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Encounter: Leonard Boyle, O.P.

DALE KINNEY *Bryn Mawr College, Professor Emeritus*

I never actually knew Leonard Boyle. I had a brief exchange with him in the days when one had to request permission to publish a photograph of a Vatican manuscript personally from the prefect; he was kind but clearly thought the requirement otiose and made short shrift of the interview. I must have shaken his hand at the conference in honor of him and Richard Krautheimer that was held in Rome in 1987, but a handshake hardly counts as an encounter. My meaningful encounters with him were spectacular: at the 1987 conference, at the Kalamazoo congress in 1998, and, most memorably, at San Clemente in Rome.

The conference of 1987 was conspicuously asymmetrical. Its occasion was Richard Krautheimer's upcoming ninetieth birthday, and the papers presented were nearly all by Krautheimer's former students, colleagues, and admirers. In a conference organized and paid for by Canadians, Leonard Boyle was the Canadian connection, revered in Canada for his many years of teaching and service at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies (1961–84) and celebrated for his recent elevation to the prefecture of the Vatican Library (1984–97), but little in the five-day program spoke to him. Nevertheless, he was responsible for one of the brightest and most enjoyable moments of the meeting. The tribute to him read in the closing session contained an anecdote about Father Boyle's nocturnal apparition, clad in his ghostly white Dominican habit, to an unsuspecting intruder in the reading room of the PIMS library. In his response, Father Boyle spontaneously (perhaps), mischievously (almost surely) gave his own version of the same anecdote. The first version was amusing; Father Boyle's was hilarious. Justice was done.¹

I was there on 9 May 1998 for the tour de force of Father Boyle's plenary lecture to the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, "Oculus Paleographicus." I

cringed and suffered for the hapless medieval reader traduced by false or missing punctuation in the manuscript before him, so vividly did Father Boyle describe this hazard. I was not alone. Seated shoulder to shoulder in the temporarily repurposed ballroom, hundreds of medievalists were riveted by the horror of confusing light with heavy syllables and by the ease of avoiding such solecisms if only one knew the signs. There is always something odd about Kalamazoo's early-morning plenaries in their makeshift venues, but I remember thinking that this one was especially so, with so many people brought to the edge of their seats by the arcana of medieval punctuation.

My most momentous encounter with Leonard Boyle must have occurred slightly earlier, sometime in the mid-1990s. It was again June and I was in Rome seeking, as always, to learn more about its twelfth-century churches. That year I had decided to watch as many as possible in action, which meant observing the Mass. Thus, around six o'clock on the evening before my departure to the States I found myself in San Clemente, sitting with a few dozen Italians on benches outside the schola cantorum. A bell rang, and the priest entered from the postcard room off the right aisle. I was startled to see that it was Father Boyle. His vestments were slightly askew, reminding me of my English colleague at Bryn Mawr, Charles Mitchell (1912–1995), and the way he used to wear his academic regalia: insouciant, like familiar outerwear, without fuss or regard for correctness of drape or fastening. Perhaps one learns to do this in English colleges.

Unmindful of his astonished witness, the priest with his small entourage walked into the nave, turned to pass through the schola cantorum, entered the sanctuary, and made his obeisance at the altar. Then he proceeded to *sit down on the marble throne* in the apse (Fig. 1). No one else reacted to this

1. Roger Reynolds gives both versions of the story in "Leonard Boyle and Mediaeval Studies in Canada," in *Rome: Tradition, Innovation and Renewal; A Canadian International Art History Conference, 8–13 June 1987, Rome, in Honour of Richard Krautheimer on the Occasion of his 90th Birthday and Leonard Boyle O.P., Prefect of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1991), 23–38, at 23–24.

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Figure 1. Rome, San Clemente, upper church, detail of apse, cathedra of Cardinal Anastasius, 1128 with reused marble slabs; wall paintings, fifteenth century (photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY).

sight, but I was electrified. The marble thrones in Roman medieval churches are often called “papal” cathedrae, and it is said that they were reserved for the pope on the rare occasions when he performed a stational Mass. I have never found this claim very convincing, suspecting that the thrones had more to do with the pope’s vicars, the cardinals, but I had never before, nor have I since, seen anyone actually sit on one. It struck me as a confirmation (however inadmissible as

evidence) that my suspicions were not unfounded. Had I confided this idea to Father Boyle he might well have dismissed it forthwith. In any case, by taking his seat in the cathedra he was not making my point, or any point, but simply using the furniture the medieval sanctuary provided. In the chair he was barely visible. He did not sit up straighter or taller but occupied the throne as he wore his vestments: casually, as a perquisite of the occasion, but not its focus and certainly no cause for self-importance.

The focus of this like every Mass was the Eucharist, but for me, watching and listening from the other end of the schola cantorum, the memorable part was the sermon. It was the vigil of the Feast of SS. Peter and Paul, when the Gospel reading is John 21:15–19. Jesus asks Simon (Peter), “Do you love me?” three times, alluding to Peter’s earlier denials, and when Peter responds, “Yes, Lord,” Jesus tells him to “Feed my sheep.” The Irish, Italian-speaking priest came forward and offered a ruminative meditation on why Jesus had chosen Peter, the most fallible and inconstant of the eleven true disciples, to lead his Church. He supposed that it was precisely Peter’s weakness that recommended him; he was tested and sometimes failed, but despite his lapses he maintained his love for God and kept trying to fulfill his commandments. In this (here I may be extrapolating) Peter was a model for the flock entrusted to him, mortals who daily face and sometimes fail their own tests and need help and encouragement to persevere. The sermon may not have been original—indeed, given Father Boyle’s great erudition, it probably reflected more than one distinguished antecedent—but as he spoke it, simply and directly, it sounded completely fresh, as if these were his own questions that he was mulling over before us, obvious questions that we, too, might ask, and that are not easy or simple to answer.

I still encounter Father Boyle in San Clemente, every time I visit the lower church. I pay my respects at his tombstone and remember his gift for making medieval studies—a field that can be as ghostly as his white Dominican habit—vibrant, amusing, and real.