

The Significance of Newman for Our Time

BY
THE VERY REVEREND E. J. McCORKELL, C.S.B.

The hundredth anniversary of Newman's reception into the Catholic Church draws the attention of scholars once again to a great historical figure and prepares the stage for a Newman revival. If, as I think, he has some special significance for our time, it will be another example of an historical accident providing him with an opportunity. It will be recollected that from the beginning of what may be called his public life he had a conviction that a special Providence was disposing events in his favor. The "Kindly Light" which he humbly recognized in the celebrated poem repeatedly prepared an audience for him. Time after time he passed under a cloud only to emerge unexpectedly into the spotlight for a new encounter. The stage was set for the Oxford Movement by others before he was drawn into it as its logical leader. The obscurity into which he passed when he left Oxford was ended by his appointment as Rector of the new university at Dublin. The neglect that he suffered when this venture failed was unexpectedly terminated when Kingsley stumbled across his path. The publication of Pusey's *Eirenicon* gave him a new opportunity and re-assembled his audience. Gladstone's attack on the Vatican decrees did him a like service. His election as cardinal made him a world figure and gave him a secure place in history. Therefore if the time is ripe for a Newman revival, the same kindly Providence so evident in the course of his life has brought together once again the man and his audience.

There is at the heart of things in the modern world a canker, which a leading exponent of the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas in our day, Jacques Maritain¹, has shrewdly designated a disease of the intelligence. The roots of this malady are to be found at the beginning of the modern period, when philosophy, surrendering its independence, borrowed methods from the sciences. Undismayed by Descartes' failure with the mathematical method which ended in the skepticism of Hume, Kant sought to impose upon philosophy the method of Newtonian physics. Anything which this method could not reach was beyond the speculative reason. Thus the way was paved for regarding the truths of the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul, and a future life, as unscientific. These were relegated to another category of truths, wholly different in kind, mere affirmations of the practical reason. Even those scientific truths admittedly within the scope of speculative reason were held to be patterns imposed by the mind on the data of experience, and

¹ J. Maritain, *The Angelic Doctor* (London-New York), 1930, page 90.

thus determined by the mind itself rather than by objective reality. Once the mind became the measure of truth, the way was open for each man to determine his own truth, and Liberalism was born. The floodgates were gradually opened and in due course not only did Religious truth cease to be a constant, but even the truths of empirical science became mere dissolving frameworks of reference for the convenience of those who would exchange ideas about them. To those men of science, genuinely troubled by this suicide of reason, Julian Huxley, grandson of Newman's contemporary, has recently said: "The remedy for the defects of science is more science. To cling to certitude is to prolong an infantile reaction beyond the period when it is necessary. To become truly adult we must learn to bear the burden of uncertainty."² Thus Pilate's skepticism is echoed in our day: "What is truth?"

I need not say that the Church has had her own method of dealing with this menace. The Vatican Council condemned the view that the existence of God was not capable of rational demonstration, starting from the data of sense.³ Pope Leo XIII followed this up by introducing into the schools the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, whose distinction is to have reversed the roles, making external reality the measure of the mind, and not vice versa. Thus certitude became possible again, and philosophy and theology came to have a meaning in terms of scientific knowledge. The Thomistic revival is gathering momentum steadily, and its leading exponents are recognized everywhere as philosophers of the first order. One of them, already named, has written a book, which bids fair to become the *Summa Theologica* of our time. It is called significantly *The Degrees of Knowledge*.⁴ Its leading idea is that empirical science, philosophy, and theology are equally valid scientific knowledge, differing only in degree.

Into the cockpit of this struggle of reason to retain and even recover its ground, the lot of John Henry, Cardinal Newman, was providentially cast. His significant work was begun long before the Church took official action against Liberalism. He joined battle with its forces whilst still an Anglican, and resumed the fight with stronger support and more effective weapons when he became a Catholic a hundred years ago. His career has been disparagingly described as a flight from reason to authority. This is but a half-truth and therefore quite misleading. Far from dethroning reason Newman actually exalts it beyond his contemporaries, and if he invokes authority, it is an authority which reason itself postulates. The *locus classicus* for a discussion of this fundamental point is the celebrated passage in the *Apologia*: "I know that even the unaided reason, when correctly exercised, leads to a belief in God, in the immortality of the soul, and in a future retribution; but I am considering it actually and historically; and in this point of view, I do not think I am wrong in saying that the tendency is to simple

² *Fortune*, December, 1942, page 150.

³ H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum et Definitionum*, Herder, St. Louis, 1922, page 480.

⁴ *The Degrees of Knowledge*, The Centenary Press, London, 1937.

unbelief in matters of religion.”⁵ It is a shallow criticism which centres upon the second part of this text and neglects the first. We shall deal with the second part later. At the moment let us consider the first part. Observe how he insists that the unaided reason is radically capable of arriving at the conclusion that God exists, that the soul is immortal, and that there is a future life. Is not this a reversal of the position of the father of modern philosophy, Immanuel Kant, who held that these truths are undemonstrable? And with due regard for the difference between English and Scholastic terminology, is it not an anticipation of the Vatican Council? It is not a flight from reason, but a return to it. It is a restoration of reason to the dignity it occupied with the great Greek and Mediaeval philosophers.

The second part of the text quoted draws attention to the contrast between the radical power of human reason, and its actual performance in the case of the great majority of men. This is a fact to which history and experience bear abundant witness. Does Newman despair of human reason in the face of this evidence? Actually, it is the modern philosophers who have done so. Scandalized by the contrast between the facile demonstrations of Mathematics and Physics on the one hand, and the difficult and halting demonstrations of Metaphysics on the other, Descartes and Kant concluded that metaphysical truth is not merely difficult of attainment but impossible. A critic of Newman has recently expressed a great regret that Newman did not know German.⁶ The inference, of course, is that he would gladly have accepted the way out of his dilemma offered by the great German idealist. This is surely wasted sympathy. Newman was doubtless impressed by the contrast which discouraged Kant, but he did not yield ground in his loyalty to reason. Clinging tenaciously to what a properly disciplined reason could do, he admitted the need of an authority to sustain the undisciplined reason in what, of itself, it could not do. Clinging tenaciously to the sublime truth of the existence of God which a disciplined intellect demonstrates, he argued the antecedent probability of the doctrine of original sin to account for its actual sorry performance in the world, and of a divine intervention to sustain it. This antecedent probability taken together with the historical facts of Christ’s life and teaching makes the faith of a Catholic in an infallible Church a reasonable thing. Readers of the *Apologia* will recall the magnificent chapter where he works this out in detail.⁷

In other words, the contrast between the radical power of human reason on the one hand and its actual achievement in the world on the other, did not lead Newman to abandon the historical claims of reason as the modern philosophers did, but to postulate an authority to sustain it, thus preparing the way for faith in its actual existence. “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp.”⁸

⁵ *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, J. M. Dent, Toronto, 1912, page 219.

⁶ M. M. Waddington, *The Development of British Thought*, J. M. Deni and Sons, Toronto, 1919, page 66.

⁷ *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, Part VII.

⁸ Browning, *Andrea del Sarto*.

Herein lies the significance of the passage from the *Apologia* so often quoted: “I came to the conclusion that there was no medium in true philosophy, between Atheism and Catholicity, and that a perfectly consistent mind, under those circumstances in which it finds itself here below, must embrace either the one or the other.”⁹

Thus reason establishes a philosophy by its own natural power, and accepting by faith the data of revelation for which it has prepared itself, goes on to create a new science which is called theology, through the penetration and development of the given data. Reason has saved its soul alive. It could not shirk its destiny without ultimate suicide. That is precisely what has all but happened in the modern world, as I have already said. The intelligence is gravely diseased. Its revival can be effected only through recognizing that theology is a true science, and that among the sciences it holds the primacy. It must either abdicate its ancient claim to establish a true philosophy, revert to Atheism and intellectual suicide, or embrace its destiny and postulate Christianity. The acid test is the recognition of theology as a genuine science.

You will recollect with what a power of argument and wealth of illustration Newman takes up this thesis in his *Idea of a University*. Nearly one third of the volume, as now published, is devoted to it. He makes the confident claim that “Religious doctrine is knowledge in as full a sense as Newton’s doctrine is knowledge.”¹⁰ He convicts a university of absurdity in professing to teach universal knowledge and leaving out theology. If a man drops theology from his university, he argues, it is because “he thinks that nothing is known or can be known with certainty about the origin of the world or the end of man.”¹¹ He could confront the opinion of his day with this dilemma more confidently than it is possible today. There has been a great decline of faith in the past century. There are a great many more today who would not admit his dilemma because they would grant that nothing can be known for certain about the origin of the world and the end of man. I think he would have to rely more upon a purely philosophical argument such as outlined in the VIIth part of the *Apologia*. Here St. Thomas Aquinas could have helped him.

He considers theology not only a science, but the first of them in dignity. It holds the primacy. There is not a single one of them that, directly or indirectly, it does not touch.¹² Such a view is implicit in the following: “What results of philosophical speculation are unquestionable if they have been gained without inquiry as to what theology has to say to them? Does it cast no light upon History? Has it no influence on the principles of Ethics? Is it without any sort of bearing on Physics, Metaphysics, and Political Science?”¹³ Such a view is

⁹ *Apologia*, page 186.

¹⁰ *Idea of a University*, J. M. Dent, Toronto, page 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, page 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, page 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, page 58.

explicit in the following “Religion Truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge.”¹⁴ Theology, in fact, holds the primacy.

But if theology touches all the other sciences, it does not destroy their independence. Each is a science in its own right, and each of them has a rightful place in the ideal university. Each is free to develop itself from its own principles and by its own method, on the sole condition that it accord a similar freedom to other sciences, and recognizes its place in the hierarchy of sciences. It is free in its own domain. This was a bold concession to make to the new science of Newman’s day, flush with victory over a decadent theology and a trifle arrogant. But Newman was convinced that the scientific investigator must be free. The only condition he attached to the freedom of physics or chemistry or biology or any of the others was that the said science should stick to its own field, that it should remember that it is a physical science, and not a philosophy or a theology. In Lecture III he instances the mistake of an Anatomist who published a treatise, assuming there is no immortal soul.¹⁵ The Anatomist forgot that he was only an Anatomist and became for the moment a philosopher, and a poor one at that. He likewise instances the blunder of an Economist who lauded the pursuit of wealth as the noblest end of man.¹⁶ He forgot that he was only an Economist, and became for the moment a theologian, and a poor one at that, for he contradicted the clearest teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. Each science must then respect the findings of the other sciences, including theology. They will not grope beyond their boundaries, for there will be another science to defend its domain, and these boundaries and disputes about them will be settled by an architectonic or master science¹⁷ called philosophy, for which theology in its turn will perform a like office.¹⁸

Thus it comes about that the sciences are free, not in spite of theology, but because of it. They may range freely and daringly within their own sphere, confident that they will be set aright if transgressing the limits of that sphere, they falter, through defective method, especially in the sublimer regions of truth where philosophy and theology soar with difficulty and where intruders have no competence at all. Theology is thus a kind of focal point, where the other sciences, autonomous in their respective domains, tend to meet in the integration of all knowledge. Theology is the keystone of the arch.

There is pre-supposed in this free, co-operative effort of the sciences in pursuit of their end a great love of truth and scrupulous fairness in argument and discussion. Newman himself could easily suppose this fairness in others because he possessed it himself. Huxley paid a great tribute to him when he said that he could construct a primer of infidelity from Newman’s own writings. In his controversies with the Liberals Newman habitually stated the case for them more

¹⁴ Ibid., page 61.

¹⁵ Ibid., page 76.

¹⁶ Ibid., page 84.

¹⁷ Ibid., page 82.

¹⁸ Ibid., page 58.

cogently than they could state it themselves. He was of the opinion that no progress towards truth could be made by controversy unless you were able to state your opponent's case at least as well as he could state it. But if Newman could desire this ideal attitude of mind, he knew that he could not count upon it generally. Herein lies the implicit reason why he wanted the Church in the University.

In the Preface he expressed himself on this point in technical language. He wrote that the Church is needed not for the essence but for the integrity of the University.¹⁹ So long as theology has its due place on the campus along with the other sciences, everything essential is there. Unfortunately, however, it is not theology which is there, but theologians, and it is not science which is there, but scientists. There is no natural guarantee of their love of truth. Science, even theology, tends as such to beget a cold intellectualism,²⁰ and Literature a warm seductiveness.²¹ The Church must be there, with her maternal solicitude, to breathe her pure spirit into the university.²² This is none other than a supernatural love of truth, the gift of Wisdom, which is the fruit of holiness. St. Philip Neri, Newman's patron, exerted a vast influence upon Rome of the later Renaissance by his unaffected humility and unpretending love.²³ The Church which produced him in her hour of need, must be at work on the campus with the means she alone has of making saints. Otherwise the university will lack a steadying and stimulating help in the pursuit of her intellectual aims because the scientists, the philosophers, and even the theologians on its staff will lack something of an invincible love of truth. The University without the Church would be incomplete.

I have tried to keep to the central point in delineating the significance of Newman for our day. There were many temptations to turn aside. Newman is a complex, though always interesting, figure. He is not beyond criticism. His terminology is sometimes baffling because it is English rather than Scholastic. He is in the Augustinian current of philosophy, which he gathered from his thorough knowledge of the Fathers of the Church, rather than in the Thomistic current, the revival of which, after his time, has left him somewhat behind. When Milton wrote prose rather than poetry he worked under a handicap which he described as having but the use of his left hand. Newman labors under a similar handicap through his meagre knowledge of St. Thomas. It is all the more remarkable that he should have become a Thomist by adoption, if not by inheritance, in his cogent defence of natural reason, through his rehabilitation of theology as a science. That is the high point of his achievement. It is that which makes him a timely antidote for the central flaw at the basis of modern culture, a denial of the rights of the intelligence.

¹⁹ Ibid., Preface, page xxxiii

²⁰ Ibid., page 213.

²¹ Ibid., page 229.

²² Ibid., page 211.

²³ Ibid., page 230.