

The Pope in Winter – The Dark Face of John Paul II's Legacy by John Cornwell.  
Viking 2004.

A very heavy hint concerning the author's approach to his subject is contained in the sub-title of the book. *The Pope in Winter* is not a eulogy to John Paul II's long papacy, or a laudatory journey through the events, encyclicals, travels and meetings that have filled his time as the Bishop of Rome.

John Cornwell, a Catholic with almost unparalleled insight into the Vatican in general and the papacy in particular, contrasts the image that the world has of the Pontiff with the reality – diminished authority at the centre, mass dissension and disillusionment, poor leadership and excessive authoritarianism, falling numbers of those seeking a priestly vocation, persecution of those who dissent from the Vatican's line and especially who flout the Pope's authority, a wholly inadequate response to the paedophilia crisis in sections of the Church, notably in the United States, and an inappropriate response to the crisis in Africa where AIDS is scything through the populations of many of its countries.

Perhaps the darkest and most shocking dimension of the book, and where Cornwell is at his most convincing, is where he describes the extent to which John Paul has allowed his own sense of self, as a man and as Pope, to overwhelm the attention he should have paid to his Church, and to indulge in fantasies and speculations which have been of no practical help or spiritual succour to anyone but himself.

Reading this book at a time when the Pope was rushed to hospital through ill health, and the speculation about his possible retirement or death was so prevalent, was a salutary and saddening experience, and a powerful reminder how the excitement and hope that gripped so many of us at the time of his election in 1978 has been disappointed. It also served to point out how difficult and dark the future may be for both the papacy and the Catholic Church as a whole.

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