History and Role of the *Advocatus Diaboli* ("Devil's Advocate")

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Chances are we have all heard the phrase "devil's advocate" to describe the role of a person who argues against a point he is in favor of for the purpose of testing the argument for flaws or weaknesses. The devil's advocate was actually the official name of the Promoter Fidei, an office first attested during the pontificate of Leo X (1513-1521) and formally established by Sixtus V in 1587 during the Counter-Reformation. The duty of the Promotor Fidei was to oversee every aspect of the beatification and canonization process, ensuring that no person received the honors of sainthood rashly, that proper juridical form was observed, and that every potential weakness or objection to the saints canonization was raised and evaluated in order that only those who were truly worthy would be raised to the dignity of the altars. Because the Promotor Fidei took a juridical position against the canonization of any given saint, it was joked that he was taking the devil's part in the proceedings, hence the common appellation "Devil's Advocate" (*advocatus diaboli*). In this article, we will examine the historical origin, office, and rationale behind the *advocatus diaboli* as well as the consequences attendant upon the abolition of office by Bl. John Paul II in 1982.

**Historical Development of the Legal Aspects of Canonization**

The first mention of anyone fulfilling the role of an *advocatus diaboli* was during the preliminary work in preparing for the beatification of St. Lawrence Justinian (1381-1456). The office appears to have been assigned by Leo X, although the beatification did not occur until 1524 under Pope Clement VII. The role became official under Sixtus V in 1587 and in 1708 the *advocatus diaboli* (technically called the Promotor Fidei) became the most important office in the Roman Congregation of Rites. But focusing solely on the establishment of the office and its institutional development gives us only a partial picture, for even Leo X was drawing on a much older legal tradition when he called for an *advocatus diaboli* in the case of St. Lawrence Justinian, and the rationale for why the Tridentine era popes enthusiastically embraced the office is bound up with the larger historical development of the cult of the saints.

In the first millennium of the Church, the *cultus* of a local saint was promulgated by the authority of the Bishop of the diocese in which the saint had lived or worked. Popular saints, such as Augustine of Hippo or Isidor of Seville, earned devotion even outside their respective dioceses and became broadly honored by the Church universal, though without any formal canonization process.

For historical reasons that go beyond the scope of this essay, these local canonizations increasingly fell short of the standards expected by the universal Church throughout the 10th and 12th centuries. Beginning in the late Carolingian era, the popes began exercising a more direct role in canonizations, reviewing bishops determinations or chastising them for raising people to the altars too rashly, sometimes even overriding their decisions and ordering the locally canonized saint to be struck from the calendar, as Pope Alexander III did in 1173. This centralizing tendency continued until Pope Alexander III issued a bull in 1170 reserving all canonizations to the Holy See exclusively. This was the beginning of the "modern" canonization process as we now know it.
Why did the Holy See insist on taking over the canonization process at this time? It is important to note that the assumption of all canonizations by the Holy See took place concurrently with the canonist movement of the 11th-13th centuries. The canonist movement was a largely legal revolution in the Church's governance. Freed from the dominion of secular rulers following the Investiture Controversy, the Church of the 11th century embarked upon the difficult but important process of streamlining its administration based on traditional precedents, which in the Middle Ages meant bringing centuries of disparate practices from all corners of Christendom into harmony and deducing general legal principles from them. This monumental process of gathering and codifying centuries of legal practice was headed by men such as the canonists Anselm of Lucca (c. 1083), Roland Bandinelli (later Alexander III) and most famously Gratian (c. 1150), compiled of the *Decretals*. The subsequent revival in the study of canon law was pioneered by disciples of such men, known as the Decretists.

The Decritist revival lasted into the mid-13th century and was characterized by a desire to apply regularized legal norms to every aspect of the Church's governance. Thus the development of the canonization procedure at this time reflects a desire to move canonization away from the realms of hearsay and popular sentiment and towards a firm, legal footing that granted the process more credibility and safeguarded the integrity of the faith. Canonization thus can be characterized as law applied to saint-making.

A similar legal development paralleled the assumption of canonizations by the Holy See: the emergence of the Courts of the Inquisition, first episcopal and then papal. If canonization was law applied to saint-making, the inquisitorial courts were law applied to dealing with heresy. Because of this emphasis on legal procedure, it made sense that both the Inquisition and the process of canonization would be seen in terms of a trial. The alleged-saint is the defendant, and his sanctity must be defended against possible accusations. While the exact canonical procedures for canonizations between the 12th century and the Tridentine period are not known with surety, it is certain that they were viewed in terms of a trial.

This is easily seen in the procedure followed during the canonization of St. Dominic in 1234. Witnesses were interviewed, depositions taken, and "evidence" carefully cataloged, and "testimonies" noted.

**Establishment and Role of the Promotor Fidei**

Although the office of the Promotor Fidei (*advocatus diaboli*) did not exist in the time of St. Dominic, we can already see the fundamental principles in place that would later be taken up by the Promotor Fidei. In reading Dominic's canonization, we see the testimony of many witnesses, but we also see witnessed interviewed who could potentially debunk the claims of Dominic's sanctity. For example, St. Dominic's confessor is interviewed, and while of course the specific content of Dominic's confession is not recounted, the inquisitors wish to know if St. Dominic had ever committed a mortal sin. The confessors, a Brother Bonaventure of Verona, stated that he did not believe that Dominic had ever committed a mortal sin. [1] Brother William of Monferrat, who spent a considerable amount of time in the company of Dominic, was asked whether he ever saw St. Dominic deviate from the Rule. He replied in the negative. [2] In this we see an example of the trial-mentality that developed in canonizations: witnesses might give testimony in favor of the sanctity of a *beati*, but those witnesses must be cross examined. Yes, you witnessed a miracle, but did you witness any deviation of the Rule? Yes, you witnessed extreme acts of virtue, but were you aware of any occasion on which the person in question could have sinned? *Ever?* While the high medieval canonizations are primarily slanted
towards the defendant, we see the presence of a "prosecution", a line of questioning that looks for weak points in the defense. Thus the canonizations bear a strong resemblance to Inquisitorial hearings; this is not surprising since the two institutions developed simultaneously. There was sometimes a cross-over between the two; at Dominic's canonization hearings, the ecclesiastics in charge of hearing testimonies were also inquisitors.

As we move forward to the period of the Protestant Revolt, the Church's whole doctrine of the communion of saints and the cults of the sancti were called into question, as well as the practices that had developed out of the cults (veneration of relics, for example). Following the lead of Renaissance humanists such as Erasmus, who had mocked the veneration of relics and considered much of 15th century cult of the saints questionable, the Protestant Reformers launched an all out attack on the Catholic veneration of the saints. Although there were many theological and biblical arguments put forth, many of the Reformers, including Luther, like Erasmus before him, objected on the grounds that relics were not properly authenticated, several local cults were of questionable historicity, various acta and vitae circulating about many saints were mostly legendary, and the deeds of many saints were not sufficiently verified. During the Catholic Counter Reformation, the Church seemed to admit that, given the literacy of the age and increasing advancements in science, medicine, etc., a more thorough scrutiny of the lives and deeds of alleged saints was appropriate. Hence in 1587, Pope Sixtus V created the office of the Promotor Fidei, which took many of the prosecutorial that had already emerged in medieval canonizations and centered them on a single individual.

In opening the commission of inquiry into the sanctity of St. Dominic, Gregory IX had stated the purpose of the investigations was to ensure that the Church was "eager to affirm certainties and slow to credit doubtful matters" [3]. Thus, following the trial model established in the Middle Ages, the Church appoints its own "prosecutor" to try to disprove the sanctity of alleged saints. The power entrusted to the Promotor Fidei was great; in 1708, he became the most important official in the Roman Congregation of Rites. His job was to scrutinize everything relating to the saint's life and deeds; the 1913 Catholic Encyclopedia sums up his role as:

"[T]o prevent any rash decisions concerning miracles or virtues of the candidates for the honours of the altar. All documents of beatification and canonization processes must be submitted to his examination, and the difficulties and doubts he raises over the virtues and miracles are laid before the congregation and must be satisfactorily answered before any further steps can be taken in the processes. It is his duty to suggest natural explanations for alleged miracles, and even to bring forward human and selfish motives for deeds that have been accounted heroic virtues...His duty requires him to prepare in writing all possible arguments, even at times seemingly slight, against the raising of any one to the honours of the altar. The interest and honour of the Church are concerned in preventing any one from receiving those honours whose death is not juridically proved to have been "precious in the sight of God" [4]

Any documents or processes not submitted to the scrutiny of the Promotor Fidei become null and void by that very fact. Because of his duty to suggest alternate explanations for alleged miracles and virtues, he was nicknamed the "devil's advocate" (advocatus diaboli). He thus served as a kind of filter to screen out candidates whose sanctity was not beyond doubt, or who were perhaps being canonized out of rashness, popular appeal, or the moods of the day. The thinking was that if the deeds of a saint truly were miraculous, they would stand up to every kind of scrutiny; indeed, they must stand up to scrutiny if they are to be placed before the faithful and an unbelieving world as witnesses of the reality of God's
grace.

Every action of the saint is to be scrutinized, even ones that are seemingly harmless. The definitive post-Tridentine work on how canonization proceedings are to be carried out was written by Prospero Lambertini, who was Promotor Fidei for twenty years and later became Pope Benedict XIV (1740-1758). His classic work *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et de Beatorum Canonizatione* laid down the principles that were followed in canonization proceedings until the post-Vatican II era. In this work, we are provided with the sorts of seemingly slight questions that the Promotor Fidei would raise in objection to a candidate's sanctity. In this passage, we see the question posed of whether a candidate who committed much of their thought to writing might be guilty of vanity:

"There have been servants of God, as we have seen, who at the command of their superiors, committed their own lives to writing, giving therein an account, not only of their own praiseworthy actions, but likewise of the various gifts and graces bestowed on them by God. And there are others, again, who, though they have not published such things, have yet communicated them by word of mouth to their confessors, their companions, or others. In this state of things, then, a doubt is raised whether they have been guilty of the sin of self-conceit or vain-glory. Certainly there are not wanting examples of saints who have done this and the like [he goes on to cite the examples of St. Paul, St. Ignatius Loyola, and other saints who were prolific writers].

If any one should suppose from these and such like examples that every one may, without the fault of boasting and vain-glory, set forth his own praiseworthy actions, he would deceive himself...Every one, therefore, sees that it is necessary to be acquainted with some rules, in order to pass a correct judgment, so often as examination is made into the causes of such servants of God as have committed to writing, or related to others, their own great and noble actions; a judgment, I mean, as to this point, whether their doing so is to be ascribed to virtue or to vice, the vice, namely, to vain glory, which is reproved by the Apostle in his Epistle to the Galatians." [5]

This passage is indicative of the level of scrutiny candidates were put under. It may have occurred to us to ask whether a candidate for sainthood had any serious character defects; Lambertini suggests we should inquire about selfish motives in even their good deeds, such as writing. How many people would think to question the integrity of a candidate for sainthood based on the fact that they wrote a lot? But Lambertini, and Church Tradition following him, insist that every act and motive must be questioned, no matter how slight. While no saint is absolutely perfect, the Promotor Fidei's job was to insist that those raised to the sacred dignity of sainthood be as perfect as possible - which, with God's grace, was a very, very high standard.

It might be supposed that such a scrutiny into the motives of saintly individuals would be contrary to Faith, a kind of impiety. After all, St. Paul tells us that charity "believes all things" and that we should rejoice in the good lives of holy men and women rather than scrutinize them searching for flaws. [6] It is true that love must "believe all things", but we are also admonished to temper our credulity: "Test all things; hold fast to that which is good" [7]; in other words, measure all things against the standard of Christ, retain everything that measures up, and then believe all things that do so. Remember, as the Catholic Encyclopedia stated, "the interest and honour of the Church are concerned" in questions of canonizations, as the Faith of the Christian people and the integrity of the Church's message is weakened if non-suitable candidates are raised to the altars. Thus, it would actually be a sin against faith to *not* scrutinize the lives of candidates; to fail to ask sufficient questions about their sanctity...
would be to compromise the certitude of faith, at least subjectively in the minds of the faithful. This is why Lambertini quotes Fr. Bartoli, biographer as St. Robert Bellarmine, in saying that the desirable end in any canonization is "for the edification of His Church, for the glory of His name" and why Pope Alexander III chastises a bishop in 1173 for allowing a man unsuitably scrutinized to be honored as a saint, going so far as to declare, "You shall not therefore presume to honour him in the future; for, even if miracles were worked through him, it is not lawful for you to venerate him as a saint without the authority of the Catholic Church." [8]

Abolition of the Promotor Fidei and Consequences

If we were to sum up the purpose of the Promotor Fidei, it would be appropriate to say that his job was to ensure that canonizations remained a matter of objective fact. Besides the strict line of inquiry proposed by the Promotor Fidei, four miracles were also required for canonization. This certainly meant that canonizations were rare events; from 1900 to 1978, only 98 saints were canonized, which, as we shall see, pales in comparison to the number of post-1978 canonizations.

By the 20th century, some had begun to claim that the process for getting saints canonized was too cumbersome; a few reforms were made during the pontificate of Pius XI, such as establishing a special department for the study of "historical" causes, distinct from the department which studied the theological aspects of a candidate's life. But bishops continued to complain that the process was too cumbersome; they repeatedly asked the pope for a more "streamlined" approach, which would nevertheless preserve the integrity of the investigative process. Pope Paul VI subsequently created the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in 1969, making it distinct from the Sacred Congregation of Rites, which thereafter became the CDW.

But the real reform came during the pontificate of John Paul II, who in 1982, issued the constitution Divini Perfectionis Magister which overhauled the entire canonization process as it had been known since the Tridentine era, abrogating all previous law on the process and laying down new norms. Under John Paul II's reforms, the role of the Promotor Fidei is replaced by a Secretary, whose job is mainly that of a chairman to ensure that procedure is followed. The theological writings of a saint are examined by theological censors who look for theological errors in the works; others, called Relators, prepare reports documenting virtues and a medical board documents alleged miracles.

What of the Promotor Fidei? Contrary to popular opinion, his office has not been abolished, but John Paul II downgraded it and altered it to such a degree that it is no longer recognizable as the same office established by Sixtus V. In Chapter 2 of Divini Perfectionis Magister, John Paul II says:

The Sacred Congregation is to have one Promotor of the Faith or Prelate Theologian. His responsibility is:

1. to preside over the meeting of the theologians, with the right to vote;
2. to prepare the report on the meeting itself;
3. to be present as an expert at the meeting of the Cardinals and Bishops, although without the right to vote. [9]
We see fundamentally the trial nature of the canonization process has been abolished. Instead of a candidate being on trial and having to face accusations by the Promotor Fidei as the Church's "prosecutor", the procedure now takes the form of a committee meeting where experts present reports. Glaring problems with a candidate's life or miracles still must be accounted for, but the inquisitorial aspect of the procedure is now gone. As an example of this, compare the old system, where the Promotor Fidei was charged with presiding and preparing a report, but actively seeking to find naturalistic causes for miracles and selfish motives in the life of the candidate. Their job was not only to point out problems, but to actively seek them out. Furthermore, the canonization process could not move forward until every one of the Promotor Fidei's objections were answered to his satisfaction, giving him an effective veto power on the whole canonization.

In the modern procedure, the Promotor Fidei does not actively seek out problems, and no longer has anything close to a veto power over the process; his influence is reduced to presenting a report and being on hand as an "expert" whose opinion may be solicited, but there is nothing in the modern procedure where the Promotor Fidei submits a list of objections that must be answered by the Postulators. Nor is there any mandate for the Promotor Fidei to personally approve all evidence and documentation in the procedure on pain of nullity. With the removal of the prosecutorial role of the Promotor Fidei and the reduction of his authority, instead of a forum for arguing for or against a candidate's virtues, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints now becomes more of a committee that collects favorable testimonies of candidates and issues reports on them. The corresponding reduction of necessary miracles from four to two further decreases the burden of proof in favor of the candidate. The result is that the modern Congregation has been unfavorably compared to a "saint making factory." Above we noted that there were 96 canonizations from 1900 to 1978, an average of 1.2 per year. When we come to John Paul II's pontificate, the Church canonized 480 saints from 1978 to 2005, an average of 17.7 per year, almost a 1000% increase. This increase is unprecedented; besides canonizing more saints than all his 20th century predecessors, Cardinal Saraiva Martins estimated that John Paul II alone canonized more saints that all of the popes going back to 1588. [10]

The Church still may and at times does employ hostile witnesses to try to find fault with candidates, but very commonly these specialists are not Catholic, have no background in theology, and the objections they raise are of a very worldly nature. For example, atheists Aroup Chatterjee and Christopher Hitchens were asked to testify against Mother Teresa in her 2002 hearings. Their objections were absurd; Chatterjee objected that Mother Teresa damaged the reputation of Calcutta and that her charity was not effective. Such worldly objections were noted and then studiously ignored by the Congregation. Meanwhile, problems that truly did have a bearing on Catholic theology, like Mother Teresa's practice of praying with pagans, encouraging Hindus to be better Hindus, her syncretist statements that all religions worship the same God and the extremely questionable nature of her miracle were never addressed (see here). They were not addressed because there was nobody designated to bring forward potentially damning evidence against the candidate. She was duly beatified without these issues ever being resolved.

While some argue that the lightening of the burden of proof and basic elimination of the Promotor Fidei from his traditional role do not necessarily mean the integrity of the process is canonized, it is undeniable that the reforms of John Paul II eliminated safeguards that had been put in place by previous popes such as Alexander III, Sixtus V and Benedict XIV for the very purpose of preserving "the interest and honour of the Church" and "for the edification of His Church, for the glory of His
name." Therefore there is a strong argument to be made that in eliminating these safeguards, the modern Magisterium has indeed comprised the soundness of the process.

Another problematic element in the modern Magisterium's approach is the rationale that underlies the massive increase in canonizations. Rather than proclaiming saints because they were in fact objectively saintly, the modern canonizations have an ulterior motive: to showcase the universal call to holiness taught at Vatican II. In commenting upon the many canonizations of John Paul II, Cardinal Martins stated that John Paul II viewed his canonizations in the context of a "fulfillment" of the vision of Vatican II:

"The first reason the Pope gave [for so many canonizations] was that he, by beatifying so many Servants of God, did no more than implement the Second Vatican Council, which vigorously reaffirmed that holiness is the essential note of the Church...Therefore, John Paul II said, holiness is what is most important in the Church, according to the Second Vatican Council. Then no one should be surprised by the fact that the Pope wished to propose so many models of holiness to Christians, to the People of God.

The second reason is the extraordinary ecumenical importance of holiness. In "Novo Millennio Ineunte," the Pope said that the holiness of the saints, blessed and martyrs is perhaps the most convincing ecumenism, these are his words, because holiness, he said with even stronger words, has its ultimate foundation in Christ, in whom the Church is not divided. Therefore, the ecumenism we all want calls for many saints, so that the convincing ecumenism of holiness is placed in the candelabrum of the holiness of the Church" [11]

Who knows whether Cardinal Martins speaks John Paul's mind on this or not, but if so, it is telling. Holiness is not affirmed by removing the safeguards put in place by Tradition, safeguards whose very existence served to ensure that only true models of holiness were proposed. One cannot make more orange juice by simply pouring more water in the pitcher. What we have in the modern Magisterium is essentially a pouring of water into the pitcher; the addition technically increases volume, but the content of the resulting mixture is not as pure.

But the second statement on ecumenism is more telling, because the Cardinal basically admits an ulterior motive in the modern canonizations: "the ecumenism we want calls for many saints", and therefore we must have more saints! The final effect of all this is that, while the Promotor Fidei ensured that canonizations remained an objective matter, the subsuming of canonization to the "needs" of the modern Church has effectively subjectivized the procedure. A canonization is no longer about whether a candidate truly meets the Church's standard of holiness, but on what role models the modern Church "needs" at any given time to promote its particular vision.

Are modern canonizations to be questioned? Ultimately, it is the opinion of most theologians that canonizations are infallible, at least in their final determination - that is to say, the fact of the canonization, not necessarily the integrity of the evidence, procedure, methodology, etc. What we are witnessing is not saints who are not really saintly, but saints whose level of heroic virtue is much lower than that expected by previous generations, as well as less able to stand up to scrutiny of secular detractors. Whereas nobody could doubt the miracles at Lourdes, which even converted atheists, not even the husband of the woman Mother Teresa healed believes in the legitimacy of the miracle, nor do
the doctors. Yet, because of the loss of the Promotor Fidei's role, these objections do not ultimately need to be resolved. In the old days, the Promotor Fidei would attack or scrutinize even the good deeds of candidate; now, even questionable issues are ignored.

Does the Church need models of holiness? Absolutely. How do we get them? We need to cultivate a spiritual atmosphere in our parishes and homes that nourishes real saints, so that we actually have an objective increase in the amount of saintly people. We cannot get more saints by making it easier to proclaim saints. We cannot make more juice by adding water to it.

Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam
July 11th, 2013

NOTES

[2] ibid., Testimony of William of Montferrat (12)
[5] Lambertini, Prospero, De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et de Beatorum Canonizatione, "On Heroic Virtues", c. 1:3,8
[7] 1 Thess. 5:21
[8] Lambertini, De Servorum Dei, "On Heroic Virtues", c. 1:21 and Gregory IX, Decretales, III, "De reliquiis et veneratione sanctorum"