

TROUBLE AT THE VATICAN

A Futuristic Inquisition

Novelette

By

John R. M. Gledhill

Preface

I originally began this novel when I was working in East Germany a year after the Wall came down. Conditions had changed little from GDR at that time. At the horticultural workers' hostel where I was staying at the time, the black and white television was on its last legs and the local library had very few books which caught my interest. There were of course a few of the classics of German literature available at the library, but at university I had read enough German literature for several lifetimes and so I wrote a section or chapter of the novel every evening for my own amusement. The novel seemed to write itself.

However, the initial idyllic period of having too little to do was soon replaced by a twenty-year stretch of having too much to do. It is only now in my semi-retirement that I have come round to finishing the novelette. Many of the events anticipated in the novel have already taken place and so, they are now ancient history. The present book is now set in the future during the fictitious reign of Pope Francis III. Fortunately, however, changes take place slowly at the Vatican and so the contemporary struggles between conservatives and reformers will continue well into the future.

A closely accurate description of the personae working at the Vatican could well lead to a flood of libel cases so that is why the characters in the novel are based on types rather than on any particular individuals. As the great psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl observed, almost any institution whether it be a monastery or a prison usually has a wide range of types from generous, saintly people to malicious miscreants. The Vatican is no exception. There should, theoretically, be a greater proportion of saintly types at the Vatican, but both recent and historical scandals have shown that the Vatican has its fair share of the latter mentioned types. However, most of us belong to the varying shades of grey in between.

The novel is by no means meant as an attack on the Vatican, but has been written in the same spirit as the Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn's BBC television series *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister* in which the British Civil Service is somewhat pilloried, but in a humorous way. The chief rogue in this series is the Machiavellian Prime Minister's Secretary Sir Humphrey as played by Nigel Hawthorn; however, he is what may be described as a 'lovable rogue'.

The novel can be described as a futuristic satire and so could appear in the science fiction department of a library if it were to be published. However, this novel is not intended for publication. The reason can be given in one word: 'Publishers!' Perhaps my experience with publishers mainly with regard to translations have been exceptionally unfortunate and perhaps I lack the persistence of J.K. Rowling whose first book *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was rejected by twelve British publishing houses on the grounds that her book was not 'commercially viable' before she was eventually accepted by the Bloomsbury

Publishing House, which led to her becoming Britain's most commercially successful contemporary novelist.

This novel is a form of protest against contemporary publishers and against the dumbing down of this genre. So many contemporary novels are written to a formula: a well researched background to a murder, butch female detectives or tough grumpy hard-nosed male investigators, a psychological build-up of the perpetrator which fails to be resolved in the end because the 'perp' is shot dead after a melodramatic action sequence. One can see that the publishers had Hollywood film rights in mind when advising their authors. The style of most of these novels is competent, plain and 'invisible'. It is as if they could all have been written by the same author.

My novel does not claim to be a literary novel, but, at the same time, I refuse to dumb down either the dialogues or the narration to the lowest common denominator. On the contrary, I am aiming at the highest common factor and do not condescend to my potential readers. It may be rather challenging to readers who do not share my interests in philosophy, theology, mathematical logic, chess and languages, but reading a novel should also be a learning experience without having to go as far as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

It is only with the arrival of the internet and the possibility of a web page that I could take up the challenge of finishing the novel. I like the idea of offering a free sample and potential user can either take it or leave it. However, I do hope some customers will not only take the novel, but will enjoy it in the same spirit as the author who wrote it.

Chapter I: Traffic Congestion in Heaven

‘Il Papa! Il Papa! Che cosa si deve fare? Quid faciemus? What on earth are we to do?’ Cardinal Cannelli, despite his three-score and eleven years, burst into the inner sanctum of the CDF, the *Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei* (yet another euphemism for the ‘Holy Inquisition’), without even having the courtesy to knock first. Even though he was the titular head of the Congregation, he rarely appeared at the office. The trilingual outburst was quite normal for the CDF where Latin was still the official language, Italian the *lingua franca* and English the main language for the small but influential body of Anglo-Saxons and, of course, for all the Anglophone and English-speaking countries. The CDF members slipped effortlessly from one language to another and so, it was understandable that saintly and simple cardinal used all three without realising the fact, particularly because he was in a state of extreme panic.

Almost as in a *commedia dell’arte*, his clown-like expression of despair and desolation seemed exaggerated, but, for the venerable cardinal, it was the real thing. On the other hand, the ‘Garfield-like’ look of resigned boredom from the Right Reverend Monsignor Beaumont, First Secretary to the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, indicated immediately that this prelate was by no means expecting another assassination attempt to have taken place on the pontiff.

‘Sit down. Calm yourself, Giuseppe, while I pour you a quadruple *Dom Jamingo* brandy.’ Cardinal Cannelli immediately relaxed and duly calmed down.

‘What’s the old codger up to now?’ enquired the monsignor rather irreverently.

‘One hundred and thirty-two’, sighed the dejected prince of the Church.

‘One hundred and thirty-two what?’ enquired the monsignor, now becoming rather impatient.

‘One hundred and thirty-two saints. He wants us to challenge the causes of one hundred and thirty-two saints during the next five years. ‘Che cosa si deve fare? Quid faciemus?’

‘You must be joking. He should know that there’s nothing more we hate than saints – except for miracles, of course. Heaven will be suffering severe air traffic control problems. There's a saint for when you reap and for when you sow, for when you sneeze, for when you bake a cake and soon there'll be one for when you pour yourself a double gin and tonic and an ultra-holy lunatic for when you take your first sip of an eighteen-year old malt. It just can't go on like this.’ (Even though this Congregation was no longer directly responsible for canonisation processes, they had been re-enlisted as Devils' Advocates on account of their supposed expertise in dogma and thus heresies.) This sarcastic diatribe, worthy of a disaffected or rabid anti-Catholic, was, alas, typical for this pillar of the Vatican establishment, but it in no way disconcerted Cannelli, a member of that virtually extinct Vatican species - a pious cardinal.

‘Yes, I'm afraid so, Georgio. His Holiness is adamant. ' Although Cardinal Cannelli was the titular head of the Sacred Congregation, he preferred to leave all the difficult matters to this very able English monsignor so that he could be free to pursue both his pious devotions and his beehives to which he gave almost equal commitment.

The now distraught monsignor continued: ‘What about the Reaper? He hates saints even more than I do!’

(This reference referred to the Pope's private secretary Monsignor Giovanni Frigini who knew of his nick-name, but thought that it merely referred to his highly successful pastoral harvests in Naples in his early thirties. It was, in fact, shorthand for the Grim Reaper because his ascetic-looking, high cheekboned face, and lack of hair gave his head a terrifying skull-like appearance from a certain distance. The evil grin was there, but only the scythe was lacking.)

‘O, *mio figlio*, what are we to do? You know there's no persuading his Holiness.’

‘The calendar’s already full anyway. We have to have some room left for this new millennium!’

The two prelates then retired to the *Villa Casina Pius IV* at the centre of the Vatican gardens as it was almost cocktail hour. (The monsignor had reserved a loggia with a terrace for the CDF. This was not strictly an official reservation, but, to keep a relatively clear conscience, the monsignor had paid for a solid copper notice engraved with the message: ‘Reserved for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith’ in Italian, Latin and English. Nobody had dared challenge the Holy Inquisition on this matter, including the Pope himself.)

Mgr. Beaumont perused the rich dark golden drops of Dom Jamingo brandy reflecting and mellowing the brighter gold of the late afternoon Roman sunshine. He then he narrowed his eyes.

‘If they’re martyrs or early Romans, then that’s manageable. They just have to be bumped off and their bones to have caused a few medieval cures and then they’re in, but I hope that there’s no one controversial.’

‘Lorenzo Stanzi’s been mentioned.’

‘Oh no, not that loony. He wrote thirteen treatises. If it wasn’t for the brandy, I’d be having a seizure!’

‘It’s *rinunciano eccellente*, Georgio. I don’t think I’ve ever tried this before!’

‘You won’t have. It’s from the Dom Pedro Majora estate, although no longer under his name. It is only sold to private customers, but his family has had a long connection with the Vatican.’

‘Do you think you could get a crate for *mia famiglia*?’

‘I could try. It would mean another visit to his estates and the usual half promises for members of his vast extended family for a couple of quick annulments or Vatican medals for services rendered to Holy Mother Church. If it weren’t for the damn saints interfering with the natural course of events, it would be no problem.’

The working relationship between the two prelates was excellent. They did not stand on ceremony. Beaumont was the brains of the organisation and did more or less all the work

and (also whatever he wanted) whereas Cardinal Cannelli was his greatest supporter and protector. Alongside many other rituals, their Saturday afternoon tea followed by an evening meal was sacrosanct. This was when the real business of running the department was done together with other curious rituals,

which will be revealed in due course.

‘I won’t squander my diplomatic skills on His Holiness. He always senses when I’m up to something and automatically does the very opposite of what I want. He even saw through the plan when we, in turn, pretended to want the opposite of what we actually wanted. This will mean another Frigini job and a game of golf.’

‘Ah, *mio Georgio*, you know how you will love the game of golf. I remember you blocked the cause of at least twelve saints during the last decade so as not to interfere with golfing!’

‘I’m fed up of playing the Devil's Advocate and combing through endless dreary pious letters. Anyway, I’m up to the hilt with liberation theologians. I enjoy baiting these beggars. It’s much more fun!’

‘Ah yes, *mio figlio*, you’re busy with that Peruvian scallywag Fr. Josimo Caldez? How’s it going Georgio, old thing?’

‘Fine, but he is going to be a lot of work. I’ll have to get Ingleton on to him to do all the spade work. I’ll then prepare to go for the jugular!’

‘It’s your favourite game, George, you oaf.’ (Although the above conversation was conducted mainly in Italian, the Cardinal had a great love of English, but his abilities were limited and his expressions were often hopelessly out of date. He constantly peppered his broken English with idiomatic phrases such as ‘spiffing’ and ‘oaf’, though often used unintentionally with their opposite meaning.)

‘Oh, I wouldn’t say that. I prefer a good game of golf, any day, except with that *figlio di putana* Frigini. (The monsignor felt (perhaps vainly) that swearing in foreign language was merely a grave imperfection rather than a venial sin.)

‘Ah, but you will sort him out with *quel libro*, George.’

That book was a reference to an unpublished work by the German Jesuit, Gustav Weigel revered even in communist circles for his clear exposition of Marxism.

‘Don’t refer to it as “that book”, Giuseppe. That’s my secret Bible. My predecessors had to work hard on Weigel not to publish it, but to have it available only to the Vatican and later, it cost me another game of golf with Frigini, who managed to have it banned by the Jesuit order. Old Weigel, that “fearful Jesuit”, understood Marxian theory better than the Marxists themselves. Indeed, in his published work on the subject, the preface writer wrote that Marxists often consulted his book for clarification of their own doctrines, but, it is the unpublished condemned *Index Errorum* (List of Errors) that is really dynamite!’

‘O, you young scoffing nincompoop, but I don’t know how I would manage without you.’

‘I’ll also need Ingleton, to sort out all the tough logic bits.’

‘But, *mio figlio*, you got a ‘*summa cum laude*’ at Gregs for logic.’

‘Yes, but this the real world now, not the world of Aristotelian sophistries, and this kind of logic is no joke. Ingleton will send out a team of snoopers who can spot a fallacy, even before it’s fully committed and refute it even before the speaker’s opened his illogical cake-hole. They convert the errors all into mathematical symbols and then, the silken smoothies rehash the whole diabolical brew into elegant or unintelligible scholastic Latin. The poor victims don’t stand a chance. It’s crueller than the rack.’

‘Ah, *mio figlio*, I don’t understand a word. It sounds frightfully OTT.’ (Again the cardinal used a twenties English expression inappropriately for what he meant to say - ‘frightfully clever’.)

‘It will cost me a lot of negotiations. Ingleton always pretends to be busy.’

‘What about the Polish charismatics, George. Are they going to be a problem?’

‘Aagh, please don’t mention charismatics when I’m drinking Don Jamingo, - any other time.’

‘But some of them are very good Catholics, even traditionalists like Fr. Czierwyrski or that African cardinal, what’s his name now? Shall we have to summon them?’

‘No that’s the whole point. They’re more orthodox than we are and that Polish Father Unpronounceable is probably yet another blasted saint. It would be a total waste of time to summon him. He would only aggravate my migraine attacks.’

‘Then what’s the problem Georgio, old bean?’

‘It’s the followers. You get your usual quota of the devout, but it also attracts the loonies and some of those loonies do all sorts of things in the name of the Church, such as healing people and, alas, miracles or even worse, writing books about them.’

‘Georgio, you oafish rascal. I thought you were also fed up with the good old pious Catholics.’

‘I just wish they would stick to adoration of the sacrament and rosaries and stop talking!’

‘But, *mio figlio*, I thought you hated rosary rallies and avoided them like the plague.’

‘Oh no, I don’t. I say the rosary once a month and go to a rally almost once a year. That’s more than enough!’

‘I know, *mio figlio*, your heart is in the right place, but, alas, you are overburdened by the weight of our holy office. I will try to get you another assistant.’

‘Thanks Giuseppe, you do your bit at your end and put a word into the ear of His Holiness and I’ll negotiate a deal with Ingleton. He hates losing good men to our bureaucracy. I’ll just have to negotiate.’

‘How will you manage that, *mio figlio*?’

‘I’ll rely on the good old loyal Africa so that we can set up a scholarship for first-class students. That’ll keep him quiet, but it will have to go through the Reaper again.’

‘I hope they will find you a good fellow, Georgio.’

‘Well he must be English speaking, sensible, discrete, and obedient and certainly not another bloody saint!’

Chapter II: Confession Time

Mgr. Beaumont and Cardinal Cannelli were confessors to each other and both in an entirely different way were excellent professionals in this delicate sphere. It was, however, difficult to imagine two more disparate set of sins.

Cardinal Cannelli was an indulgent with Mgr. Beaumont as the latter was severe with the former. Mgr. Beaumont had already made it plain that he had no serious intention to remedy his many faults and imperfections, even if they did incur the penalty of a considerable extended delay in purgatory. His malicious quips, his nefarious banter, vitriolic curses and uncontrolled outbursts of temper were all left unchallenged. He was, however, willing to confess all but only those sins which could definitely send him to ‘the other place’. He did not have the personal calling to the state to which clerics refer as ‘the life of perfection’. The only saint in whom he seemed to show any real interest - not to mention devotion - was, of course, St. Augustine - on account of his famous prayer, ‘Convert me, Lord, but not just yet.’ (Indeed, he belonged to a secret select Vatican society called the *Augustinians* for this very reason. Whilst ostensibly a prayer and discussion group, it was known for the outrageous sumptuousness of its feasts even by Vatican standards.) Mgr. Beaumont thought that, perhaps, at some future date when he was old, deaf, half-blind and, of course, gout-ridden he might experience the Pauline conversion to sanctity in a blinding flash and only then would he give up Jamingo brandy, Sumatran cigars, *cuisine provençale*, mephistophelean diplomacy, the juiciest morsels of malignant gossip as well as generally urbane and inane *causerie*. But as, alas, these constituted his main pleasure and purpose in living, he was not exactly over-anxious to renounce them all at once at this relatively early juncture in his life.

‘So, my son, you forged the signature of Cardinal Delorges on 32 occasions in order to save time’.

‘Yes, well, the old buffer never reads the documents anyway and as you know, he’s already half blind. You can never find him when you want to. It takes him at least two hours to come round from his nap and all you get in return is bad temper, garlic breath and French spleen.

They were only marriage annulments anyway. He certainly never bothers with those and even if he did, he would not understand the complex Latin formulations. So, I thought a bit of holy forgery would save time.'

'Ah, I see, my son, you were only giving priority to what you perceived to be the real interests of Our Holy Mother, the Church over the mundane, pharisaic tasks of our overblown bureaucracy. (The cardinal was, of course, speaking Italian at this juncture.) I understand, my son, your aim was most laudable, but as, I'm afraid, you know better than I do that the means do not justify the end - or is it the other way round? I can never remember that one, but you know what I mean, my very dear child. Anything else?'

'I've told quite a few lies in the past couple of months, Giuseppe.'

'Ah, this is very serious, my son, on about how many occasions?'

'Oh, only about two or three a day. All in the interests of the Vatican - except for about a third of them'.

'Could they have been prevarications, my son?'

'Oh no, you know I never bother confessing those! No, they were downright, blatant lies. You know, lies to get rid of people, to avoid rosary rallies and invitations, to cover up my incidences of incompetence in our department - and to the press, of course.'

'Anything else, my son.'

'That's all I can think of at the moment, but there are probably lots of other things, so please hurry up and get the absolution over, Giuseppe, before I remember anything else!'

The absolution duly took place with the blissful words for Beaumont, 'For these and all other sins you cannot now remember, I grant you pardon and peace!' The penances were always very slight from Cardinal Cannelli in contrast to the gravity of most of the sins.

'Now for your penance, my poor prodigal son, I want you to spend a few moments in front of the statue of Our Lady in Maria Maggiore and to tell her that you are sorry for your sins and that you love her.'

'Fair enough, Giuseppe. You know I still have a remnant of devotion to Our Lady if that's not too strong an expression.'

The two changed roles and the monsignor heard the confession of the cardinal. Mgr. Beaumont took confession very seriously and from his Oxford days had taken what was referred to in the post-Newman circles rather pompously as the Wittgensteinian approach to this sacrament, seeing each case as a restricted language game in which the penitent defined the parameters and the confessor responded to the particular ‘grammar’ of the ethical logic appropriate for each penitent. The imperturbable monsignor was, therefore, equally good with the criminal as with the saint. If a distraught murderer had approached Mgr. Beaumont with the words ‘Father, I have committed the sin of murder’, the monsignor’s immediate response would have been, ‘On how many occasions?’ The hysterical perpetrator of an evil deed may have felt some relief when his answer was a feeble ‘On one occasion’ and, perhaps, may even have felt a little deflated being consigned automatically to the rank of petty one-time murderers rather than belonging to the echelons of those who commit serial killings, or even genocide. Equally, Mgr. Beaumont could be ludicrously strict with saintly people, as will be seen from his treatment of the venerable cardinal.

Cardinal Cannelli used the formulation, *mio figlio*, even to his father confessor as he used ‘family’ words on the basis of how he personally felt towards people.

‘I have brutally and in a fit of fury committed the crime of murder on one occasion.’

(Not for a split second, not even in the remotest corner of his world-weary brain, did it occur to Mgr. Beaumont that Cardinal Cannelli might have committed this sinful act against another human being.)

‘Please be more specific. Can you give the genus and species of the slain creature of God?’

‘Certainly, my son. The genus was of the insect world and the species, to be precise, is *apis humilis* or the common humble bee. He was actually one of my own bees at the time of the termination of his brief sojourn *in hac lacrimarum valle*.’

(The Cardinal’s confessions sometimes centred on his relationship with his bees, if there had been no cross thoughts or words with his family.)

‘But, my son, the matter is even graver.’

‘*Gravior? Worse?*’ There was no hint of irony in the monsignor’s tone, who switched from English, Latin and Italian with equal ease.

‘Yes, I even cursed the poor miserable creature as I brutally cut short the life-span intended by its omniscient Creator.’

‘That is a bit extreme, Giuseppe. Why did you do that?’

‘I was just taking out the honeycomb from the hive dedicated to St. Teresa of Avila when the poor innocent victim crept beneath my face covering and stung me almost in the middle of my right ear lobe. (Sometimes, the cardinal's eagerness to have a 'full' confession led to the recital of totally irrelevant details.) I confess that I shouted ‘*farabutto*’ and killed the unfortunate and innocent wretch instantly, whereby I dropped the whole comb on my right foot. It did not hurt as I was wearing my new bee-boots at the time.’

‘Ah, I see. Well, Giuseppe, you know you have behaved in an extremely irrational manner. The bee had, of course, no sense of malice when it stung you. It was merely acting within the severe limitations of its apine intelligence. In addition, to cursing the dumb creature as well as killing it (which may or may not have the mitigating circumstances of limited self-defence, even though the damage had already been done at the time of the murder and only the instinct rather than the act of self-defence remains) shows only too clearly, Giuseppe - that after all the graces you have received from the sacraments, from a lifetime devoted to the Church and from all your holy discipline, that when it comes to the crunch, your passions are still, even at your age, not completely under control. Indeed, we could go so far as to say they are completely out of control’

‘Oh I know, my son. I must admit I shed many tears, but I tried not to make too much fuss.’

‘This is no help, Giuseppe. These are the very same emotional tendencies which cause a murder to result from a lovers’ tiff or cause domestic violence. It is, perhaps, only chance or providence or whatever you wish to call it, that you have been spared those circumstances in which you might have committed murder against a human being. Thus, you have shown the same tendencies and passions of a real murderer. The Supreme Being judges more the motive than the result because He is no superficial consequentialist like the humanist gang’

‘Yes, I know, my son. Were it not for Our Holy Mother the Church and the intercessions of my Guardian Angel and the saints, I could be the worst sinner on earth. I am so undisciplined.’

‘However, Giuseppe, despite the fact that bees in themselves are wonderful, complex and fascinating creatures, they are, I’m afraid, still fairly low on the evolutionary ladder. Even to kill a bee with malice aforethought would still constitute only a grave venial sin on account of the motive rather the consequences.’

‘Ah, you are too lenient, my son. I am so ashamed.’

‘Any other sins?’

‘Yes, the twelfth decade twice.’ (This was shorthand for Cardinal Cannelli who tried to say fifteen decades of the rosary every night before falling asleep. If he fell asleep on the sixteenth or seventeenth - his maximum - that was all right as he had completed the required fifteen.)

‘Twice? Twice in one week, Giuseppe! That’s rather a lot. What have you been up to? On a wild binge again?’

‘You are right. How did you know, my son? I had imbibed an extra glass of wine on both occasions.’

‘Aha! I suspected as much! Well, you can see for yourself only too clearly the close connection between over-indulgence and laxity in prayer. It is Our Lady who has lost graces intended for mankind from your gross negligence. Who knows what souls have been lost for all eternity, what graces of conversion to the world, what holiness to the Church has been missed now and forever because of those six missing decades!’

‘Oh, I am so very sorry, my son. I cannot bear it. You must give me an extremely severe penance.’

‘Don’t worry. I will. Anything else?’

‘There are so many, many other things, but these are the ones Our Holy Mother told me to confess. As you know, I always ask her first because I usually have a telling off for rambling confessions.’

‘Right, for your penance, Giuseppe, for gross neglect, I want you to add an extra decade to your usual quota for the next three weeks. Concerning your unregulated passions and tendency toward outbursts of uncontrolled violence, I’m going to give you an extra three hours’ paper work this week (This really was a penance for Cardinal Cannelli) and concerning your sins of over-indulgence, I am putting you on a bread and water fast for Monday as well as Wednesday and Friday.’

‘Ah, thank you, my son.’ Except for the paper work, the cardinal was well pleased with the penance. Prayer to Our Lady was more of a pleasure to him and fasting was an integral part of his routine.

Now that the confessions were over, it was already 3.30 pm - time for afternoon tea, a social ritual still more bizarre than the episode which has already been narrated.

Chapter III: A Mad Hatter's Tea Party at the Vatican

Although Cardinal Cannelli was technically a doctor of canon law, he had never really been a strong scholar so that during his *lyceo* days, he had been relegated from the Greek class to modern languages and, in his case, English as modern languages were curiously thought to be more suitable for the less linguistically gifted pupils. Latin was, of course, compulsory for all pupils throughout their schooling. Far from being a punishment, English soon became his favourite subject in spite of or even because of the very eccentric methods of his only English teacher, Mr. Tomkins, to whom, since his ordination, he had sent a crate of wine from his family home every year for Tomkins's birthday present.

Mr. Josiah Tomkins was one of the many Oxford Anglo-Catholics who had converted to Rome, which, in his case, literally meant going to Rome and living in the *urbe aeterna* itself. He had tried his vocation at the illustrious English College there, but soon discovered that he liked his independence too much to conform to sacerdotal routines - a largish tippie of whisky as an aperitif before each meal including breakfast as well as a nightcap; then, regular visits to the opera and theatre and irregular visits *ad tabernas suspiciosas*. All this did not quite fit in with the high ideals of the English College, with its own private list of forty-four English martyrs and 41 saints between 1581 and 1679. He ended up teaching English at a Berlitz language school, but he also did some part-time teaching at a *lyceo* in Rome. He loved Rome and had no intention of leaving *hanc urbem aeternam*, but, after several years, like colonials who had lived abroad far too long, he had developed into a typical ex-pat who was far more English than the English in England - so much so - that he felt distinctly uncomfortable whenever he visited the Blighted Isles. It was not just the fact that he always wore the same style of brogues, tortoise shell glasses and battered sports jacket, but more because of his indulgence in extreme eccentricities unchecked by any external factors so that he, in the end, became an epitome of an English minor public schoolmaster from the last century. Although the Berlitz authorities insisted on modern, direct methods of teaching English at their own institutions, he felt no compulsion to use modern methods for his *lyceo*

classes despite his theoretical advantage of his being a native speaker. At the elementary stages, he taught English as if it were Latin so that every English noun would have six cases:

Nominative: the desk (deictic or subject of verb)

Vocative: o(h) desk! (or simply, “desk!” (with accenting) (note 1: only to be used when addressing a desk directly; note 2: no inflectional change!))

Accusative: the desk (only to be used when the desk is the DIRECT object of a verb; (note: no inflectional change!))

Genitive: the desk’s (only to be used with regard to the desk’s possessions; (alternatively, replaceable by the prepositional phrase *of the desk*))

Dative: the desk (only when the desk is the INDIRECT object of a verb such as giving the desk a present or paying some form of tribute to the desk; (note: as with the accusative, no inflectional change, but the non-prepositional indirect object must precede the direct object; alternatively, *to* or *for* the desk (prepositional) in which case the prepositional phrase follows the accusative)

Ablative: from, with or by the desk (always prepositional owing to a paucity of appropriate inflectional endings as is the case in many modern foreign languages)

In spite of these methods, the boys soon progressed to readers which consisted mainly of *Winnie the Pooh* stories and then onto *Just William* for the pupils in their second year of English, which concerned a precocious mischievous brat causing havoc to a middle-class household; *Billy Bunter* was the main reading fodder in their third year and was all about a fat boy in a public school and, finally, the class read P. G. Wodehouse’s *Jeeves* stories for fourth year English language pupils who would have been sixteen years old in the system at that time. Far from being deterred by this rather narrow reading diet, Cardinal Cannelli remained a fan of these humorous, somewhat outdated stories all his life. He had read every book by all three authors and he regularly re-read them. Whether it was a consequence of Tomkins’s regime or not is difficult to determine, but Cardinal Cannelli had never been able to finish a book by any other English author

‘Ah Shakespeara, a greata poeta, but too many bally wordas. Dickens a very *importante*, but not he is not to my most wretched *gusto ignorante*’, as he used to say in his extremely Italianate English. Even the ecclesiastically approved Chesterton was too much.

‘Chesterton - very good, but not ripping nor (he always remembered his ‘nors’ from his Tomkin days) a barrel of laughas.’

One of the highlights of the week for Cardinal Cannelli was his hour of English conversation with Mgr. Beaumont, which always followed the confessions. The only problem was that Cannelli would often use 1930’s boarding school slang in inappropriate situations and often with opposite connotations to their original meanings and, all this, with an extreme Italian accent. (Phonetics and phonology did not rank high in the list of linguistic priorities for Mr. Tomkins who spoke Latin, French and Italian with an impeccable Oxford accent.) Mgr. Beaumont never corrected the cardinal’s mistakes nor reacted in any way even to the absurd use of English on Cannelli’s behalf. The monsignor was far too much a diplomat to correct other people’s mistakes, an activity he would have deemed rude and Germanic and he also did not have the remotest hint of the pedagogue in him. (Indeed, the very notion of educational enterprise had something of the revolutionary for him as it involved changing the world rather than leaving things as they are.) He himself babbled on incessantly during these conversations without the slightest concession towards a non-native speaker. Cannelli’s interpolations during the monsignor’s torrents did not help to express his total incomprehension. ‘Most decidedly, old thing’, ‘utter rot’ or even ‘absolutely, you nincompoop’ - all expressions thought to be polite interjections by the cardinal whose recourse to the dictionary even during his schooldays fell somewhat short of perfection. Even though the actual content of communicated material was often virtually nil, Beaumont also enjoyed these sessions as it was a relaxation for him to speak nothing but English instead of having to survive in a trilingual world. The conversation always took place over a traditional afternoon tea with some of the choicest blends and often with a Vatican variety of Devonshire clotted cream, apricot jam, scones, cucumber sandwiches and oddly enough,

even potted meat sandwiches were known to appear on the table. The Mad Hatter's Tea Party could be regarded as a comparatively sane occasion.

'Another cuppa cha, old boyya?'

'Yes, thank you very much, Giuseppe '

'I say, old beano, you never told me about your bally, old days at Oxforda, doncha knowa.'

'I certainly do know. You know I didn't enjoy Oxford that much, Giuseppe. For a start, I was sent to Keble.'

'Ah, but those spiffingo puntos! Did you punta mucha?'

'Of course not. Only tourists and poseurs punt at Oxford. Keble was a serious college.'

'So, you rowadd for your collegia, old thingo?'

'Certainly not. I was never a hearty type nor did I like the arty-farties or the airy-fairies. To be honest, Giuseppe, I was a prig and a swot for the first two years. That got me a first though, but I was never really happy until I went to the Gregorianum.'

Oblivious to the implication of these last remarks, Cardinal Cannelli blithely kept to his original theme.

'How about your tuck? Was it utterly scrumptious or ghastly?'

'College food was luke-warm, bland and homogenous just like the college itself. The breakfast was alright. At least, they didn't always quite succeed in utterly ruining the toast.'

'Aha, I betta you hadda, oodles and oodles of marmalado on your toast, you oaf, (Cannelli thought 'oaf' was a term of endearment. Being an innocent, the cardinal would have been deeply shocked to learn how frequently English boarding schoolboys insulted each other.)

'Not at all. We Anglo-Catholics were all into Thomas à Kempis at the time and would studiously do without butter and sugar at breakfast during Lent, for example.'

Cardinal Cannelli was delighted because he thought he had actually understood the last sentence.

' I say, old boyo, that's rather OTT, doncha knowa. English always have butter with toast and marmalado.'

‘Well, we prigs didn’t. I did enjoy my final year, however, after I had converted and was going to try my vocation. I had a definite aim. I wanted more than anything to study at the Gregorianum. I am not sure what it was that I didn’t like at Oxford. I had a good circle of friends, I enjoyed Greats, the grim college with its theological tradition was bearable, but somehow, Oxford was a disappointment for me whereas Gregs exceeded even my highest expectations!’

Beaumont was not an introspective type of person, but he too was warming to the new subject. Cannelli, however, resolutely stuck to the theme of Oxford in the same way he had kept to other subjects in previous conversations which were firmly imprinted on his mind such as public schools, tuck, wheezes and japes, English lords and aged aunts, Oxford dons, bicycling vicars and, of course, irate schoolmasters brandishing the cane and wearing cap and gown. Beaumont continued pursuing his own theme with equal dogged resolution.

‘Yes, that’s it. It has just occurred to me. What I got from Gregs is what I hoped to get from Oxford, but didn’t. Hence, the disappointment.’

How an aged cleric who had learnt English fifty five years ago and only visited the place twice in his life was to understand such a sentence delivered at full pelt never occurred to the monsignor, but this did not deter his interlocutor in the slightest.

‘Ah, yesso, balmy days amongsta the haughty spires and bells.’

‘Oh yes, we high Anglicans belonged to the “bells and smells” brigade on account of our almost Byzantine services.’

‘Tell me about ripping wheezos and pranks with your chummazza.’

‘I told you, Giuseppe. We were pie, poefaced Keble kids.’

‘Aha, I knew itto. Topping grub, pies and chocolate cake. I say, old chumma, do gobble up this jolly old tucka now. The cream is utterly smashing.’

‘Yes, I think I could manage a slight dollop’

This was one of the many ways the monsignor acquired his truly clerical girth. The English conversation finished with Cannelli pouring the fifth cup of Assam tea.

‘I’ll replete the cracking cuppo with a topping drop of cha, what ho!’

And so continued the second part of the Saturday afternoon ritual.

© John R. M. Gledhill

Purchase full version via Gumroad:
<https://gum.co/trouble-at-the-vatican>