

The Dossier
By John P. Nordin

Chapter 1

“You have received the dossier?”

“Yes, Vice-Commissioner, it came into my hands late this morning.”

“I will not insult you by reminding you that this is a matter of considerable sensitivity.”

“Thank you. It will certainly require quite careful consideration.”

“Others suggested it should go to someone more senior, but I told them you had the necessary discretion.”

“Thank you, Vice-Commissioner.”

With that, he swept from the small office of the Assistant Claims Examiner. That word – swept—seemed appropriate, even if the Vice-Commissioner was not actually wearing floor-length robes.

The Assistant Claims Examiner—perhaps he was only a year or so from being promoted to Senior Assistant—looked at the two-inch thick pile of documents that crammed the folder to bursting. Oh, my, yes, this would require some careful consideration, some very careful consideration in deed. With luck, it would require so much consideration that facts would intervene before a decision had to be made. Perhaps Jesus would return, or perhaps, less likely, the Supreme Father would be called home to heaven and a new Supreme Father would appoint a new Commissioner for the Detection of Virtue who would bring his own Vice-Commissioner who would not actually need to be informed of all the dossiers that were pending in his office.

He opened the dossier, undoing the blue ribbon with solemn and deliberate movements. He wished to give a ritual significance, a weight, to the act of undoing the ribbon, the act of placing it to one side, and the act of opening of the cover. In this, he could practice, as so many spiritual writers had urged, being attentive. He did this, the Liturgy of the Opening of the Dossier, whenever he first began his consideration of some claim that had survived the perilous journey from the hinterland, crossed the mountains, came down the Italian peninsula and then, miracle of

miracles, survived the still more perilous journey from the arrival gate at the outskirts of the Vatican to the in box on the edge of his desk.

He ran his fingers slowly and lightly down the length of the folder, seeking the dirt of the journey, the sweat of the writer, the patina of emotions that had motivated the words.

Claims examining, his job. His job to take the fears, the hopes, the dreams, the defensive pleadings that a parish had sweated over in some windswept edge-of-the-empire garrison town, and give it careful consideration. He always gave them careful consideration. Had a miracle actually been performed? Did the priest have the qualifications to be promoted to arch-priest? Should the discipline for the adultery of the mayor be a year without the sacraments or 30 pieces of gold at the imperial standard? Had a parish accumulated enough evidence of God's mercy to be promoted to the 2nd rank or only the 3rd?

It was, he had to admit, a perfect job. Fascinating, endless variety, great power and utterly no accountability of any kind he could see. For since the Supreme Father was chosen by God himself, and because selecting officers was a necessary part of the job of the Supreme Father, therefore the personnel choices of the Supreme Father would inherently be the correct choices and because it would be inherent in the definition of the correct choice that the immediate servants of the Supreme Father also have the ability to choose wisely, and because all knowledge was retained forever, and because it was a philosophical necessity that truth be indivisible, then it must follow, as the night the day, that an Assistant Claims Examiner could make whatever decision he decided to make and that this decision would be, by utter and absolute application of the iron laws of logic, the correct one without need of review or appeal, or at least not by anyone outside of the walls of this building.

That, and those poor priests and poor parishes blown by the cold winds of northern Europe or the hot scouring sands of north Africa would never come to Rome and would never find the Assistant Examiner. Or so it was hoped, though some seventy five years ago, it had come closer to disaster than anyone could have suspected, when an aggrieved father of a badly used daughter had sold his farm for the money to come to the Vatican itself, walked into the offices of the Commission for the Detection of Virtue and issued threats. Fortunately, he issued his threats

too quickly, before he had found the individual he sought and so he was promptly killed by the guards, and it was only a year or so before the stain of the blood could not easily be seen by those who knew where to look.

He read the first page of the dossier. It was openly obsequious; the bowing and scraping could almost be seen and heard over the distance. It offered prayers for the esteemed person who would hear this most unworthy plea from one whose only ambition in life was to humbly serve God. It quoted verses of the Bible and the Church Fathers and the current Supreme Father. It attacked, with gusto, all the usual heretics. It gave a hymn to justice. There was a form to these things, and one could tell when the local priest had some wit or learning or access to the library of the local bishop, and in those cases, the first pages were often just copied from a previous—successful!—plea. Sometimes, when the wit or education was less than extensive, the form was copied, even to the extent of failing to remove the specifics of the previous plea and insert the specifics of the actual plea. Or at least, there were some rough transitions.

This current plea, gave signs of being composed by someone who was not a fool. So much the worse for the Assistant Claims Examiner, because this made it less likely that the plea could be dismissed for technical failures or some obscure breach of some obscure, but absolutely necessary, provision of the Holy Law.

For there was no way this plea could be granted. And no way it could be refused. For what had come, lo these thousands of miles from the religion and war-ravaged east was a claim that in its mercy and grace could not be denied and in its politics could not be accepted. Or so it immediately struck him.

It was, all puffery put to one side, the claim of this rural priest that a miserable infidel had performed a miracle in the name of Christ. A benighted follower of a false religion had invoked the name of Christ; to be technical, he had actually invoked the name Jesus, and, perhaps with the aid of the Holy Spirit, whom the infidel could not have invoked, had healed the sick son of the mayor of the neighboring, much larger, more powerful village.

The metaphysical questions competed with the theological questions to push aside the political questions. Could someone who did not accept Jesus as the only begotten Son of God

actually, call upon his name? Can you invoke a power you do not accept? Would God answer the prayers of an infidel? Even if the prayers were offered on behalf of a child, said to be under the special protection of that god? A child of a powerful official upon whose military leadership rested the defense of the region from the crazed followers of the very religion professed by the performer of this miracle, this alleged miracle.

Oh yes, it would be so much easier were something to arise to make this go away. Some mercy, such as the obliteration of the village in war, or a famine or something like that. The mayor was grateful; it appeared he loved his child. The priest of the little church in which the powerful mayor had taken refuge from the rain to care for his sick child was most grateful for the incident that would allow his little parish to be moved from the list of 4th rate holy buildings of no distinction onto the list of the location of 4th rate miracles. They could get pilgrims for that. They could get mayors from other cities to come to pray for their sick children. Somebody would give money and perhaps the roof could be repaired or a statue cleaned or the priest be allowed to buy a new pair of shoes. For it did appear, to all involved, that this priest was an actual believer, and so unlikely to use any increased revenue on prostitutes or drink.

But, but, but. No weakening could be allowed. No weakening of the resolve to smash the frenzied hoards of rampaging followers of the desert prophet—his name could not be spoken in the halls of the Vatican, by official decree of the Supreme Father several decades dead – no weakening could be allowed at all. Resolve must be maintained. And were even a single follower of this calligraphied calling to be seen as possessed of humanity, to say nothing of access to God's ear, then this could be the initial breach that would lead to the weakening of the very moral fiber of Holy Mother Church itself.

And then there were the Easterns, the even more grim-faced, square-bearded, staff-carrying folk who spoke the language of Plato, as they were forever reminding us, and who, in a different world, would be the allies of the Vatican in holding the eastern frontier against the camels and the flowing headdresses, but who were, if anything, a more bitter enemy.

They were likely to be outraged that the Examiner had deigned to even look at this dossier, an outrage that would not be assuaged by the rejection of the claim, not a bit. They

would dip into their catalog of dead writers, unearth some phrases demanding that uncleanness not be tolerated, a spot of blemish not be allowed to gain a foothold, and fire those in the general direction of the plaza of St. Paul.

The Assistant Claims Examiner stopped for a minute to assess the description of the alleged miracle worker. Suddenly, reading between the lines, he discerned that this alleged receiver of the special grace of God was a conventional disciple of neither of the two branches of the hated enemy, but, even worse, someone whose primary identity was as a Sufi. The Assistant Claims Examiner stopped to allow his head to quit spinning.

Could this be used? By promoting this person, by complimenting him, would this cause dissention in the majority of the enemy who did not like this group? Would the followers of Salafism be roused to kill this Sufi if he was approved of by the followers of the Prince of Peace, or even if he merely had come from the Shi'ite and not the Sunni branch? Perhaps some could use that. However, while the Examiner prided himself on extensive knowledge of the myriads of groups that surged against the borders of the one true civilization, his superiors did not care about such knowledge of error. To hold up to admiration and approval, to mention in prayers at St. Peter's one who denied the trinity, this would never do.

But, he always told himself, you must first determine the facts, then the politics can determine which facts are allowed to see the light of day and which, in order not to disturb the faithful, must, with infinite regret, be allowed to die. He would begin this in earnest, the first thing, the very first thing, tomorrow.

For now, he performed another ritual only he knew about, the Act of the Closing of the Dossier, first putting all the papers back in order, then tying the ribbon, then moving the dossier to his active pile.

He had another case pending near completion, that he could, with effort, get his report written up by the time he had to go home. He turned to his word assembler and began. His department had computerized many decades ago, of course, but after the latest oil shock, the always traditional holy bureaucracy had reasserted itself, pulling out the large dossiers, the tape,

the candles, the special inks, the special pens, each of which had some ecclesiastical pedigree 500 years long.

But they kept the word assemblers, these massive screens in a metal box that hulked on the floor, with the massive keyboard with all sorts of special keys and symbols ready to hand. The rumor was that nuns and monks, and maybe even priests, who had transgressed the Supreme Father, were made to toil in the dark basements, turning wheels to power the machinery of word assembly that permitted the offices to emit their reams of documents every day.

But it was only a rumor. If nothing else, they'd need separate rooms for the nuns and for the monks, for even when being punished, or still more, being tortured, the two could not mingle for fear of the still greater abomination of fleshly appreciation.

He started clanking the keys and the words splattered across the top of his screen. This was a fairly simple case. A parish to the east had been bombed. In revenge, the local priest got the local warlord to burn down the local mosque and a few farms held by followers of the Arabian prophet. Some women on the farms had been raped. What was the appropriate penalty for the warlord?

Rape carried a penalty of death, if there were no mitigating circumstances. But there were always some mitigating circumstances to be found. The priest pleaded several such for the warlord: that he was on a holy mission for the church, that he had been provoked by resistance encountered at the farm, that the local mosque leaders had, it was reliably known, spit in the direction of the parish church, and that the mosque leaders had insulted the church.

The Assistant Claims Examiner was fairly certain that, had he investigated, the insults from the mosque leaders would have been found to have occurred after the burning of the farms and mosque, not before, but let that go. The priest proposed a fine of some seventy of the local unpronounceable currency, to be paid to the local parish, of course. Would this turn out to be exactly what was needed for some parish project? The Examiner wondered.

The Examiner used to treat these cases by doubling the proposed fine. However, it had occurred to him some time ago, that the war lord was most likely to obtain the cash to pay the fine by pillaging another farm or two. Perhaps best to leave it alone.

Naturally, there was nothing in that dossier about any investigation into the parish bombing, nor no statement from the women as to what they wanted. They were not followers of the true faith, so their evidence could not be accepted anyway.

The Examiner wondered about his opposite number, should there be one in either the Easterns or in the Arabian prophet's organizations. Certainly the Wahabies and their somewhat larger umbrella group, the Salafies, inflicted many punishments. But the ones who did the punishing in the language and lands of their originating prophet did not tend to write them out beforehand nor keep archives of them afterward. On the other hand, those from these groups who dwelt in the ever more disunited states in North America and who engaged in only the violence of words, issued endless rulings, rulings that endlessly contradicted each other. But as for the desert-based violence-makers, there was the occasion last year where they forced a priest into a vat of lye, in retaliation for an insult to one of their wives. But no ruling had been published, no decision. An oral tradition, perhaps, without case law.

Nor should he forget the rising Darwins, active over the ocean to the west, who had taken a professor in a church college hostage last year and forced him to rape a former nun in retaliation for his refusing to sign the Pledge of Science that was now required for all teachers in some jurisdictions. Did they keep archives, these who raised a sword for the god Science? They certainly trumpeted their fidelity to the god, Experiment. That would seem to be a deity worshiped by the filing of records, but he did not know for sure. In any case it was not safe for him to go to those lands any longer, not as he wore the hair and beard of a monk.

Another crowded set of questions, this. Were these lands, now controlled by the Darwins, properly thought to be part of civilization or not? The Vatican had organized a seminar on this very point some months ago. The Examiner has snuck into one session if only to be in the same room as a cardinal, a Nobel prize winner and a movie star.

A major complication of the question is that those who fought most valiantly against the Darwins were a group not that friendly to the Supreme Father. For the Evangelicals denied the authority of the Supreme Father, a sin that could not be mitigated even by their fierce devotion to the cause of Jesus and their willingness to proclaim their hatred of the Darwins and their god.

Chapter 2

After work he caught up with his friends at the cafe a three blocks from St. Peter's.

"Here he is, the man of the hour!"

The Examiner looked puzzled at the group of two men and three women.

"The Muslim Miracle they're calling it, and it is your case, right?"

He sat down, caught the eye of the waitress, a nun from the order of Secular Servers, identifiable by their red shorts, and ordered a beer.

"Yes, Father David," he said to the previous speaker, "it is indeed my case. But if you call it the 'Muslim Miracle' aren't you prejudging the outcome? What if there is no miracle?"

"Who cares what the sandfuckers did, or what the Supreme Fathead thinks about what they did, the question is, who will pay?"

"Keep your voice down, Davy, you don't know who is in here." This was from one of the woman, who shuffled paper in another division, one the Examiner could never remember.

"You're not taking it seriously, are you, Benny boy?"

"He always takes it seriously!"

Benedict, the Examiner, bowed slightly to the woman who said this. He still could not tell if she was flirting with him for real, or flirted because she thought her order protected her from the consequences should any man take the flirting as real.

"I'm sure someone will pay," the Examiner said, carefully.

"Actually, my boy, we're thinking that Sister Denise of the bodacious ass should pay for this, she is a miracle, is she not?"

For a moment Benedict tried to follow the logic of this before he remembered that Father David was merely trying to flirt with Denise or embarrass her for failing to respond to his flirting, depending on what was more provocative at the moment.

"What?" a chorus broke out, followed by laughter. The beer for the examiner arrived and he tried not to look at the server, or tried not to be caught looking. He took a sip of this brew, available only in Rome, it was said. It was very good.

"But seriously, Benny," the other man said, "tell us, what is the deal with this claim?"

"I just got the dossier today, and I just looked over it briefly."

Groans broke out.

"I had another case to finish off," he plowed ahead over their objections, "and will start in on this tomorrow. But, it seems to be what you've heard. Mayor takes refuge in a little village church during a severe storm, his kid is sick. This Sufi – a practitioner of Islamic mysticism – happens by, prays for the child, the child recovers." He looked around, shrugged.

"Handle this well, my boy, and you'll shoot up the bureaucracy."

"You'll be rich, and you can buy the beer for us."

"How," the Examiner said, "could I handle this well? Denying the claim has pitfalls as well."

"How can that be, who gives a crap about the Sue-flies?"

"No, Benedict is right." It was the same woman who had earlier warned about being overheard. The Examiner remembered now, she worked in some part of the Department of Relations with Foreign Entities—she was a diplomat. "Relations with the mayors and provincial governors are touchy right now, especially in that area. They want some support from us. They want us to cut them a little slack if they work with the Muslims on practical issues at a local level, they want ..."

"Fuck them! They work for us."

"Maybe so in some ecclesiastical sense, but rub them the wrong way and contributions mysteriously start declining from their area. And we all know that we're in a situation of overstretch."

"So tax them some more. It's not like they do anything with their money. They need us."

"And if they object?"

"Sell them tickets to see the pope, or some paintings. Take some paintings on tour, I don't know, some shiny object they'll love."

The woman shrugged. Benedict had been looking at her. She was in her late 30s, and had the beauty of maturity. She was attractive, not that any of that would make any practical

difference to him. And she was wise, balanced, mature, he thought. Totally intimidating, in fact, though she'd been nothing if not supportive and pleasant to him.

The speaker threw his arm over the shoulders of the much younger woman next to him. "Well, Sister Bodacious Ass, what do you think? I say, make love not diplomacy."

The woman grimaced, shrugged off the arm, but did not move away. She preened herself, while looking ostentatiously away from the man.

These were his friends, the Examiner thought, but he could not remember why.

Chapter 3

Bishop Onerifious brought the meeting to order. Four archpriests, two monsignors, one abbot and two mere priests were gathered around a large, ancient, wooden table in the rectory of the bishop. Outside the darkness was complete and a cold wind flicked at the stones of the building.

“So the dossier has been sent? Do we know it has been received?”

A priest at the far end tentatively spoke up. “Ah, my bishop, it was sent, some six days ago after changes were made as your office suggested. We don’t have any notice that it was received—that’s not unusual. The Holy See generally does not comment or provide any status reports on these matters, although,” he hurried on, “it is often the case that something can be found out informally.”

Two of the higher ranking prelates grunted. One said, “I know someone in Cardinal Boniface’s office, perhaps I might check.” The bishop inclined his head to the speaker and gestured his approval.

The oldest monsignor said, “I am surprised that we allowed it to be sent. Why would we wish to promote the infidels? Why did we associate ourselves with it?”

“A brother priest asked for our assistance, should we have denied it?”

“He should have been guided in a more helpful direction.”

“The lad did get well.”

“Could have happened anyway.”

“The priest is convinced it was a miracle.”

“It is convenient for him to think so,” the monsignor said, “it is up to us with the office of leadership to provide some mature guidance.”

The bishop intervened for the first time. “We purged the plea of its more sensational and superstitious elements. We directed that the facts be laid out and that we invite the Holy See to tend its judgment. I would point out to you that the mayor is very grateful and promises us a tidy memorial. Why offend him for no reason? And he is a sober and faithful member of his local

parish. And I am informed that there actually are similar precedents in holy law. God works where he wills and is not limited in his dispensation of grace.”

“Perhaps this will provide motivation for some the accursed to come to faith.”

“That does not seem very likely, given that a decree of death is placed on any who convert to our faith.”

“God will provide a way. If this is from God it will succeed, if not ...” he shrugged.

“Well, we are from God too, are we not?”

A glare from the Bishop.

“What’s done is done,” another interceded. “Anyway, there is little chance the Holy See will approve this, wouldn’t you agree? And that might be best. We gain the credit with the mayor for trying, but are spared the embarrassment of success.”

“Blame failure on Rome? Why not?”

“I don’t disagree with your analysis, Reverend Bishop, but some in my area are very upset that we promoted this.”

“You know, Reverend Father, every time you call me ‘Reverend Bishop’ I know you disapprove of something I did.”

The priest smiled and shrugged.

“I have no doubt that many are upset about this. But, I repeat, it was our judgment that declining to send the request would be a bigger problem. Upsetting fewer, but more powerful.”

“Anyway, Mark,” one said, addressing the priest, “the Muslims will probably not even know that we sent it.”

“Oh no, brother,” the other priest quickly interjected, “they are all very much aware of it. A local Imam has already spoken to me of it, he is very excited. They hope it will be accepted.”

A general stirring.

“And why are you talking with an Imam? It sounds as if you are actually friendly with him.”

Before the priest could respond, another seeing his strong feelings, interjected. "We get a lot of good intelligence from these local contacts. The Holy See has commended others for them."

"They commended others for intelligence about misconduct by the infidels, not for having them to tea!"

"Wait! I'm confused here; my priests are telling me just the opposite. They claim the infidels are opposed to this petition and have cut off relations with their co-religionist who provoked all this."

"Who can sort these people out, and besides, what's the point."

The Bishop raised a hand and they all fell silent. "Brothers, let us retain perspective here. That the infidels have internal disagreements is of no interest to us. Local priests have always been forced to make compromises those of us in the hierarchy can afford to avoid. We give them some room to maneuver, but we do monitor it and ensure it does not become excessive. But people must be able to breathe."

The faces around the table sighed inwardly, that last was a well-known expression of this bishop. The bishop continued.

"Again, I think that we are in a good position here. As you have indicated, we gain credit for submitting the dossier, and it is not our fault if it is dismissed. The Holy See can dismiss it without risk to themselves, unlike what would happen if we rejected it. Our brother priest who submitted the claim can be commended for his Christ-like generosity, and also reminded that the infidel's prayers are not heard by our Lord. The local mayor can be praised for his piety and given opportunities to express his thanks to God in some material way that will find more pleasure with God than mere words could do. We will assist the mayor by suggesting some ways he can be thankful, and as the child grows up, he will always be a living proof of God's mercy."

They all nodded. The conversation turned to the next topic and after a bit the meeting broke up.