

ABOLITION OF THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

"If the parties will at my hands call for justice, then,
[albeit] my father stood on one side, and the Devil on the
other, his cause being good, the Devil should have right."

St Thomas More¹

The office of 'Devil's Advocate', *Promotor Fidei*, was instituted by Pope Sixtus V in 1587. The charge imposed on the office's incumbent was the Church's honour in preventing the elevation to the ranks of the saints of the undeserving, of any whose death was not precious in the sight of God. Prospero Lamertini, later Pope Benedict XIV (1740-58), exercised the office for twenty years. The fruit of his work was the study *De Beatificatione et Canonisatione Sanctorum* a comprehensive statement of the rights of the Church and of the care applied in the exercise of those rights. No step in the process of beatification or canonisation was valid unless conducted in the presence of the *Promotor Fidei*. He was bound to object to any omission of the forms laid down and to insist on careful study of any objection to the processes.

Pope John Paul II abolished the office in 1983 facilitating, it is alleged, his canonisation and beatification of unprecedented numbers of men and women.

The causes of the late popes John XXIII and John Paul II for canonisation are well advanced and their elevation to the ranks of the saints is set to be proclaimed on April 27th 2014. The advancement of these two before other popes with qualifications at least as compelling seems consistent with the mindset of the Church's current administration to confirm the bona fides of the Second Vatican Council. The popular Catholic mind does not distinguish a saint from his actions, distinguish the will from the intellect, distinguish heroism of will (the chief characteristic of a saint) from his intellectual competence, a debility not assisted by the poverty of analysis emanating from the Vatican or from theologians it favours.² These efforts to promote Vatican II are likely to prove effective, then, at least until the Church is blessed again with a pontiff formed in the Church's philosophy with the requisite intellect to expose that Council's shortcomings.³

Were the office of Devil's Advocate still in force and the author its incumbent the very first objection he would consider is the motivation behind precipitate elevation of candidates to the Church's altars. The second is the issue whether intellectual incompetence should not be a factor weighing against heroism of will to disqualify one who otherwise might be a fit candidate. Both John XXIII and John Paul II were guilty of utterances which, when they were not downright inaccurate, conflicted with the Church's teaching so as to fall within the theological category 'offensive to pious ears'. Some excuse might be found for John Paul II due to his appalling philosophical formation. This excuse would not avail with John XXIII.

¹ William Roper, *Life of Sir Thomas More*, (Everyman edn. 1963, p. 21)

² Such as members of the *Pontifical University of the Holy Cross*, Martin Rhonheimer, Angel Luño et al.

³ Anyone who thinks a saint cannot be a person of poor intellectual attainment should weigh the reality that of the thousands of saints in the Church's history, only 35 are acknowledged as *Doctors* of the Church.

While visions and private revelations do not guarantee the sanctity of their recipient, it is worthy of note that neither of these popes is alleged to have received any such revelation. In contrast, two earlier popes, popes whose reigns pre-dated Vatican II and whose teachings were overridden by the novelties promoted by the bishops of that Council, did experience such phenomena. One of them was Leo XIII who, on 13th October 1884, was forewarned of the devastation that was to befall Christ's Church in the century following his death. The other was Pius XII.

How are the comparatively easy reigns of John XXIII and John Paul II to be weighed against the immense burdens which confronted Pius XII during his governance of the Church ? He was Pope throughout the course of World War II, with Germany's National Socialists allied with Italy's fascists. He had the immense prudential challenge of maintaining Catholic principle while innumerable of his flock were ruled by tyrants bent on oppressing them for their religion. Apart from murderous attacks on Rome he had the safety of Jews and other displaced persons his constant concern. And, the War over, he must deal with the greater evils of Russia's atheistic rulers. He had burgeoning heresy and freemasonry among his clergy and religious, weak Cardinals and bishops, and one in whom he had placed his trust, Giovanni Battista Montini, who betrayed him in a matter of principle.⁴

The Devil chose different courses in his endeavours to damn the authority of these two popes in the eyes of the world and the Catholic faithful. While he promoted his acolytes to condemn Pius XII for alleged failures to assist the Jews during the Nazi persecutions—an attack grounded in longstanding lies only belatedly corrected—in Leo XIII's case he chose the more effective course of persuading popes, bishops and theologians to ignore his teachings or to misquote them in support of their own dysfunctional views. Incisive Catholic commentators of the early twentieth century such as Belloc, Chesterton or Frank Sheed, were they alive today, would only shake their heads in disbelief at the wilful misinterpretations of the teachings of Leo XIII advanced to support errors propounded during the Second Vatican Council.

With the benefit of hindsight one may characterise the pontificate of John Paul II as a sort of ironical reflection of that of Leo XIII, his reign occurring almost exactly 100 years after Leo's, and lasting slightly longer. In neither manner nor in content did John Paul approach the teaching power of his predecessor. Leo dealt with topics with conciseness and distinction to leave his readers with clarity. In contrast, John Paul was almost heroically longwinded and, save in the signal case of his formal exclusion in the *apostolic letter, Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, of women from the priesthood, never seemed to deal with a topic without leaving it more obscure.⁵ His first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, is largely incomprehensible ; what can be understood of it frequently verges on the heretical.

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⁴ He appointed Montini Archbishop of Milan in 1954 without the dignity appropriate to the incumbent of that See of a Cardinal's hat.

⁵ And even then he confused the issue by his contemporaneous abandonment of the 2,000 year old exclusion of women from service at the altar.

The abolition of the office of Devil’s Advocate has had some bizarre consequences. British-American columnist and atheist, (the late) Christopher Hitchens, was invited to testify against the beatification of Mother Teresa of Calcutta in 2002, a role he would later describe as akin to representing the Devil *pro bono*. Indian physician, Aroup Chatterjee, author of the book with the histrionic title, *Mother Teresa, The Final Verdict*, also gave evidence. The text of Chatterjee’s ‘exposé’ seems to have been grounded not in what Mother Teresa and her Order did, but in what they did not do. The approach here is testament to the subjectivist preference to consider allegation over the evidence of the objective witness.

There has recently been published the results of a survey [by Univision.data⁶] which purports to show an overwhelming rejection of the Church’s moral teachings among Catholics around the world. Accepting that the value of any survey is limited by its sampling bias—and there is a bound to be bias underlying this survey—the figures quoted are still immensely disturbing.

One can imagine a catechumen, having grasped with fresh eyes the splendour of the Church founded by Almighty God for the salvation of mankind, observing the insouciance of immense numbers of Catholics towards their Church’s moral teachings and understanding its cause, saying to himself something like this—

“The faith of millions is going to hell in a handcart because of follies resulting from Vatican II’s rapprochement with the secular, why is the Pope not addressing the chaos that has resulted instead of canonising those who had a large hand in it?”

Michael Baker

21st February, 2014—*St Peter Damian, Doctor of the Church*

⁶ http://univision.data4.mx/resultados_catolicos/eng/ENG_catholic-survey.pdf