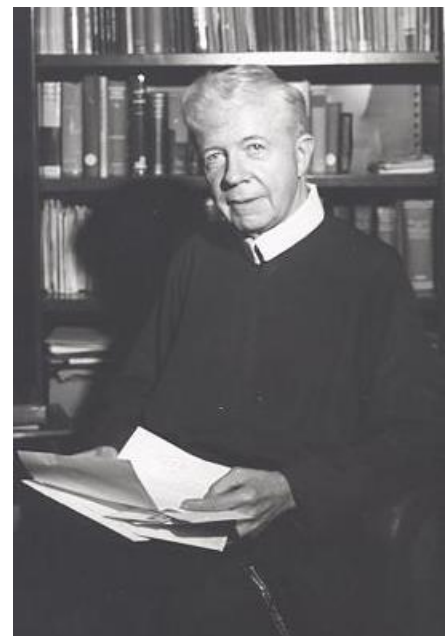


Redemptorists and Vatican II: American Contributions Francis Connell

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Redemptorist Archives of the Baltimore Province

Francis Connell

We may begin with the elder statesman. Father Francis Jeremiah Connell was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on 31 January 1888.² He professed as a Redemptorist on 15 October 1908 and was ordained 26 June 1913. He was repeatedly praised as a brilliant student and was sent to study for the doctorate in sacred theology at the Angelicum, from which he matriculated (*summa cum laude*) in 1923. He returned to the Redemptorist seminary at Mt. St. Alphonsus in Esopus, New York, and taught dogmatics until 1940, when he was released to teach moral theology at the Catholic University of America. In 1946 he was elected the first president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, of which he was a co-founder. He became the Dean of the School of Sacred Theology at the Catholic



University of America in 1949 and remained in that position until he retired in 1958, whereupon he took up the position of dean for religious communities. He wrote several books during this time, mostly on moral questions. He also was a regular author in publications such as *The American Ecclesiastical Review* (a 1958 issue is dedicated entirely to him), the *Boston Pilot*, and the *Brooklyn Eagle*. In 1956 he was appointed consultor to the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities. Connell died 12 May 1967 and was buried from the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC. He is interred at the Redemptorist Cemetery in Annapolis, Maryland.

Connell's work on the Council began, first, in response to the letter of Cardinal Domenico Tardini of 18 June 1959. Tardini requested input from the world's diocesan bishops on the formulation of a conciliar agenda. Connell supplied Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle of Washington with eleven proposals for discussion on questions of faith and ten more on morals, some of which the prelate accepted and sent in to the Secretariate of State.³ Listed in Connell's memorandum were, among others, the historical value of sacred scripture, particularly the New Testament; the constitution of and membership in the Mystical Body of Christ; the significance of the doctrine "Extra ecclesiam nulla est salus" (outside the church no one is saved); the mediation of divine grace by the Blessed Virgin Mary; the relation of the Church to the State, as well as doctrinal questions related to the papal magisterium. Among Connell's suggestions for moral subjects one could find a call for defining the requisite elements of a just war; just wages; matrimonial ends; the use of rhythm in marriage; the obligations of parents in teaching their children; and the role of

international authorities in relations between states.

In the aftermath of Tardini's letter of 18 July to heads of seminaries and pontifical faculties, Connell submitted several more topics for discussion to the faculty at the Catholic University of America, to which he was still connected as an emeritus professor.⁴ His five theses for discussion at the Council were on the relation of church and state; on the historical value of the New Testament; on the ordinary magisterium of the pope; on the evil of contraception; and equality of all persons. The university's *votum* was one of 51 higher education institutions that sent agenda items.⁵

In early June 1960, Pope John established ten commissions and a central coordinating commission "to devote themselves to the study of matters which it will be possible to have discussed at the council."⁶ Among these was the powerful theological commission, headed by the prefect of the Holy Office, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani. Connell was enlisted as a consultor for this commission, which was charged with synthesizing questions and directing debate on matters "touching Holy Scripture, sacred tradition, the Faith and its practices."⁷ His own activities and input were apparently minimal. There is no data on his participation in his personal papers. Connell was also enlisted by his Redemptorist confrere, Bishop James McManus of Ponce in Puerto Rico, to be his conciliar *peritus*.

Connell left for Naples aboard the Leonardo Da Vinci ocean liner on 22 September, 1962, and departed for New York on 13 December, 1962. While on board the first leg of the trip he gave seminars to 52 bishops, prelates, and priests *en route* to the Council.⁸ Connell's principal work at the Council was to serve as an expert on the press panel which gathered together reporters at the conclusion of each

day's session in St. Peter's at the office of the National Catholic Welfare Conference in Rome. He worked alongside ten other American priests who met daily in the USO Club, then at #2 Via Conciliazione. Among them were the Paulist editor of *The Catholic World*, Father John Sheerin, newly minted professor of Church History, Robert Trisco, Holy Cross Father Edward Heston (a member of the preparatory commission on religious), and Fathers Fred McManus (a member of the preparatory commission on sacred liturgy) and William Keeler, the future Cardinal Archbishop of Baltimore. Though some of these men rotated off the press panel from session to session, or others were brought in as special guests, Connell was a member for all four sessions of the Council and promised to do so "if it kills me."⁹

During the periods between conciliar sessions, Connell also worked on three committees of American *periti* and theologians established by the United States bishops. His assignments were to the committee on faith and morals, the committee on sacraments, and the committee on religious liberty. Through it all, Connell maintained a consistently conservative outlook, urging traditional positions on mixed marriage, contraception, and the authority of the pope to whatever audience he spoke. He often lobbied for his views among powerful cardinals. He wrote to Cardinal Joseph Siri, for instance, asking him to urge the pope to make some pronouncement on the problem of freedom of conscience, where one is not free to make subjective decisions that are objectively erroneous.¹⁰ This was a central problem in the birth control debate and was particularly vexing to Connell who believed that action was needed in the face of liberal recommendations. He was open about this to John Ford, SJ, a fellow moral theologian:

You have probably learned from the papers the events of the Council in recent days. The impression has been given—and I fear with reason—that some are pushing for a radical change in the Church's stand on birth-control. That was apparently implicit in the speeches of Suenens, Leger, and Maximos. They are calling for a "reexamination" of the theology of marriage and its ends, while maintaining that the traditional doctrine must be maintained. Double-talk, I call it. [...]

I have spoken to Archbishop Heenan. He told me yesterday that two English bishops, Holland and Pearson, will speak on Wednesday, by a rule that under certain conditions topics can be discussed [only] after the debate has been closed. I feel that these two will speak along the right way. But the [others?] have the greater influence. We are hoping that the Pope will soon speak. The opinion that birth control is permissible—any form, not merely the pill—is now being followed by confessors in the USA.

So, that is the situation. I am confident that God will preserve the Church from teaching error, even though in the meantime souls are suffering. I respect the Pope's conscience, but I pray that will soon speak firmly. I know you will do your part intelligently and loyally. I hope your health keeps up. God bless you. Sincerely in Christ, /s/ Francis Connell.¹¹

On the religious liberty question, Connell supplied several bishops at the Council with his rationale for his opposition to any principle that would undermine the

duties of Catholic states to promote Catholicism as the one, true Church.¹² He breathed a sigh of relief when the text on religious liberty was postponed for further study during the so-called “Black Week” in November 1964. His Redemptorist confrere Bishop William McCarty, wrote Connell in January 1965 requesting his opinion on the adoption of the second version of *De Libertate Religiosa* instead of the third version—a suggestion made by both Cardinals Ritter and Meyer.¹³

Connell was often caricatured as a kindly, old man, which of course he was.

John Cogley, writing in the pages of *America*, recalled a passing insight during those days:

So many Americans in the city for the Council. ...The daily press briefing is where the Americans meet each other. ...Fr. Connell, the venerable Redemptorist, ever a dependable spokesman for the conservative minority, belies the ferocious rigidity of his writings. He is a very gentle, very priestly priest, utterly without side, and wholly winning. One non-Catholic critic of the Church said the other day, privately: “I was ready to detest that man above all others, but I like him best of all. How do you figure that out?” Not hard to figure out, of course—but an interesting reaction.”¹⁴