

Piety, Money, and Catholicism

February 6, 2012

Review of Jason Berry, *Render unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church*, New York: Crown Publishers, 2011

Render unto Rome author Jason Berry is a practicing Catholic living in New Orleans, and this is his third book on the present crises in the Catholic Church he remains a devoted member of—yet as such, a necessary prophet of conscience who uses his pen and his investigative skills to cry out as did Isaiah and Jeremiah. His two previous books on Catholicism, *Lead Us Not into Temptation* and *Vows of Silence* (with Gerald Renner) explored the ramifications of the priest-pedophilia scandal. *Render unto Rome* looks at another facet much related to priest-pedophilia, the finances of the Catholic Church—a system of fiduciary fiefdoms controlled by bishops with little financial accountability or constraint, who were called upon to quickly raise large sums of money to pay off lawsuits and other compensation to pedophile victims. Combine secrecy with sudden vast financial need, and a volatile mixture emerges—just how volatile in what Berry probes here in depth, in a well-researched tome that combines ample documentation with the storytelling grace of a thriller novel. Only the troubling tale presented here is all too true.

Berry is a novelist, jazz historian and documentary filmmaker as well as a reporter, and his novelist's art enters well into *Render under Rome* as Berry weaves a chilling story of seemingly disparate parts that he all pulls together to portray a Church deeply committed to, and corrupted by, Mammon. *Render unto Rome* discusses, and extensively documents, at length these various elements, at first glance seemingly unrelated, but all bound together: the parish closings in the dioceses of Boston, Cleveland, New Orleans and Los Angeles, and the indignant activism of the parishioners to stop the closings; the fascinating historical origins of the Vatican's fiduciary system; the machinations and "financial considerations" given to, respectively, a corrupt Cardinal high up in the Vatican hierarchy, the founder and head of a cult-like Catholic religious order famed for fund-raising and once in very good favor with the Vatican, but who was exposed as an active sexual predator of both sexes with illegitimate children, and a bottom-line auxiliary bishop in Boston and later, bishop of Cleveland, who was more akin to a Wall street banker than to a spiritual leader; the Church's massive investments in real estate, investments that went up and then plummeted with the Great Recession of today; and finally, a guarded but hopeful note that committed Catholics such as Berry himself and the activists who protested parish closings can reform the Catholic Church by righting the wrongs within, many of them exemplified by both the Church's present financial crisis and its medieval-like financial system where bishops and high Vatican prelates rule over diocese and broader Church finances as unaccountable princes answerable only to themselves, and automatically given a pass by the higher-ups when assets become liabilities and bottom-lines go red.

As Berry demonstrates, at the heart of the Church's financial crisis is another Catholic crisis: that of priest-pedophilia and its deliberate cover-up, with the numerous ensuing lawsuits and settlements forcing dioceses to come up with large sums of cash very quickly. That was the core of the financial crisis that engulfed the dioceses of Boston and Los Angeles, where exposure of pedophilia cover-up led to exposure of financial cover-up as well. Further, changing demographics within the U.S. Catholic Church, as more and more middle-class Catholics moved to the suburbs and left poor Catholics, overwhelmingly black and Hispanic, behind to rot in neglected inner-city parishes, parishes that, while penurious financially, were often rich in spirituality and social justice activism for their parishioners and neighborhoods. But like a banker foreclosing on houses, diocesan officials now wanted to foreclose on these parishes, regarding them as fiduciary assets that could be sold to developers and other commercial businesses. Of course, this was also pushed by the frequent need

to come up with cash to pay off pedophilia-related lawsuits, so the two meshed together, and brought forth a fiduciary crisis in tandem with a moral crisis.

This thumbnail sketch of *Render unto Rome* can only begin to do justice to Jason Berry's book, can only present schematically the vignettes, themes and analyses that Berry presents in great, frequently shocking, detail. *Render unto Rome* looks at Catholicism's fiduciary crisis from spiritual, financial, political, economic, geographical, demographic, historical and legal aspects to paint a fully-detailed picture of the Church's financial system and its interrelatedness to both the pedophile crisis and to the Church's preoccupation with Mammon. As a writer, Jason Berry has the jeweler's eye for significant detail that combines with the novelist's art in telling a story; as a reporter and researcher, Berry is thorough, compelling, and complete; as a person of conscience and a devoted Catholic layperson, Berry is indignant over what has happened, but conscientiously wishes to right the wrongs of a Church he is still part of, though perhaps increasingly more akin to a Catholic such as Roy Bourgeois than to a soothing, Bing Crosby-like *Going My Way* prelate. But what Jason Berry has related in *Render unto Rome* needs to be told, told to a wide audience, and should *Render unto Rome* get the notice it deserves, it will serve as yet another needed tocsin in our troubled times of corruption, malfeasance, discredit and lack of compassion manifesting themselves today in all our formerly revered, venerable institutions, institutions that remained untouchable (except for those dismissed as cranks) only a few years ago. But now even the Catholic Church joins with Wall Street as objects of justified opprobrium by an aroused, concerned citizenry of conscience—as attested to by Catholics such as Jason Berry and Roy Bourgeois, by movements such as Occupy Wall Street, and by what only the blind can ignore in our daily newspapers and TV news programs.