

BOOKS

2 Views of Papacy Make Good Reading

"La Popessa," by Paul I. Murphy with R. Rene Arlington. Warner Books (New York, 1983). 325 pp., \$16.50

Reviewed by James C. O'Neill
NC News Service

"La Popessa" is Italian for "the female pope," a cynical nickname given by many Romans to Sister Pascalina, a Bavarian nun who was housekeeper, adviser, confidant and friend to Pope Pius XII for 40 years.

The nun, whose name before taking religious vows was Josefina Lehnert, became a powerful — if not the most powerful — figure in the life of Eugenio Pacelli during his career as a papal diplomat, Vatican secretary of state and pope. Rome, always a cynical city, was filled with gossip about her influence over the pope and the papal decisions affecting the life of the church.

This book might be better described as an autobiography as told to author Paul Murphy. A good 80 percent of the contents seem to rest solely on Sister Pascalina's reminiscences gathered during more than 30 hours of interviews. Sister Pascalina, now 87 and still in charge of her own home for aging women, evidently poured out her heart to Murphy.

Archbishop Pacelli and Sister Pascalina first met in 1917 at a Swiss retreat house where the 22-year-old sister of the Congregation of the Holy Cross of Menzingen took charge of the recovery of the Vatican diplomat, who suffered ill health. The stern, efficient and rather bossy nun and the withdrawn, serious Italian archbishop had a strange affinity for each other.

When Archbishop Pacelli returned to his duties as nuncio in Bavaria, she was asked to become his housekeeper. When he was transferred to Berlin in 1925, she went with him.

In both nunciatures Sister Pascalina ruled with an iron hand, brooking no excuses from aging nuns or lazy laymen on the staff. The underlings disliked her intensely. As long as Archbishop Pacelli was served well, she did not care about others.

The author never once suggests anything but the most chaste relationship between the two, but he records a gradual, increasing dependence and emotional reliance that grew stronger as the years went on. There were tiffs, mutually hurt feelings, arguments about papal policy and expressions of mutual admiration. Some of the quotes verge on soap opera dialogue.

When Cardinal Pacelli was elected Pope Pius XII in 1939, Sister Pascalina soon followed, first as a kitchen helper, then gradually climbing the back stairs into the corridors of ecclesiastical power. In the all-male world of the Vatican, her rise was as unusual as it was resented.

Pius XII became isolated in his years as pope, serving as his own secretary of state and often spurning the advice of his cardinals and Curia. Sister Pascalina was blamed for this. As his doorkeeper, she controlled who saw the pope and who did not. For

one so devoted to her master, she seems harsh in a number of judgments on his character. She saw him as procrastinating, vacillating, weak and often in need of her indomitable strength and keen mind to do what a pope should do.

Neither Pius XII nor Sister Pascalina emerge from this book as particularly attractive. Nor, for that matter, does the church. It is not the unattractiveness of any of the principals, however, that make this book difficult to accept as solid biography or history. Too many events and conversations with long dead people are reported third hand. We are too far away from the source. If only she had chosen to tape or write her memoirs — there would be a book and a half, as they say in Rome.

Nevertheless, Murphy's work remains interesting for the tantalizing glimpse it gives of life on the third floor of the Vatican Palace. The author gives us enough of Sister Pascalina's thoughts, resentments and rigid devotion to convince ordinary readers as well as cardinals that the lady was not for spurning.

(O'Neill, former chief of the NC Rome bureau, is a representative of the International Catholic Union of the Press at the United Nations in New York and a media consultant.)

"Pontiff," by Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan-Witts. Doubleday (New York, 1983). 459 pp., \$17.95

Reviewed by Thomas P. McDonnell
NC News Service

"Pontiff" is, possibly, foremost among the books an occupant of the household of the faith should select from this summer's offerings to take to his hammock for a long reading session.

For a Vatican watcher it is irresistible. Others will find it at least a chock-full reading experience and breezy entertainment.

The authors, an international reporting team, have in the past had a strong penchant for covering disasters as the titles of two of their works, "Shipwreck" and "Earthquake," attest. Abandoning that course they explored the Vatican. Their reporting seems thorough, well-intentioned and done with an attitude of goodwill. Having done their homework, they tell more than the Vatican itself, historically speaking, has ever been willing to reveal of any of its major involvements — which is probably as it should be.

The most prominent example of this, and yet one which contradicts the Vatican's record of reluctance to reveal its own involvement in more or less sensational and controversial events, is that of the attempted assassina-

tion of Pope John Paul II by the terrorist, Mehmet Ali Agca, and other accomplices in the midst of some 80,000 people in St. Peter's Square.

From "Pontiff," certainly, American readers will learn more about Agca than has generally been reported, especially that pertaining to his periodically unstable mental condition and a background almost sure to have conditioned him for a career in terrorism and assassination.

"Pontiff" is an account of the behind the scenes events in the Vatican during the reigns of the last three popes — emphatically including, of course, that of the extraordinary John Paul II. The subject matter, though momentous, is only a smaller part of that continuity which the authors recognize as unique in its capacity for survival and which the historian Toynbee has called "the greatest of all Western institutions," meaning the papacy and what it represents.

"Pontiff" is sure to become a sourcebook for future attempts to evaluate both John Paul II the man and the complexities of his administration of the church. Aside from the present pope himself, the secondary hero of the book is probably that marvelously Irishman, Father John Magee, private secretary to all three popes, and quite enough in himself to put Father Andrew M. Greeley on the shelf.

(McDonnell, a freelance contributor to the church press, lives in a suburb of Boston.)

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