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Blast From the Past: Murray v. Vagnozzi

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 20, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Last week, I ran a quote from Gerald Fogarty?s invaluable *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy from 1870 to 1965*, which included quotes from the intervention of Bishop Stephen Levin at the Second Vatican Council. That passage is followed immediately by this account of a struggle between Father John Courtney Murray, S.J. and the Apostolic Delegate to the United States, Archbishop Egidio Vagnozzi, which shows that there is always a back-drama to the Church?s decision-making, a thing to remember whenever we read a new document from the Holy See.

?Shortly before the close of the second session [of the Council] Murray had written an article for America calling religious liberty ?the American issue at the Council.? He praised the American hierarchy?s support for it, but criticized those who tried ?to block discussion.? This brought forth an admonition from Vagnozzi in the form of a letter to Murray?s provincial in New York, John J. McGinty, S.J. The delegate cited norms governing the activities of the periti [the official theological experts at the Council] adopted at a meeting of the Coordinating Committee on December 28, 1963. These forbade the periti ?to organize currents of opinions or ideas, to hold interview or to defend publicly their personal ideas about the Council.? Nor were they to ?criticize the Council? or ?communicate to outsiders news about the activities of the Commissions?; they were rather to observe ?the decree of the Holy Father about the secret to be observed concerning conciliar matters.?

? Murray was at that time recovering from a cardiac arrest, so, on February 26, 1964, McGinty wrote him in care of his rector at Woodstock. Only on May 16 did Murray respond. He had received the norms governing the activities of the periti, he wrote, but was not yet sure of their precise meaning. The article he had written was the original English version of a press conference he had given to the German-speaking press at the request of the German episcopate. He granted that the new norms might ?represent a tightening up,? but in the case in point he had done nothing more than the other theologians at the council. More germane to the admonition, however, was ?what business is this of the Apostolic Delegate,? who was ?in no sense an official of the Council? and had ?no jurisdiction whatever over the activities of the periti?? In Murray?s mind, ?the Apostolic Delegate has elected to be my personal enemy and he has made statements about me throughout the country which are libelous.? But he remained optimistic, for ?if there should be any trouble in my own case, which is hardly likely, I am sure that his Eminence of New York [Cardinal Spellman] will stand behind me. He is one of the few American bishops who can be counted on to talk back to the Delegate. And he has ? bless his heart ? elected to be my patron. He mentioned to me in Rome that he had read the article in America and liked it.??

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