

COMMENT

Vatican II: Some Ecumenical Reflections on the 2012 Lyndwood Lecture

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The biennial Lyndwood Lectures are a significant ecumenical joint commitment by the Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland and the Ecclesiastical Law Society. The Canon Law Society, as host, selected Professor Norman Tanner SJ to deliver the 2012 lecture¹ and as is customary it fell to me, as chairman of the guest society, to conclude the event with comment and thanks.

I had the pleasure of listening to Professor Tanner twice in 2012. The other occasion was in the spring, at a seminar at the Venerable English College in Rome in celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the restoration of full diplomatic relations between the United Kingdom and the Holy See. His opening topic was the massive task of providing an overview of British relations with the Roman See from the beginning. His concise and focused review was not without humour. He began – tongue in cheek – with Glastonbury and Joseph of Arimathea.

I have long been in Professor Tanner's theological and historical debt through his part in the publication of the Bologna Institute's *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* as its English editor.² Accuracy of text (in Greek and Latin) is its hallmark. The translation is excellent and inclusive. It was in perusing this two-volume edition that I came across the first (Western) legitimisation of auxiliary bishops when I was Suffragan Bishop of Stafford. It was a delightful irony to discover the origins of Henry VIII's Suffragan Bishops Act 1534 in Lateran IV – not a Council that has so many Anglican admirers. More seriously, as Chairman of the Church of England Council for Christian

1 N Tanner SJ, 'How novel was Vatican II?' (2013) 15 Ecc LJ 175–182.

2 N Tanner SJ (ed), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume Two: Trent to Vatican II* (London and Washington DC, 1990).

Unity it was extremely helpful to hear Professor Tanner's sensitive introduction touching on the use of the word 'ecumenical' in conjunction with 'council' – he notes that some Catholics prefer to call councils of the second millennium 'general' rather than 'ecumenical' by reason of occurring after the East–West schism of 1054.

The historian in Professor Tanner is also impishly evident in his note of the (fairly minimal) role of women in Vatican II as compared to the role of the Empresses Pulcheria and Irene in giving the universal Church the Councils of Chalcedon and Nicaea II, with their respective teaching about Christ and about iconography. From conciliarism in England (or rather Northumbria) he could have cited Hilda of Whitby and the Synod that she effectively convoked to reconcile the Northumbrian and Roman missions.

Professor Tanner's general emphasis on the importance of councils is also profoundly to be welcomed: not only with the current anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council but also from an ecumenical perspective because of the continuing Anglican synodal tradition, which has its roots in the conciliar movement common to both traditions. I note that the conciliar canonists argued that mere majorities were insufficient in councils: rather consensus was desirable, if not always attainable. In the General Synod of the Church of England certain decisions require a two-thirds majority to be effective, as well as agreement by the bishops. In this the Synod markedly differs from parliamentary procedure, to which otherwise Anglican Synods owe (too?) much. The two-thirds majority principle can be traced indirectly to Pope Alexander III and the Third Lateran Council (1179), which established such a majority for papal elections. More directly, the later Conciliarist Movement continued to argue for 'concordance' rather than majority decisions, while recognising that complete unanimity would be unlikely.³

Professor Tanner highlights the role of the official ecumenical observers. It was said at the time by some of the fathers that the observers had better seats than they did. Significantly, the then new Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity under Cardinal Augustin Bea played a major part in the revision (and rejection) of key conciliar drafts, especially on Revelation (where Bea as a biblical scholar was asked by Pope Paul VI to assist in the drafting of a new text), on Ecumenism (naturally), on the Church, on Religious Freedom and on Non-Christian Religions. The interventions by the Secretariat were indirectly influenced by the observers whom the Secretariat was hosting.

Professor Tanner's research into the representativeness of Vatican II and the number of fathers present reminds me of the importance of the council *outside*

3 See P Valliere, *Conciliarism: a history of decision-making in the Church* (Cambridge, 2012), for much that Anglicanism owes to the conciliar movement.

the Roman Catholic Church. The first session made national and international news. A slightly frivolous illustration: in the Athenaeum Club there is the original of an Osbert Lancaster cartoon that appeared in the *Daily Express*. Two Anglican bishops are looking at a newspaper headline: '2,500 bishops in Rome'. One bishop says to the other: 'pon my word Fontwater; worse than the Athenaeum on Boat Race Night.' My point is that Vatican II was news for all, not least Anglicans.

Professor Tanner's observations on the lack of abrasive canons or anathemas are extremely significant. Traditionally, a council excluded some topical error or misbehaviour. Exclusion was accomplished by a formal canon concluding with the *anathema sit*; the result was the excommunication of those who could not accept it. Vatican II broke with this exclusion. Similarly significant is Professor Tanner's historical wisdom in reminding us that not everything in every council is remembered. Episcopal translation was forbidden at Nicaea but admitted by its successor at Constantinople. This is just as well for this bishop – and for many others who have been translated, including the past and present Archbishops of Canterbury and Pope Benedict XVI.

Professor Tanner also dispels a romantic view of councils – just as unfortunate as romantic views of either episcopacy or papacy. There have been divisions in councils: not every father at Vatican II welcomed the trajectory it opened up and dispute continues as to the true meaning of the council. Divisions and debates continue in all the churches – not least my own. I am reminded of something Archbishop Rowan Williams said to an enquirer who remarked: 'Archbishop, how difficult it must be to be a bishop in today's Church.' 'Yes,' replied Dr Williams, 'but not as difficult as being a bishop in the fourth century!'

We live as Christians in the twenty-first century. There are many problems, some acute, facing the Church. At the time when many are remembering the great reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council (and that includes Anglicans, who have informally received much of Vatican II), Professor Tanner's lecture, now reproduced in this issue of the *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, is stimulating and challenging, and honours Lyndwood, who would doubtless himself recognise many of the issues that Professor Tanner raises.⁴

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4 For a perceptive pen portrait of William Lyndwood, see J Baker, 'Famous English Canon Lawyers: IV: William Lyndwood, LLD († 1446)', (1992) 10 *Ecc LJ* 268–272. See also B Ferme, 'William Lyndwood and the *Provinciale*: canon law in an undivided Western Church', (1997) 4 *Ecc LJ* 615–628, being the text of the inaugural lecture in the series.