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Denis O'Callaghan

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One bishop outside of Europe who was a major influence at the Second Vatican Council was Archbishop Denis Hurley of Durban in South Africa. He had some links with Ireland. He was born in 1915 to an Irish emigrant family and when he joined the Oblates of Mary Immaculate he came to Ireland to complete his noviciate here. He was ordained Bishop of Durban at the age of 31, then the youngest Catholic bishop in the world. I came to know him well when I was in Rome studying for a postgraduate degree in canon law. He came to Rome as a member of the Central Preparatory Commission established by Pope John XXIII to organize the Second Vatican Council which he had announced on 29 June 1959. Later, soon after the Council had ended, I spent some time with him in Durban. He was a mine of information with a colourful memory of all those personalities who had featured in the debates at the Council. It is true that we in Ireland did not learn as much about him as we should have in regard to his many important contributions and interventions in the debates. Later there was passing mention of him here in his role as chairman of I.C.E.L. (International Commission of English in the Liturgy) but the absence of any real interest in him, as the heroic figure that he was, shows how little impact the Council had here. Of course the stand taken here by the workers at Dunnes Stores in refusing to handle South African imports did come to his attention. Their action reflected his stand against apartheid.

In South Africa, as Archbishop of Durban, he was very active in challenging the racism which had reduced the coloured people of South Africa to the level of slavery. He saw the apartheid system as intrinsically evil and considered the "homelands" policy as condemning the black South African people to abject poverty and loss of their rights in basic justice. His strong language exposed

Denis O'Callaghan is a priest of the Diocese of Cloyne. He is Emeritus Professor of Moral Theology at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.

him to a charge of defamation by the South African Government but they declined to bring him before the courts because this would have provided him with the opportunity to expose the level of abuse of which he had clear evidence. It was inevitable that this outspoken witness proved divisive with other religious groupings in South Africa at the time and even with a number of his fellow bishops including Cardinal McCann of CapeTown. However it showed the quality of the man who spoke up for Nelson Mandela. He has been well compared to Martin Luther King in his stand against racism in the U.S.

The clarion call of Pope John XXIII in summoning the Council would have found an echo in the mind and heart of Denis Hurley. At first he may not have appreciated the need for a Council at that time because there was no Church crisis to resolve, which was typically the reason for calling a General Council, but if there was to be a Council then this was surely the kind of Council that Denis Hurley would welcome. The words of the Pope rang true for him. ‘The Catholic Church leaves many questions open to theologians. She does this to the extent that matters are not absolutely certain. Far from jeopardising the Church’s unity controversies as (Cardinal) Newman has remarked can actually pave the way for its attainment. Discussion can lead to fuller and deeper understanding of religious truths, when one idea strikes against another there may be a spark. But that common saying, expressed in various ways, and attributed to various authors, must be recalled with approval: In essentials unity, in doubtful matters liberty, in all things charity’. That surely warmed the heart of Bishop Hurley.

Not only did he describe Vatican II as the greatest experience of his life he foresaw it from the very beginning as the work of the Holy Spirit. It would indeed become the means of living out the message in his Episcopal motto “Ubi Spiritus ibi Libertas”. Bishop Hurley was providentially well prepared for the challenge of the Council. His postgraduate studies as a student in Rome at the Angelicum and Gregorian universities had inspired a lively interest in contemporary philosophy and theology. One is amazed at the ground that he covered in his reading – Daniélou, de Lubac, Tillich, Guardini, Congar, Delhay, Rahner, Teilhard de Chardin and so many others. Many of these had come to the critical notice of the Holy Office, known later as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, under the control of Cardinal Ottaviani. During the Council he became quite impressed by the young Dutch Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeckx who was a *peritus* of the Belgian Cardinal Leo Suenens.

THE FURROW

While the Council was in session many of the *periti* would have made themselves available at think-ins and lectures around the city. Hurley made every effort to attend these lively sessions with theological debates from the floor. He was blessed in having a good command of Latin and of most of the European languages in common use. Where most theologians would have had an academic interest in the themes under discussion Hurley would have gone further. His main interest would always have been the pastoral one of providing a better understanding of the Christian faith and of the mission of the Church.

Hurley found the system of debate in the Council to be boring with all those repetitious monologues in Latin. This was quite alien to the Anglo-Saxon tradition where small groups would sit down together to hammer out a fair understanding of some important theme and then have spokesmen ready to make their cases to the main assembly. As time went on these small groups became the rule of working behind the full open sessions. In the system of debates on the floor of the Council it fell to the secretaries of the various Commissions to get to work so as to make sense of what seemed to be the common understanding. Denis Hurley commented that the fact that the hard worked secretaries would succeed in their work proved that the power of the Holy Spirit was active. However, nothing could distract Bishop Hurley from the areas in which he had a particular interest on the pastoral front. To the fore for him were the Constitutions on Revelation, on the Mystery of the Church, on Liturgy and on the Church in the Modern World. He had a particularly important role in the Commission for Seminaries of which he was chairperson. Based on his own experience in Rome and in South Africa he proposed an introductory year for seminarians followed by a combination of philosophy and theology. The main emphasis would fall on Scripture and Pastoral Theology which were key areas for the mission of the priest. In this context Denis Hurley referred to a seminal article which he had written in *The Furrow* in January 1962. He also knew of *Christus Rex*, a Maynooth magazine which had its focus on sociology and on planning for the Catholic Church in a new Ireland. On a wider front he did not see the contribution of the Irish bishops at the Council as of great importance. He did speak on the floor with Archbishop William Conway of Armagh on the need to stress the role of priest which the Council seemed to have forgotten. I was with Denis Hurley at an evening meeting of bishops in Rome who were discussing the question of vocations worldwide. Bishop Michael John Browne of Galway gave a glowing account of the

situation in Ireland which then had around 500 seminarians in Maynooth College and an equal number studying for the missions abroad in various colleges across Ireland. We certainly did not have any indication then of the change that would take place within the coming half century. Of course Irish bishops tended to be isolated in the Irish College during the Council. Archbishop Hurley would have wished the Irish College to have served as a gathering point for the bishops worldwide of the Irish diaspora. One bishop who was a frequent visitor to the Irish College was Cardinal Peter McKeefrey of New Zealand who had an abiding interest in all things Irish.

Denis Hurley argued with passion for the recognition of the status of the bishop as *sui juris* in the Church hierarchical structure. He made a strong case for the bishop as operating in the Church in his own right not as if delegated by Rome. The Curia was there to serve the Church across the world not to rule over it. He was critical of how the Curia had suffocated the development of theology in the years before the Council. He surely must have surprised many present at one of his interventions when he introduced Teilhard de Chardin's views on the cosmic Christ as a reflection of the prologue in the Gospel of St. John. At the time Teilhard was certainly *persona non grata* with the Curia.

With his background knowledge and appreciation of the work of contemporary theologians and his understanding of the expectations for the Council put forward by Pope John XXIII Denis Hurley found himself of one mind with the bishops of France and Germany who were largely committed to the vision of *aggiornamento*. Curia Cardinals such as Ottaviani and Ruffini represented those who were concerned to hold the line against any developments which, in their eyes, might threaten the doctrinal truth of the traditional deposit of faith. The confrontation between the Curia and those on the side of *aggiornamento* had already come to the fore even before the Council had assembled. I was in Rome at the time when that confrontation had moved out on to the streets. The field of battle principally centred on the interpretation of Scripture as at the heart of guiding theology. Pope John XXIII moved behind the scenes with a quiet *non prodest* addressed to the factions whom he saw as a distraction with little purpose. At the time I had collected a range of documents available from students on the streets. Unfortunately, as so often happens, I loaned my dossier to a friend who did not return it. The two camps were chiefly represented by those from the Lateran University and those from the Biblical Commission at the Gregorian. It was

THE FURROW

very clear that the former were outgunned when their challengers won the support of internationally acclaimed biblical scholars from Germany, France and from the *École Biblique* in Jerusalem. Denis Hurley enjoyed my account of the confrontation. One story which he really savoured was about the taxi organised to convey Cardinal Ottaviani to the Council. On his direction to the driver “Al Concilio per favore” he ended up out among the olive groves and vineyards in the countryside. When he expostulated about where they were headed the driver responded ‘Si Eccellenza, al Concilio, al Concilio de Trento’.

Denis Hurley had worked as the Bishop of Durban for sixteen years before the Council began. His pastoral concerns had always inspired him whether it was his commitment to resolve the abuses of apartheid or to find better ways of making the Gospel real for ordinary people. His joyous personality, not unlike that of our Pope Francis, helped him in pastoral work. When he discovered that I was engaged in the *pastorale* at the Navicella parish in which the Irish College was situated he was immediately interested. I introduced him to the parish priest Don Mario with whom he made common cause on first meeting. Bishop Hurley dressed in a plain cassock would accompany me on visitation to the high rise flats where many old people resided alone while their children were at work. He was a pleasure to be with and to watch how his interest focussed on those we met. He was particularly disturbed when he learned from an old lady that her son who had been a young bishop in the far south of Italy had been murdered by the *Mafiosi*. It reminded him of some of the atrocities in South Africa. As it happened I had already met Senora Lanza. Her son had been a professor in the Lateran University and I had a copy of the moral theology text book published by him and a colleague shortly before he became Bishop of Rhegio-Calabria.

One of the Cardinals at the Council who was particularly admired by Hurley was the Dutch Cardinal Leo Suenens. He was strong in his support of the view that the Council should focus on the pastoral mission of the Church rather than concentrate on doctrinal matters as the First Vatican Council had. Suenens had led the acclaim which had greeted Frank Duff, founder of the Irish Legion of Mary, when he was introduced to the Council. The Legion was well known for its work even in the most remote missionary countries. I was happy to share with Denis Hurley what I knew about the Legion and the spirituality which had inspired its work in pastoral care and in preaching the centrality of prayer among its lay members. After he had met with Cardinal Suenens

Bishop Hurley discovered that Frank Duff was quite adamant that there should not be any alteration in the system as set out in the Handbook of the Legion. Denis Hurley did not understand why this should be a basic principle when different conditions would affect missionary work in the various countries where the Legion would operate.

Bishop Denis Hurley was by far the best known of the Catholic episcopate across Africa. He was very appreciative of how the bishops from the black and coloured communities were meeting their challenges. He showed delight at how the first African Cardinal Laurean Rugambwa of Dar-es-Salaam showed such quality at the Council where he was one of the serious debaters. Outside the Council Hurley kept his people at home well informed through his weekly column in *The Southern Star*. He knew that in some countries, including Ireland, bishops, mostly for their own protection, took shelter under the rule of secrecy in regard to Council affairs. Hurley had no time whatever for this. For him the Council had a mission to keep the whole Church and indeed the world well informed about matters which would concern them. How would the views and directions of the Council be made known and observed if those crucial developments were to be kept hidden behind closed doors? What helped him was that he was a fine speaker and a gifted writer and he seemed to know everyone. He had great admiration for the work of the *Sant' Egidio* community based south of Rome. He saw them as world peacemakers *par excellence*. He said that if he had come to know about them in earlier times he would have happily joined them!

His archives in Durban are a real treasury and well organized for someone who was very busy. His memoirs of the Council were finally published in 2005 a short year after his death on 12 February 2004. The book *Vatican II: Keeping the Dream Alive* also contains a number of essays by friends who appreciated what he had achieved in making the Council a reality in South Africa. The book published by Cluster Publications in Pietermaritzburg has not been circulated widely in Europe, apart from Ireland where it is now stocked by Veritas Publications in Dublin. It provides a detailed account of the various sessions of the Council and of the personalities that featured in the debates. Not only did he follow closely the views put forward on the various sides but his humorous descriptions of the personalities make them particularly memorable. He did not share the mind of those pessimists like Cardinal Siri of Genoa who described the Council as “the greatest mistake in recent ecclesiastical history”. Those pessimists have

THE FURROW

listed the number of priests leaving ministry and the falloff in vocations as proofs positive of their position. Denis Hurley trusted in the Holy Spirit that the purification of the Church would yet be achieved and that a new day would dawn. These were his words to me as I left him in Durban.

One should not confine one's interest in Bishop Hurley to the public personality which he certainly was. From the beginning he saw the summoning of the Second Vatican Council by Pope John XXIII as an inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He told how one morning the Pope had informed his secretary of his intention. The startled priest referred to the Pope's age as something to be considered. The reply was that if it was the will of the Holy Spirit it should be left in the hands of God. This is how Denis Hurley saw the Council and that is why he committed all his efforts to making it a reality. The book *Keeping the Dream Alive* provides many insights into the character which made him a very unusual man indeed. Many people regretted that he was not created Cardinal. Perhaps his challenges with the pezzi grossi in the Curia were the consideration. He also had made a strong case for leaving the issues of celibacy and birth control to be decided at the Council rather than reserved by the Pope to commissions appointed by himself.

Shortly after my visit to Durban he left the Cathedral and retired to Sabon House, an Oblate centre for retired priests. With a constant stream of visitors he still made time for his long hours in the chapel before the Blessed Sacrament. One can be certain that his prayers were occupied with the challenge provided by the Second Vatican Council, that its promise would be realized in due time through the will of the Holy Spirit. Many of those who shared his life in Sabon House do see him as a saint.

Courage. Courage is not just about speaking out but about knowing how to do it well, when and how to do it. First of all one must discern whether one should speak out or not. Courage is constitutive of all apostolic action. And today, more than ever, we need courage and prophetic audacity. We need a *parresia* for today, the prophetic audacity of having no fear.

– Pope Francis, *Open to God* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum) p.92.