

TWO BISHOPS

Professor Solomon told this anecdote over a cup of tea after a recent symposium.

“There were these two bishops, you know, in a retirement home in the south of the US. This happened many years ago now. To protect the innocent, I’ll call them Bishop Ted and Bishop Bill. They were both longlivers. The two had been votaries at Vatican II. One had been a secretary, or some such, in one of the Roman Congregations before being appointed an Auxiliary. The other had been in charge of a diocese in the north. Retirement had brought them to the warmth and comforts of Florida. They had known each other distantly in the 1960s ; their common residence had brought them closer.

“Bishop Bill had promoted Vatican II with enthusiasm, had endured the fallout that followed, the loss of fellow priests, bishops and religious, the wholesale abandonment of the faith by many. He had not doubted that the Council had achieved some great work. The disasters occurring almost weekly among the faithful had not affected his faith.

“Bishop Ted had been one of the dissenters to a number of Council documents, supporting those he did vote for only through a sense of fellowship with his fellow bishops. (‘Fellowship’, he used to say, ‘solidarity’ be damned!) Ted had never doubted there was something wrongheaded about the Council. He had been on the end of some less than charitable (‘positively malicious’, he had said) criticism from German, Dutch, and his fellow American, bishops for his stands but the enduring influence of a sceptical father and a share in that parent’s obduracy had moved him to vote as he had thought fit despite the opposition. Bishop Bill told me of an interchange between them some time after Ted died. As best I recall, it went something like this—

‘I used to think your arguments in those committee meetings were plain damn silly, Ted,’ Bishop Bill said one evening after dinner. ‘Now, I’m not so sure.’ The two were sitting on the western promenade of their retirement home. The sun was setting behind the ridge across the bay. The light was easing. In ten minutes or so the mosquitoes would begin their nightly invasion. Something of the approaching closure of their own day seemed to affect them.

‘*Post hoc ergo propter hoc* they used to say, as if I was arguing a fallacy.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Those who complained long after, when I told them that the disasters that had followed the Council were inevitable. Just because these had happened *after* the Council, they argued, it didn’t follow the Council had caused them. Didn’t it, hell! I told ‘em. Here they were holding themselves out as experts in logic when they had participated in a gab-fest that was about as logical as a vote of confidence in Catholicism at a communist convention.’

‘But it all felt so right! There was so much promise that came out of it; so much to look forward to, as Paul VI said later.’

‘And it all fell in a heap. But it was always going to fall in a heap.’

‘How can you say that?’

‘What was the Council in aid of? What was it going to do?’

'Bring the Church up to date. You know, *aggiornamento*.'

'An ecumenical council is supposed to be for the good of the Church. So where was the good? What was the benefit the Church was going to get?'

'More non-believers would join up. There'd be greater numbers, and the faithful would feel better about the Church, you know.'

'But there *weren't* greater numbers, and the faithful *didn't* feel better about the Church ; in fact the very opposite. The faithful became disillusioned and they gave the Church away in droves, priests, religious and laity ; 40,000 priests, for heaven's sake ! If you ran a conference in a corporation, and the staff began to resign in bulk soon after the conference had closed, wouldn't you say the conference had had something to do with it?'

'But it's just something that happened. They got caught up in the world.'

'Why ?'

'How the hell do I know ? They just lost it.'

'So, why can't we say that they lost it *because of* the Council ?'

'No. It was the world. It just happened. They would have lost it anyway.'

'So the claim it was the Council that caused it is just nonsense, eh ?'

'Yeah. Hey, we better go in. These mosquitoes are starting to chew me up.'

'So where was the benefit for the Church ?'

'There was the revival of the liturgy, the change into the vernacular, greater participation by the laity, simplification of the Office so it's not such a burden...'

'Well, a lot of that happened afterwards, and most of the Council fathers didn't have those changes in mind when they voted for *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. I damn well didn't think they'd abandon Latin when I voted for it. The document *says* Latin is to be retained, for heaven's sake.'

They were inside now, looking out on the gathering gloom, the sunset a thin band of light on the western horizon.

'What about the regularising of the Church's status. You can't say the concordats made sense, given the situation in the rest of the world ?'

'How the hell was that for the Church's good ? Or even for the good of the faithful in the countries that had them ? The Church just seemed to run out on the faithful in those countries after '65. The Vatican functionaries couldn't wait to impose 'religious freedom'. Those silly gits didn't have the brains to see that 'religious freedom' meant that the faithful who were unsure about their faith—and there have always been loads of 'em !—could abandon the Church's teachings with a clear conscience. They were free to make their 'faith journey' as they chose, even to giving up the faith completely. Hadn't the Council's bishops authorised them to do so ? Hadn't the Pope endorsed the decision ? The Council was a disaster for the faithful, Bill, but you're not allowed to say so.

'The whole business,' he went on when Bishop Bill forbore to reply, 'reminds me of that tale of Hans Christian Andersen, *The Emperor's New Clothes*. You remember how it went ?'

'Sure. There were these two frauds who pretended to be weavers.'

'That's right. They promise a silly emperor a suit of clothes from a fabric invisible to all who aren't up to their jobs or who are hopelessly stupid.'

'When the non-existent clothes are 'fitted' to the emperor his ministers, not wanting to look like gooks, pretend they are real. And when the emperor marches in procession the townsfolk, thinking the same way, pretend to admire them too.'

'Right. And the voice of sanity in the whole business is a little kid...'

'Who yells out : *He's not wearing anything at all !*'

'Well, that's how it was with the debates on religious freedom. Here were the ministers and townsfolk—the cardinals and bishops in the *Aula*—letting go these admiring shouts about the Emperor's new clothes, this splendid new doctrine of 'religious freedom', and here's this small group yelling like that kid *There's nothing to it ; it's a load of codswallop*. But they wouldn't listen. Religious freedom might be alright as a political protocol where you got people of different views pulling a country every which way, but it's ridiculous as a theological principle. Didn't Christ say, *I am the way, the truth and the life*. The Apostles didn't concede rights to any other belief. What about St Paul : *Do not yoke yourself with unbelievers... What can light and darkness have in common ?* How could the descendents of the Apostles allow equality to every tin-pot religion ?'

'So who were the two frauds ?'

'Well, Courtney Murray and Emil de Smedt, for a start. But there were plenty of others.'

'Alright, forget religious freedom for the moment, why do you say the Council was always going to fall in a heap ?'

'Come back to the two questions. *What was the Council in aid of ?* and *What was the benefit for the Church ?* You already answered the first—sort of. It was to bring the Church 'up to date'; *aggiornamento*, right ?'

'Right.'

'Did the Church need bringing up to date ?'

'Of course it did. There were all sorts of problems.'

'But was it the Church that had the problems ? Or was it the bishops, the priests, the religious ? Anyway, the Church *can't* have problems. The Church is the spotless bride of Christ. That's in *Ephesians 5*. And what did Christ say to Saul after he was knocked to the ground ? You are persecuting *me* ! He identifies the Church with Himself. The Church is Christ's creation and Christ is its head. All that *We are the Church* stuff after the Council was Protestant crap.'

'But there's a sense in which things had to be brought up to date.'

'So, the Church's ministers needed 'bringing up to date'. We might have had to adapt the way we taught the faith to deal with the great changes in the secular world, but that didn't mean we needed to try and reinvent the Church. Anyway, it's not possible. Think about it ! If the Church is something of God it doesn't even exist in time. It's outside time.'

'Of course it exists in time. Its with us here and now.'

'And so is my soul ; so is yours. But our souls don't get any older or any younger. Why ? Because they aren't material. They are *in time*, but strictly speaking they are *outside* time : when I die, my soul doesn't die, it continues in existence. The Church is somewhat the same : it may need material instruments to achieve its ends ; buildings, books, popes, bishops, priests and people. These can all disappear but the Church goes on.'

'I still think the Church needed bringing up to date.'

'All that razzamatazz was *sounding brass and tinkling cymbal*, a lot of clerics having a good time at the expense of the faithful, flocking the coffee shops around the Vatican, conducting themselves like schoolboys. It was a waste of time and money, money provided by the poor faithful for determinations which worked, in due course, to destroy the faith of their children.'

'But the Church did get *something* out of the Council. There's much more openness than there was before.'

'Yeah. Well, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. But one thing the Church got that many of the Council fathers didn't bargain on. And it got it in spades.'

'Which was what?'

'*Secularism*. In their endeavours to make the Church 'relevant', to 'bring it up to date', the Council fathers allowed entry to any zany secular idea. Everything that has followed—re-inventing the liturgy in the vernacular, the smorgasbord liturgies, the facility for priests to fiddle with what is laid down, the systematic disobedience, the 'rock' Masses and the reduction of the Mass to a sort of entertainment with applause, the loss of faith of so many priests, has all resulted from the introduction of the secular. That's the real 'spirit of Vatican II'. It was like trying to mix water and oil. What do you get if you do that?'

'A gluggy mess.'

'Right! Think how the popes and bishops compromised the Church's standing. When John XXIII abandoned the exercise of discipline in his Opening Address he effectively abandoned the Church's authority. We've suffered ever since. No pope since has condemned a theologian who preached heresy.'

'What about Tissa Balasuriya?'

'Balasuriya was a soft target. And John Paul didn't go on with it anyway. Balasuriya was reinstated a year later and boasted he never had to withdraw a thing. Why, the other day Benedict XVI had a meal with that creep Küng, a heretic J P II should have excommunicated 20 years before. Think about what Paul VI did in his address to the UN in October '65. He presented himself as supplicant to an organization dominated by Masons, deferring to their authority in secular matters. Read what he said there. He acknowledged the validity of the UN's claim that 'religious freedom' was a human right. He publicly rejected the Church's teaching laid down by Pius IX and Leo XIII two months *before* the bishops passed *Dignitatis Humanae*. God save us, there were just seventy of us who refused to endorse that silly document, seventy out of twenty four hundred bishops.'

Bishop Bill got up. 'I'm going to bed,' he said. 'It's all too much for me. The Church got *something* out of Vatican II. I can't believe it got nothing.'

'I'll tell you what it got, Bill. What it got was chaos!'

"That was the last conversation of any depth the two had. Bishop Ted was carted off to hospital the next week and he was dead within the month."
