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"Lessons in Hope: My Unexpected Life with St. John Paul II", George Weigel, New York 2017 : [recenzja]

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George Weigel, *Lessons in Hope: My Unexpected Life with St. John Paul II*, 257 pp.
New York, USA, Basic Books, 2017

George Weigel is widely known as the author of *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (1999) and *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II—The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy* (2010). This new book provides an insight into how these books came to be researched and written, and how and why this American writer was selected by Pope John Paul II to write a biography by attempting to understand him from within. The book opens with an account of a dinner at the Vatican in December 1995 when Pope John Paul II asked George Weigel to write his biography. Weigel looks back from that dinner to ponder how providence prepared him to take on such a monumental task. And of course he unfolds the story from that evening until his publication of two long biographies of John Paul II. He took many trips to Rome and throughout Poland to meet with the Holy Father and to meet and to interview many of those who knew him and worked with him in Poland. Through seventy short to medium size chapters Weigel shares many stories about the Pope and he reveals much about his life and work in Poland and helps the reader understand various Vatican personalities and the dynamics of the Vatican operations. Weigel explains that he was often asked after the publication of his two major works to tell stories that would make Saint John Paul II present again by “rekindling memories or illuminating previously unknown aspects of his rich personality.” He also sensed “a yearning to get to know more personally a saint who bent the course of history in a more humane direction.” (3) This book fulfills many tasks and it is a book that is very worthwhile reading for these reasons. Perhaps the book is most useful for an identification and review of the key points that he

makes in his large biographical works; here he explains them in a brief compass and embeds them in many poignant and often entertaining sketches. These key points include the priority of culture over politics and economics, the centrality of conscience, the promotion of a free and virtuous society as the way to accomplish peace and development in the world today, his deep faith and prayer life, and his commitment to Vatican II. Weigel offers his own summary of the lessons of hope at the book's end:

God is here, in the midst of the human condition, redeeming his creation through radical, self giving love. God is here, even when humanity is at its worst, so that fear and hatred and death don't have the final word. God is here, even when, to human eyes, the Holy One seems silent or indifferent. God is here, and God's creative and redemptive purposes are going to win the day, ultimately. (340)

John Paul II lived and died according to those convictions and "that is why his life is a witness to hope. And that is why the lessons he taught me were, above all, lessons in hope (340).

Much of the story of his writing of the biography revolves around Weigel's special work on the encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*. With his colleagues Michael Novak and Richard Neuhaus, Weigel found in this encyclical a breakthrough document expanding Catholic social teaching in new ways and building bridges to liberal political philosophy and practice. John Paul II apparently found the Weigel/Novak/Neuhaus account compelling because he often invited them to the Vatican and sometimes used their writings. The encyclical also provides an understanding of the deep causes of the fall of the Soviet Union and liberation of Eastern Europe. Weigel spent much time in Poland and Eastern Europe preparing a book on the resistance to communism entitled *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (1992). Virtually everyone he interviewed for his book on the fall of the Soviet rule in Poland traces that event to the first visit by John Paul II to Poland in 1979. That revolution of conscience is on display in the encyclical letter. Weigel talks about his debates and conversations with Cardinal Casaroli who was an advocate and defender of Pope Paul VI's *Ostpolitik*. The two sparred at a conference the very weekend that Weigel was invited to write the biography. As Weigel reports the story, Cardinal Schotte and Cardinal Ratzinger supported his interpretation of the events. In the longest chapter in the book entitled *A Pride of Curialists: Rome 1966–1969*, Weigel describes and summarizes his meetings with the following Cardinals: Francis Arinze, William Baum, Agostino Casaroli, Edward Cassidy, Roger Etchegaray, Bernadin Gantin, Pio Laghi, Giovanni Battista Re, Jan Schott, Angelo Sodano, Jean-Louis Tauran, and Jozef Tomko. Each interview reveals much about the significance of the papacy of John Paul II and gives

testimony to the variety of gifts and strengths of the men who surrounded John Paul II in the Vatican.

Also of special note are the interviews he conducted with many of the people surrounding the pope during his life, especially in Poland. (See among others the chapter entitled “Wojtyła’s Poland in Depth,” 156–168) He interviews members of Solidarity, members of Środowisko, and the Rhapsodic Theater. Weigel met them all and carried away much information and a deeper of understanding of the Pope’s life as is evidenced in his books. There is an air of authenticity in Weigel’s books because of his relentless research and his sympathetic interviews. In one series of interviews with Sister Emilia they commenced to translate “Stanisław” into English (124–125), part of which can be found in *Witness to Hope*. Through these many trips to Poland his interviews with many Polish people, we better understand the influence of his Polish experience on the papacy of John Paul II. The pope himself explained the Polish connection as due to the “confidence in the Holy Spirit, who was calling to the see of Peter a Cardinal with this experience, this background. It means that there is something here that is useful for the universal church” (155). The influence of the Polish Catholic experience, its shrines and saints, is much in evidence throughout these stories. Poland’s humiliation at the hands of evil during World War II (127) was the central factor in Wojtyła’s conviction that errors concerning the human person are at the root of so many modern evils and an adequate philosophy of the human person became the central focus of his life long work. The devastation of hate filled and reductive ideologies on human life and dignity gave rise to his profound commitment to defending human dignity and human rights (127).

Of particular interest to all students of the Pope’s writings is found in a chapter entitled “The Spiral Staircase” (116–119). Weigel explained to the Pope the difficulty that many people have in reading his works; but Weigel proposed a way to approach them. He proposed to the Pope that he writes in a non-linear fashion. He walks around the object he is describing, always proceeding to a greater depth of understanding.

You see a problem or question start walking around, looking at it from different angles. When you get back to where it seems you began, you’re in fact one level deeper. So you start walking around it again, only deeper this time. You get back again to that starting point, but now your two levels deeper, so you start going around the subject again, in a more profound way. [...] It’s not a linear journey, it’s like walking down a spiral staircase to get where you want to go.

The pope responded by saying “yes you’ve got it” (116–117). Also of interest to readers will be their discussion of the poor translation of *Person and Act*, his interest in John of the Cross especially as a bridge from his early theological

writings to later philosophical writings and his turn from the object to a fuller appreciation of the subject. There are many more details about the pope's life, his travels, his work in the Vatican, and his life in Poland that make this book worth reading. My one question about Weigel's books on John Paul II concerns his brief but guarded criticism of Radio Maryja and inference that John Paul II was not very favorable to their message (244); I suspect that there is much more to the story.

Lessons in Hope by George Weigel is a welcome addition to his other two works on Saint John Paul II; it completes his own Triptych as the third panel to "flesh out the portrait of Saint John Paul II" (4).

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