Bernard Pawley was appointed by Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher as his representative in Rome and later reporting to Archbishop Michael Ramsey. Pawley had perfected his Italian as an army chaplain, captured in Libya in 1941 by the Germans and handed over to the Italians. He became Anglican Chaplain to the POW hospitals in Parma, Piacenza and finally in Milan. Late in 1943 an RAF attack on the railway in Milan seriously damaged the nearby POW hospital. With Cardinal Schuster - of Milan – the following morning Pawley saw the bodies hauled out of the ruins. The Cardinal later attended their funerals conducted by Pawley. Pawley returned to Milan in 1956 as a member of the group of Anglicans who visited and stayed with Archbishop Montini, an informal Anglican delegation supported by Bishop George Bell.

When Pawley informed Lambeth about particular conciliar decisions and their interpretation he offered his best opinion, sometimes with the comment ‘am I right?’ Pawley and the later Observers related on a daily basis with the ‘founding fathers’ of the Secretariat for Unity, eventually to become the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity under Pope John Paul II. Bea and especially Mgr (later bishop and Cardinal) Willebrands, as well as other principal staff, became close allies. The ecumenical Observers as a whole considerably influenced the Council through Bea and his Secretariat, amongst whom Pawley had special influence and Bea was to influence much more than simply the Decree on Ecumenism. He was central to the drafting of the key texts on revelation, relations with the Jewish people, interfaith dialogue and religious freedom.

Special to Pawley’s reports is the fact that they begin in Rome well before the Council. Although Pawley was sent out by Fisher as an ‘observer’ in April 1961 there were no official observers envisaged by the powers that be. He arrived as an unrecognised ecclesiastical ambassador of Canterbury to a Church which did not officially accept his ecclesial credentials. His opening reports tell of a warm but cautious welcome by Willebrands, and also embarrassing Italian press fascination. He met other members of the Secretariat for Unity and eventually Bea himself and sent on to Lambeth some of the preparatory documents for the Council. Pawley, the Anglican, was the first ecumenical representative to arrive and was a great encouragement to the Secretariat, even if the Vatican had not yet invented a mechanism for recognising him.

Hospitality, arranged by his intelligent and ecumenically committed wife, Margaret, equally fluent in Italian, burgeoned, indicative of his correct instinct as to how things happened in Italy. Guests included the eloquent French Cardinal Tisserant, Dean of the Sacred College, who joked about Secretary of State Tardini. Visits included the Secretariat of State where Pawley picked up antipathy towards the new Secretariat for Unity. More significantly, Willebrands explained the work of the Central Commission of the Council for which the Secretariat for Unity had prepared documents on the Church and the liturgy. Religious Freedom and Mixed Marriages were in preparation.

Next Pawley had a private audience with John XXIII. They had an extensive theological conversation; Papa Roncalli recalled the recent visit of Archbishop Fisher. Both Bea and (now Cardinal) Montini had recommended Pawley to the Pope. As yet there had been no general decision on Observers or their role at the Council. Of great significance was Willebrands reasonable certainty that one of the outcomes of the Council would be a theological continuation conference, especially with the Anglicans. So emerged the germ of the official Anglican Roman Catholic theological dialogue of now over half a century.

Pawley made a wise plea that a submission being prepared by the Church of England should not consist of only or even mainly complaints. At the same time he urged the Church Information Office in London to give some Anglican news and views about the Council. From this concern emerged the projects of books by Pawley about the Council and his anonymous contributions to The Church Times. Then Bea told Pawley in confidence that the decision to invite ‘guest’ observers from the World Confessional Families had finally been approved.

By March the formal conditions for the Observers had been decided and communicated to Pawley by Willebrands – present for all but ‘study’ sessions but no voice or vote. Nevertheless, the Secretariat would organise special sessions for the Observers at which there would be dialogue. These were to emerge as important sessions, no less than fifteen sessions are reported by Pawley.

All this takes the story up to the eve of the Council itself, October 1962. What is most notable is the way that Pawley almost becomes an honorary member of the Secretariat for Unity, clearly trusted and sought for advice rather more than being just a recipient of information to be passed on to Lambeth Palace. He was made party to the aspirations and frustrations of the new Secretariat as a trusted ecumenical friend. In this respect his pre-conciliar ecumenical reports are especially valuable. In moving on to the actual sessions of the Council Pawley necessarily concentrates more on the issues at stake and the ecclesiastical politics of the Council. These have been widely reported - once again Pawley as an ‘insider’ to the Secretariat and trusted by Bea gives us an unique glimpse of the grand debates and their outcome. Pawley gives special space to documents of crucial ecumenical significance: Revelation, the Church, Ecumenism, Religious Freedom and the Liturgy.
Canon Bernard Pawley
someone deeply respected in Rome as a person who knew what was going on better than most

The next great battle was over the schema on the Unity of the Church: Bea and the Secretariat, with the Observers again. But by May 1963 there were rumours about the Pope’s health, the possibility of a conclave, and therefore a question about the future of the Council. After Pope John’s death Pawley wrote about details of the Papal funeral and the subsequent election. Montini is an early favourite (Pawley is objective in reporting other views as well as his preference). In his report about the Enthronement of the new Pope Paul VI Pawley stressed the importance of remembering that the Pope is ‘the bishop of the diocese of Rome’.

Pawley is unexpectedly delayed in his return to England because the new Pope wished to see him. In discussion with the Pope’s Secretary (whom he knew from Milan) it is established that Pawley, could have confidential access to the Pope through him. In September 1963 he recommended the establishment of a permanent Anglican office and ‘an Anglican centre’. While John Moorman is rightly given credit for the establishment of the Anglican Centre after Michael Ramsey’s visit in 1966, the germ of the idea emerged here.

In the continuing debate on the ecumenical schema special treatment of the Anglican Church was agreed. Willebrands talked to him about an Anglican ‘specialist’ in the Secretariat. This was eventually to be Mgr William Purdy, Co-secretary with me of ARCIC-I. Pawley was delighted to report that Willebrands was to be ordained a (titular) bishop. He cautiously (but rightly) hinted that this could be a grooming for Bea’s post. In his second private audience Pope Paul encouraged the Archbishop of Canterbury to visit him to discuss the form of a future dialogue eventually to become the work of ARCIC. Again we see Pawley’s work as strategic for the future.

The Third Session takes us through to the end of Pawley’s time in Rome, November 1964. He now observed a certain tiredness in the Fathers. There was lively debate over contraception but the Pope reserved the matter to a special commission. Things livened up when Bea presented the Declaration on the Jews and On Non-Christians and a start was made on the new draft on Revelation.

Pawley had three Papal audiences in a fortnight, the last being entirely private at his request through Montini’s secretary. At the very end of the Third Session we have a remarkable picture of Pawley trying to decipher the meaning of the Pope’s interventions prior to the passing of the Decree on Ecumenism and the Constitution of the Church. The story of ‘la settimana nera’ (the black week 16 – 21 November) is well known. The famous – or infamous – Nota Previa was added by Paul VI as a footnote to Lumen Gentium, explaining that Papal Primacy remained unchanged. A series of amendments from above were also made through (but not from) the Secretariat for Unity to the Decree on Ecumenism. Bea had sifted out some of the more wrecking amendments but necessarily had to accept others, largely of a cosmetic or mildly qualifying character. The conservative minority had ‘got at’ the Pope. Even the final vote on Religious Liberty was also delayed to the final session. However, the votes for the unity draft and that of the Church were massive. Finally, Mary was proclaimed Mother of the Church, a title earlier rejected by the Theological Commission. Only the conservatives rejoiced, nevertheless the chapter on Mary in Lumen Gentium remained within the body of the text; Mary remained in the Church, not above it. Pawley sent a private letter to Archbishop Ramsey and offered the following interpretation:

The Council as a whole has been a severe disappointment to the old guard Roman Catholics who have run the Church from here for centuries. The Pope has ‘let them down’ by agreeing to collegiality, to ecumenism (can you think what a bitter pill this is?) and to the severe blows dealt to the Blessed Virgin Mary in de Ecclesia. There is no doubt that he has been appealed to on all sides to modify these decrees and has refused. So the good captain of the ship to save the boat rocking too much, has put a little weight on the other side, to comfort them, and to keep the balance.

And I suppose we don’t mind her being called Mother of the Church do we, now that we know officially (ex cathedra) this morning that she has a subordinatum munus. All is not lost. Am I right?

Further light is shed on Pawley’s assessment of the Pope in his final audience. Pawley was characteristically frank with Montini and said that the final week had not been easy. The Pope told him that he thought ‘Anglicans often understand what is going on better than anyone else.’ Then Paul VI used a similar metaphor to ‘the captain of the ship’ that Pawley had already used himself. This confirmed his interpretation. He noted that the interview was one of the most satisfactory that he had had. ‘It was a return to the Milan days.’

Pawley was deeply respected in Rome as a person who knew what was going on better than most. Intuitively, he concentrated on ecclesiology (without ever using that word), ecumenism, collegiality and primacy, religious freedom and revelation. Together, with the reform of the liturgy, these were to be Michael Ramsey’s own summary of the achievements of Vatican II and the Archbishop’s basis for believing that the time for dialogue was ripe, prior to his historic visit to Rome in 1966. Pawley also pointed out the need for an Anglican Centre in Rome and established Vatican trust for such an office to be welcomed.

[This is a very much abbreviated version of a lecture given in the Anglican Centre in May 2015. A longer version is also to be found in a Review Article by Bishop Christopher Observing Vatican II: the Confidential Reports of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Representative Bernard Pawley 1961-64 eds Andrew Chandler and Charlotte Hansen, Cambridge 2013 in International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church, Vol14, Issue 4, 2014 pp 419-427.]

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