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Have You Read Any Newman?

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It was my good fortune when I went up to Oxford in 1970 to study Newman to find that Father Stephen Dessain, that prince among Newman scholars, had agreed to be my supervisor. Stephen was a member of the Birmingham Oratory, which Newman had founded. He was deeply devoted to Newman, and his knowledge of Newman's writings was without equal. His small biography, *John Henry Newman*, which was first published in 1966, remains the best brief biography of the cardinal, and the twenty-one volumes of Newman's *Letters and Diaries*, which he edited and saw published between 1961 and his death in 1976, bear witness to his grasp of the corpus. Although he assisted countless other people with their research, I was to be his only full-time student.

Stephen and I knew each other a little already from his visits to Rome while I was a student at the English College at the Vatican; he attended my priestly ordination on December 21, 1969. By chance that day was the anniversary of his own initiation into

the religious life. Ever generous, he brought me as a present the collection of Newman's Oratorian papers, which had been edited by Dom Placid Murray and published the year before with the title *Newman the Oratorian*.[1] Inside he had written Newman's words about God's hidden saints and their influence: "Say they are few, such high Christians; and what follows? They are enough to carry on God's noiseless work" (*U.S.*, 96). While Newman was referring to the saints, I have no doubt that Stephen was thinking of Newman. And this book is in part my attempt to explore Newman's influence on me, his part for me in "God's noiseless work."

I can precisely date the time and place where it all began. It was the morning of March 30, 1964, and I was on a Roman bus on my way to the Alban Hills, south of the city. It was Easter Monday. I had come to the English College as a seminarian the previous October, and that Monday I was going to Palazzola, the college's villa, for a week's break after Easter before lectures began again. I was traveling with Tony Cornish, a fellow student and, since 1967, a priest of the Plymouth Diocese in Southwest England. At one point in our conversation, Tony turned to me and asked, "Have you read any Newman, Rod?" I had not. I had only the vaguest idea of who Newman was. I had seen portraits. He then told me about author Meriol Trevor's 1962 critically acclaimed two-volume biography, which had been published and which the college library had just acquired.[2] When I got back to Rome, I went to find it and decided to read it that summer during our long vacation. And I did.

What I read captivated me. I went on at once to read Newman himself. I began with his autobiography, *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, in which he gave his account of his journey to Catholicism, and I wrote my own extended summary of it as a way of trying to grasp a little more clearly the sequence of events. It would be fair to say that I have been reading and studying Newman's work ever since. There has been much else, of course, but Newman has never been too far away.

What was it that impressed me? In many ways, as I have said, this entire book is an answer to that question, but let me begin

by mentioning three aspects in particular that struck me almost immediately.

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First, like most people, I love a good story, and I found the story of Newman's life enthralling. It revolves around the twin ingredients of controversy and surprise. The young Newman, though shy, was recognized as brilliant. When he took his degree, however, he managed only to scrape together a pass. Intensity and overwork had drained him. Nevertheless, the following year he was elected a Fellow of Oriel, which at that time was regarded as the very cream of Oxford intellectual society.

As a college tutor, Newman believed that his care for his pupils should extend beyond simply the teaching he gave them. Something more personal, a moral dimension, was needed. Many years later he stated his view plainly: "An academical system without the personal influence of teachers upon pupils, is an arctic winter; it will create an ice-bound, petrified, cast-iron University, and nothing else" (*H.S.* iii, 74). A view that is commonplace today was seen then as a reform so radical that he had his pupils withdrawn. And one ironic consequence of that action was for him to find himself with time available, when the moment came some years later, to devote himself wholeheartedly to the Oxford Movement, which aimed to renew the Anglican Church of England by restoring to it its share in the Catholic tradition.

When the Movement began, he was its driving force. But then he found himself drawn by his own arguments, along with a series of events, to doubt the very position for which he was so eloquent an advocate. Some years later, after anguished study and reflection, he ceased being an Anglican and was received into the Roman Catholic Church. That was in 1845. This decision was as painful as it was dramatic, for it caused a parting from friends that only long years and abiding affection on both sides would overcome.

Catholicism, however, was no safe haven for him. Further controversies ensued.

After ordination in Rome, he established the Congregation of the Oratory in Birmingham and London, but later his plans there were marred by an unhappy dispute between the two houses. Then during a series of lectures in 1851, he took the opportunity to respond to the scandalous allegations against Catholics that were being made in England by a former Dominican friar, Giacinto Achilli, and he was tried for libel. The evidence that could have cleared Newman had been mislaid by Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, the Archbishop of Westminster, and a prejudiced jury found Newman guilty. Many people were outraged, and the verdict prompted the British newspaper the *Times* to observe that Roman Catholics could no longer have faith in British justice.

During this time Newman was also working to found a university in Dublin, Ireland, at the invitation of the Irish bishops but was consistently being denied the support he needed to make the venture succeed. Then in 1859, the year following his return to England from Ireland, he was persuaded to accept the editorship of the Catholic periodical the *Rambler*, which the bishops regarded at the time as being too critical; he was judged to be a safer pair of hands and acceptable to both the bishops and the periodical's proprietors. His attempt to calm anxieties, however, misfired, and almost at once he was asked to resign. The situation deteriorated further for him because soon afterward an article of his own on consulting the laity brought him under suspicion in Rome. His readiness to answer objections was not passed on to the Church authorities, and he remained under a cloud of suspicion there for some years.

At the end of 1863, matters came to a head. Anglican priest and critic of the Catholic clergy Charles Kingsley accused Newman of indifference to truth, and there poured out from Newman his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. That controversy marked a turning point, at least with regard to the respect his contemporaries held for him. Yet there were more controversies to follow. His plans for establishing an oratory in Oxford were encouraged at first but then frustrated, and notably his moderate interpretation of the doctrine of papal infallibility brought him into conflict with

Archbishop (later Cardinal) Manning's, another Catholic convert from Anglicanism, extreme ultramontane[3] view. But finally in old age, Newman's life became more serene.

In 1878, Trinity College, Oxford, where he had been an undergraduate student, invited him to become its first honorary fellow, and so he visited Oxford again for the first time in thirty-two years. And then the following year, the new pope, Leo XIII, named him a cardinal. Old wounds were healing; the cloud of suspicion was lifted from him forever.

As a young man, beginning my preparation for ministerial priesthood, it seemed to me a stirring tale, an example of love for the truth and fidelity to Christ and the Church, and it compelled my admiration.

A second aspect that caught my attention was the fact that Newman was English. It may help to remember that when I began reading him, the Second Vatican Council was in progress. The Council was encouraging a growing awareness of the local church, and Newman's personality and approach to many issues gave a clear example of what that could mean for England. The point is not chauvinistic. His influence in other countries is too well known for that. It is simply a matter of acknowledging that when the Church in Council was trying to recognize what each culture could contribute to its life, Newman supplied a particular illustration of what the English contribution might be. On one occasion, years later, some friends who were not Catholics were joking with me by saying that Newman had never really been a Catholic but was always an Anglican at heart. I responded by saying that on the contrary, I felt Newman had shown how being English and Catholic were compatible. It was just banter, but I may have struck a nerve because there was a sudden silence and the subject was changed.

Thinking of banter, it is perhaps worth adding here that most people don't usually associate Newman with humor. But I found that preconception mistaken. Let me offer some examples.

On holiday in the Mediterranean in 1832, there was a splendidly comic account of his seasickness: "the worst of seasickness,"

he observed in a long letter to his mother on December 23, "is the sympathy which all things on board have with the illness, as if they were seasick too." He goes on to describe the movement of table and chairs—swing, swing—and the motion of the glasses, knives, and forks on the tables, with wine spilling—swing, swing—and trying to hide the misery he felt, until he could do so no longer, but when he got up, he couldn't move because the ship was moving, and when he finally made his berth, the door wouldn't shut, then "bang, bang, you slam your fingers." Then, when he lay down, there was the noise of the bulkheads, the noises of the gale, "creaking, clattering, shivering, and dashing," not to mention the bilge water, which he called an "unspeakable nuisance," set in motion by the storm and draining down to the bottom of the boat (*L.D.* iii, 159). The whole passage is masterly. And his letters generally are full of comic observation, such as his comment on William Wilberforce's false teeth and his habit of throwing "the whole set out of the gums upon his tongue, and [chewing] them, as an infant might a coral" (*L.D.* xx, 261). And there is the story of Newman laughing just before sending off the final proofs of *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, which he had dedicated to his friend Edward Bellasis "in remembrance of a long, equable, sunny friendship." Just in time he noticed that the dedication recalled instead "a long squabble and funny friendship." There is plenty more.[4]

And a third element that impressed me early on was Newman's instinct for pastoral care. I soon discovered that when people knew anything about him at all, they tended to think in stereotypes, contrasting him with his contemporary Henry Manning. Manning was seen as the practical one, involved in the world's affairs, while Newman was regarded as intellectual and remote.[5] But the reality was very different. I was struck by Newman's practicality, his commitment to pastoral matters, and the administrative skill that went with it.

When he took up his first curacy at St. Clement's in Oxford, he was an earnest evangelical Anglican who, while not believing in predestination, was convinced that more people were damned

than were saved. But by caring for his parishioners, he learned otherwise. “How could the majority of such good people be destined for hell?” he wondered; that could not be true. Then, as I noted earlier, when he became a tutor at Oriel, he could not see that role as a matter merely of intellectual instruction. And later as vicar of the University Church and leader of the Oxford Movement, he was full of pastoral energy. His preaching from that time has become legendary. “It is of the essence of the Movement,” theologian and scholar Owen Chadwick has observed, “that its best writing should be enshrined in parochial sermons.”[6]

After his reception into full communion with the Catholic Church in 1845, this same pastoral energy drove him on. He established the oratories in Birmingham and London and founded the Catholic University in Dublin. He also set up the Oratory School for boys. In all these projects, his administrative gifts, as well as his pastoral instinct, were fully engaged. That pastoral instinct was also evident decisively in his vast correspondence with an astonishing range of people and found further expression in his other writings, where his devotion to what was real, as he would say, rather than the merely notional, was always evident. He had no time for theories, however splendid, if they could make no impact. “I say plainly I do not want to be converted by a smart syllogism,” he wrote in *A Grammar of Assent*, which he published in 1870, “if I am asked to convert others by it I say plainly I do not care to overcome their reason without touching their hearts” (*G.A.*, 425 [273]).

Such pastoral commitment could hardly fail to inspire me as a young man as my own preparation for ministerial priesthood gathered momentum. And then there was something else, something interior.

(iii)

Effective pastoral work needs to be more than activity. It must be in tune with the person within; it must flow from spirituality. Reading Newman, I soon became aware of his extraordinarily

vivid sense of God's existence and presence. His pastoral instinct and energy were undeniable; in no way was he in flight from practical demands; nevertheless, it could be said that there was a sense for him in which the unseen world had a greater reality than the seen. Early in his *Apologia*, he described himself as coming to rest when young "in the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator" (*Apo.*, 4 [18]). In other words, he was as sure of God's existence as he was of his own. Few of us would probably be able to make such a claim, or at least we would not make it in those terms. All the same, it is wonderful to be encouraged, as I was by Newman at that time, as I prepared myself for priestly ministry, to look beyond the visible world and nurture a sense of the world unseen. Sensitivity to the unseen stimulates that longing for God, which is indispensable for a life of prayer.

Styles and approaches in prayer are very varied. Some people love the company of others when they pray, as well as the stimuli of words and music. My usual preference would be for stillness. One image of Newman's has never failed to help me. In a sermon called "Equanimity," he asks: "Did you ever look at an expanse of water, and observe the ripples on the surface? Do you think that disturbance penetrates below it?" He goes on to speak of tempests and scenes of horror and distress at sea, but remarks, "The foundations of the ocean, the vast realms of water which girdle the earth, are as tranquil and as silent in the storm as in a calm." He uses it as an image for the souls of those who are holy: "They have a well of peace springing up within them unfathomable" (*P.S.* v, 69). As the passage continues, he acknowledges how troubled we may sometimes be in fact, and indeed such catastrophes like the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 may seem to qualify the image further; but these tragic events cannot simply cancel that peace altogether. This appeal to tranquility in the deepest sense has given me encouragement to persevere in prayer beyond any immediate difficulties in order to discover the strength and stillness of God.

Hand in hand with this belief in God's existence and presence, as well as the call to prayerfulness, went Newman's sense of God's providence: the Lord is not only close to us, he cares for us. No one can read Newman's life carefully and believe he thought otherwise. The idea may seem bewildering to many people today, implying divine intrusion into the natural course of events, or their manipulation. But that was not how Newman saw it. He believed that God had a plan for each of us, a plan made real by his presence among us—a plan and a presence that we see as providential when we recognize it within our lives. We call providential those moments or occasions in our lives when we become aware of God's will for us. They are privileged demonstrations of his abiding presence.

It took a long while for my own appreciation of providence to reach this stage, but I remember clearly how it began. I was reading one of Newman's sermons and came to these words: "God beholds thee individually, whoever thou art. He 'calls thee by thy name.' He sees thee and understands thee, as He made thee." He goes on, concluding, "Thou dost not love thyself better than He loves thee" (*P.S.* iii, 124–125). If time has mellowed the initial impact of those words, it has not diminished their reality for me. We will explore Newman's understanding of providence more fully later.[7]

Fascination with Newman's long life and work in England, as well as his pastoral instinct, on the one hand, and his profound spirituality, on the other, have had their influence on me. Before continuing further, however, let me mention one other way, specific and practical, in which I have found myself following his example over the years.

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When Newman published the first volume of his *Parochial Sermons* in 1834, the custom was to include in some way the whole range of Christian doctrine, but he was criticized because he had placed emphasis on some aspects of the Anglican Church's teaching and ignored others. His friend Samuel Wilberforce took him

to task. He wrote to complain that Newman was too severe in his demands for an evident change of heart and that he had not made sufficient allowance for the work of the Spirit in bringing sinners to repentance. But Newman remained unmoved. It is not necessary to go into the details of that controversy here. It is enough to recognize that Newman was not intending to deny the power of the Spirit working in people; however, he felt the need at that time to bring out the importance of an individual's response to grace. That was the aspect he wished to emphasize. There would be opportunities for other aspects at other times. And the particular point that impressed me was his assertion that he could not deal with everything at once. As he told Wilberforce: "I lay it down as a fundamental Canon, that a Sermon to be effective must be imperfect." He could not bring in every doctrine everywhere. At one time certain elements would be considered, at another time others. However, he claimed, "No one, who *habitually* hears me, ought to have any other than the whole Scripture impression" (*L.D.* v, 38). The plan was to proceed part by part; the result would be an account of the whole. Working in very different circumstances, which is precisely what I have tried to do.

Both as a priest in a parish and particularly as a university chaplain, I have sought to supply a whole account of the Church's teaching. It has not generally been practicable to do so by offering a series of extended lectures. Instead it has had to be done gradually, through homilies and talks, assembling little by little the pieces of the jigsaw. And there is evidence of the outcome. In 1986 I published a small book called *The Catholic Faith*. It was essentially a reworking into a whole of homilies and sermons, lectures and talks, that I had been giving at the Oxford University Chaplaincy. It considers Christ and the Church, the sacraments and the virtues, Mary and the Trinity. A later book, *Living Catholicism*, published in 2001, emerged in much the same way. They have generally been well received, and the material in them was gathered by following Newman's approach.[8]

(v)

Many other aspects of Newman's life, like the valuing of friends, and of his thought, like the role of theological reflection, and of his experience, like love and care for the unity of the Church, have made their mark on me over the years. They will become evident as this book unfolds. And there have, of course, been other influences besides Newman, some of them no doubt qualifying and adapting what I have learned from him, but it would be dishonest of me to disclaim the impact he has had on my life and priestly ministry.

Some years after I had been ordained and while I was studying him in Oxford as a graduate priest, a friend asked me why I did not quote him more often when I preached. The question took me by surprise, and I had to think carefully to find the answer. Then I realized that in fact I was quoting him frequently, but rarely word for word. His influence goes deeper. My debt is incalculable, my gratitude profound.