism.

It has been my great privilege to connect some of the dots in these reported pieces, specifically to see how these organizations are linked to sets of ideas that are antithetical to Catholic social teaching. So, for example, in a [follow-up](#) to Roberts' report on the Knights of Columbus, I pointed out that Weigel has long held a corner office at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, which the Knights help fund.

The center is more neoconservative than libertarian, espousing a narrow understanding of natural law and trying to apply it, willy-nilly, to American history and culture. Organizations like the center have been critical to the formation of foundational myths in our culture, such as "[originalism](#)" and "supply-side economics," myths that always seem to result in a politics that is more business-friendly than Catholic-social-doctrine-friendly. And Weigel famously [displayed his hubris](#) when he attacked Pope Benedict XVI's social encyclical [Caritas in Veritate](#).

And, of course, no one in the English-speaking world has been more responsible for producing the early hagiography surrounding St. Pope John Paul "the Great." The same inattention to history that allows these neocons to embrace originalism in constitutional interpretation prevented Weigel et al. from recognizing that such

appellations as "the Great" only come with time.

His current article, of course, is about clergy sex abuse, so you would think Weigel would have the intellectual integrity to admit to the fact that on the issue of confronting sex abuse, John Paul II was "the not-so-Great." In fact, it was John Paul who [set the patterns](#) for denial and refusing to meet with victims, making it almost impossible for bishops to laicize priest-perpetrators, and, of course, the serial promotions of former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick. Alas, Weigel again displays he has no such intellectual integrity.

Advertisement

You could have a field day comparing what Weigel wrote then about the relationship of national bishops' conferences to Roman authorities to what he writes now. "What conceivable meaning of 'synodality' or 'collegiality' includes an autocratic Roman intervention in the affairs of a national bishops' conference that knows its own situation far better than the Roman authorities do?" he asks now. I do not recall him asking a question like this during the 27 long years of his hero's reign, do you?

Or this: "Honest disagreements — about, say, [Amoris Laetitia](#) and its implications for doctrine and pastoral practice — are one thing. A systematic distortion of reality, which tramples on the presumption of an opponent's good will that should guide any internal Catholic debate, is quite another." After the publication of, say, [Veritatis Splendor](#) in 1993, was there an affirmation of "honest disagreements" coming from Weigel and his ilk?

If irony were gold, Weigel would be a rich man in this pontificate of Francis. But this kind of intellectual — and moral — whiplash is unbecoming and unserious. If he has had a conversion, let him explain his conversion. Otherwise, his writings are mere evidence of hypocrisy.

The ever-shrinking, increasingly unhinged crowd at First Things may still look to him for guidance but Weigel is not precisely unhinged. He appears to be flailing about, clearly disconnected, not clear how to reconnect. The "evangelical Catholicism" he said the church needed has arrived with Pope Francis, and it is about the poor not

contraception, about witness not entrenchment, about engaging the culture not denouncing it — in short, not what he was expecting.

Now, like so many on the right, Weigel thinks he can suddenly become concerned about clergy sex abuse and use that concern to tarnish Francis, but it is his hero who will emerge from the current reckoning the most tarnished.

What did Marx say about history? That it repeats itself first as tragedy and then as farce. Marx was wrong about history, but something similar is happening to Weigel and the entire neocon project. Under Benedict, their appeals to reshape Catholic social doctrine became tragic as the theologically gifted pontiff wanted none of their Americanist propaganda. With Francis, the American neocons and the plutocrats who fund them have become a farce unto themselves.

It is mildly entertaining to watch, if you do not mind committing the sin of *delectatio morosa*. Thank God for small mercies: At least Weigel is mostly confined to the pages of First Things, America's least influential journal of religion and public life.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest: [Sign up to receive free newsletters](#) and we'll notify you when he publishes new [Distinctly Catholic](#) columns.