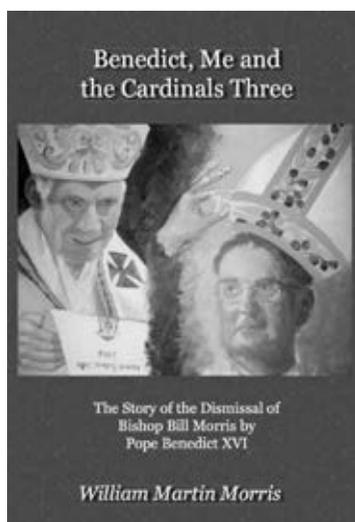


BOOK REVIEW

Benedict, Me and the Cardinals Three: The Story of the Dismissal of Bishop Bill Morris by Pope Benedict XVI

Author: William Martin Morris;
Publisher: Hindmarsh: ATF Press, 2014
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Reviewed by Bernard Doherty*



Few events are more likely to make history in the Church than an episcopal dismissal; an occurrence that, while rare, this book demonstrates is not a unique occurrence even here in the faraway antipodes. Bishop William Morris' book is a twenty-nine-chapter account (with twenty-two appendices!) of the events surrounding his dismissal by Pope Benedict XVI and a group of highly placed Cardinals and provides an important witness to the fraught relationship between parts of the Australian episcopate and parts of the Roman curia over recent decades.

While Morris includes a few autobiographical details, the vast bulk of this book deals with events which transpired from the late 1990s through to early 2014 and will be of interest to historians and contemporary observers for the light it sheds on the relationship between Australia and Rome in the wake of the much-debated 1998 *Statement of Conclusions*, a document outlining the allegedly parlous state of the Catholic Church in Australia which upon its release caused a minor furor over claims its conclusions were based on a minority opinion and not reflective of the Australian reality. The great strength of this book is its extensive documentation, including Morris' correspondence with Rome and pastoral documents, which allows the reader to assess many of the claims made within the body of the text.

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By now the rough outline of events leading to Morris' downfall is well-known and in purely factual terms can be summarized thus: Morris fell afoul of a minority of his parishioners and various Roman dicasteries due to his alleged lax attitude toward individual confession and overutilization of the Third Rite of Reconciliation and, more seriously, his perceived "advocacy" for women's ordination and the recognition of Protestant orders in a 2006 Advent pastoral letter. He was ostensibly sanctioned on the grounds that all public discussion of women's ordination had been closed following Pope John Paul II's *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994) and the view in Rome that raising this matter showed poor pastoral sense. In the eyes of Rome this pastoral letter, coupled with other aspects of his episcopal ministry (not all of which are made clear and some clearly based on errors of fact), warranted his removal from his role as bishop. What remains hotly disputed, as the mixed-reception of Morris' book among reviewers indicates, is whether Morris was culpable for the second accusation leveled at him, and more importantly in the eyes of Morris and his supporters whether he was denied natural justice in the proceedings against him. Only history, and fuller access to documentation, will satisfactorily answer these questions, nevertheless Morris' account offers a valuable primary source for understanding the recent history of the Church in Australia.

The preexisting cleavages with the Australia Church which crystallized in the wake of the 1998 *Statement of Conclusions* – in particular through an emboldened attitude amongst disaffected conservatives and a series of arguably conservative appointments to key positions within the Church – and the marked contrasts in pastoral style, ecclesiology, and attitudes toward Vatican II which divide many Australia Catholics form the immediate context of the events which led-up to Morris' effective dismissal as Bishop of Toowoomba in 2011. In essence this book is a narrative about conflict between two styles of Church leadership and pastoral ministry.

Following a brief autobiographical introduction, Morris launches into substantive matters outlining his pastoral vision and the events of the 1998 Synod of Oceania which led to the penning of the *Statement of Conclusions*. These prefatory chapters and the related appendices outline Morris' position as someone who embraced dialogue and who earnestly sought to keep uncomfortable questions on the agenda of discussion. Morris' candor here is commendable, though as anyone familiar with the tone of discussion in more conservative sectors of the Church will clearly perceive the seeds of his eventual downfall were clearly present in his theological ideas about matters like collegiality and his interpretation of certain Vatican II documents.

Morris' intervention given at the Synod, in which in a single breathless sentence he manages to mention 'the divorced, celibacy, married clergy, the unspoken issue

of women, appointment of bishops, the adaptation and translation of liturgical texts, the problems surrounding general absolution and the Communal Rite of Reconciliation, inculturation of the liturgy and many more' (p. 17), could only have worked like a red rag to a bull amongst more conservative observers, and when the *Statement of Conclusions* was imposed upon the assembled bishops in what Morris tellingly describes as an 'ambush' and a 'witch-hunt' (pp. 18f.), the proverbial writing was on the wall. These early chapters also outline Morris' commitment to a culturally sensitive vision of the local Church and effectively set the stage for the conflict which this approach was to occasion amongst some parishioners.

That Morris' pastoral vision did not gel with everyone within his diocese becomes clear early in the book and Chapter 2 records complaints about Morris' alleged dereliction of duty in failing to provide provision for a Sunday Mass during the Diocesan priests annual retreat weekend. That such a seemingly inconsequential oversight would be reported directly to the Papal Nuncio might appear an extreme measure, but this evidently reflects a culture of denunciation which exists amongst those whom Morris refers to as the 'temple police' or 'right wing' of the Church. A steady stream of complaints found their way to the Nunciature and various offices in the curia over the course of Morris' tenure on more serious topics like the continued use of the Third Rite of Reconciliation and on ultimately inconsequential issues like Bishop Morris having his face-painted at a community event or allowing his priests to wear ties rather than Roman collars. The tone of these complaints is best illustrated by an anecdote in Chapter 15 regarding the discovery of a copy of the cantankerous *Lepanto* magazine on the desk of Cardinal Re during one of the final ill-fated attempts to reconcile Morris with his detractors.

Clearly Morris' collaborative style of leadership, engagement with the laity, and emphasis on collegiality cast him in an unfavorable light with those who felt the need for a more hierarchical ecclesiology and a rigid approach to liturgy, and his creative initiatives to address the pastoral needs of a sizable rural diocese (a point he often repeats) clearly ran counter to the received wisdom in Rome that only a steady stream of priestly vocations or the importation of foreign priests are suitable means for addressing gaps in pastoral care and the ravages of secularization.

From a historical perspective the Morris's situation offers a case study of the kinds of divisions which are becoming more acute in the Church more broadly (as evidenced during the recent Synod of Bishops in Rome), but which are often dismissed as the complaints of a few malcontents on the extreme fringes of ecclesiastical life. While talk of a 'crisis in the Church' amongst conservatives temporarily abated during the short Papacy of Benedict (only to return of late as a response to the much discussed "Francis Effect"), Morris' book amply demonstrates, that major ideological fissures remain a live issue and if nothing else perhaps offers

a salient lesson of how quickly the tide can turn and the evil-eye can rest on those who fail to toe the party-line,

One interesting omission from the book is an account of Morris' handling of the sectarian Magnificat Meal Movement (MMM), a conservative Marian prayer group who developed into a disruptive sect within the Diocese of Toowoomba that Morris issued a public statement against in early 1999. Over the course of the 1990s Morris showed exemplary leadership and pastoral sense in dealing with this problem in consultation with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Given the clear similarities between the forms of devotional traditionalism exhibited by the MMM and the parishioners who credited their 'Eucharistic adoration' (p. 203) with ousting Morris, it seems quite strange that Morris would not mention his more cooperative relationship with Pope Benedict (then Cardinal Ratzinger) in dealing with the canonically challenging problem of alleged apparitions and private revelations.

Given his role in overseeing the complex canonical procedures involved such an investigation, including anonymous reporting, it seems rather unlikely that Morris could realistically expect to see the contents of the brief against him or be unaware of the confidential nature of any Vatican investigative procedure. Unfortunately, in this case, the seal placed on documents held by the CDF will only fuel speculation as to the exact content of Archbishop Chaput's report following his apostolic visitation in 2007 and it will be left to future historians to revisit the Morris case when more documentation becomes available.

Like any autobiographical account this book could be read as self-serving (perhaps an *apologia*) and certainly at times the reader is made acutely aware of the exacerbation and frustration which the stonewalling process of the so-called 'fraternal dialogue' with Rome entailed for Morris and his supporters. At the same time one also senses that there is less-candor than might be found were this book written with more distance from the events described. Morris is still clearly healing from the wounds inflicted on him and while vague allusions abound to divisions within the Australian episcopate, Morris has been understandably circumspect in pointing the finger at some of his less sympathetic 'brother bishops' who were clearly glad to see the back of him.

From both a contemporary and a historical perspective Morris' book highlights what has always been a perennial tension between how things have been done in Australia and how actions are perceived in Rome, and the potential that exists within a global Church for cultural misunderstandings. Morris' account of meetings with both Cardinal Arinze and Pope Benedict highlights the challenge that a global Church faces in ensuring its highest office-holders can communicate effectively; a matter perhaps most strongly evidenced in the VatiLeaks memo quoted in Chapter

21 from Pope Benedict to Cardinal Re which demonstrates the all-too-human limitations at play in the Pope's admission to having misunderstood Morris during their meeting. While many of the difficulties between Morris and Rome could be put down to cultural differences or theological stalemates, some of the actions of various parties in Rome to Morris' entreaties remain perplexing. The complete pastoral disregard shown for Morris' support for victims of clerical child abuse and Rome's apparent inflexibility in terms of a date for his resignation in Chapter 23 stand out here. Similarly Morris' encounters with Vatican intrigues, while at times a tad baroque, do ring true. Anyone familiar with other disciplinary cases surrounding figures as divergent as Marcel Lefebvre and Hans Küng would be aware that the Roman attitude toward due process leaves a lot to be desired. In the end, upon concluding Morris' book one is left with the discouraging impression that the Vatican is a lot like Las Vegas in two regards: what happens in the Vatican stays in the Vatican and the house always wins!

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COMMENTARY

When a non-Romanised Bishop Confronts Rome

By Michael Costigan*

When drafting these notes I had not seen Bernard Doherty's review of Bishop William (Bill) Morris's book. My contribution is in no sense a second or alternative review of the Emeritus Bishop of Toowoomba's *Benedict, Me and the Cardinals Three*. I am simply taking up the Editor's kind invitation to offer a few reflections of my own after reading a book that I see as unique and significant.

My first observation is that, as Toowoomba's Catholic leader from 1993 to 2011, Bill Morris was in the best sense a bishop formed and animated by the teachings and pastoral orientation of the Second Vatican Council. Secondly, I believe that, unlike some other past and present members of the Australian hierarchy, Morris was, in a praiseworthy way, "non-Roman" (but never anti-Roman) in his thinking and actions.

That this bishop was profoundly influenced by the Council is evident from the

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