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Newman the Pastor

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Abstract

When people think about Newman, they usually think, first of all, about his ideas, doctrinal development, the relationship between faith and reason, the place of the laity in the Church, and much else besides. But however brilliant those ideas may have been, Newman was never simply a thinker, a man trapped in his brain. The key question for him was always how to make the ideas become real. He had no interest in moving minds without touching hearts. Newly ordained as an Anglican deacon, then as a tutor at Oriel, as a leader and preacher during the early years of the Oxford Movement, as a parish priest in Birmingham, as an educator, and as a champion of the *via media*, of moderation in dispute, his instinct was invariably pastoral.

Keywords

Newman; pastor; parish priest; education; via media

Although our conference is about *The Theology of John Henry Newman*, my topic is not 'The Pastoral Theology of John Henry Newman', but 'Newman the Pastor'. That is as it should be. And it illustrates the point made twenty years ago by Nicholas Lash, writing to mark the centenary of Newman's death. He remarked then that it is difficult to chart Newman's influence because of 'that very *closeness* of speech to speaker, of text to thinker, which is the hallmark of his genius'. And he added that 'it is *Newman* who makes the difference to those touched by his spell'.[1] And this point itself was confirmed that year in Oxford where a series of lectures was being held to mark the same centenary. One was given by Roy Jenkins who was then Chancellor of Oxford and who spoke on 'Newman and the Idea of a University'. He ended almost with an apology: 'I have written more about Newman and less about universities than

[1] Nicholas Lash, 'Newman since Vatican II', in Ian Ker and Alan G. Hill (eds.), *Newman after a Hundred Years*, (Oxford, 1990), pp. 451, 452.

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you might have expected me to do. That is partly because I have many more opportunities to talk about universities than I do to talk about Newman, and partly because I have found him such a wholly absorbing even if sometimes tantalizing subject.'[2] It is the man who makes the difference.

So my topic is Newman the pastor which I will illustrate with some snapshots from his life. I will say something about his approach to education and indicate how he continued to make pastoral use of the *via media* when he had become a Catholic.

1. Newman's Life

a) *Early parish experience*

It is impossible to doubt the importance for Newman of his first conversion in 1816, when he was only fifteen, how he was overwhelmed by 'the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator' (*Apologia pro Vita Sua*, p. 4).[3] It was an earnest, evangelical conversion and, although the intensity of the experience faded in time, its significance is not to be underestimated. I think it is fundamental for understanding Newman's originality, but that is a subject for another occasion. I mention it now because Newman was still feeling its influence when he was ordained as a deacon on 13 June 1824. He recorded his emotions in his Journal: 'It is over. I am thine, O Lord; I seem quite dizzy, and cannot altogether believe and understand it. At first, after the hands were laid on me, my heart shuddered within me; the words "for ever" are so terrible.'[4] He felt overwhelmed.[5]

The following year on 29 May, he was ordained as an Anglican priest. Again there is an entry in his Journal. He considered how he has changed since he became a deacon. 'Then,' he wrote, 'I thought

[2] Roy Jenkins, 'Newman and the Idea of a University', in David Brown (ed.), *Newman: a Man for our Time*, (London, 1990) p. 157.

[3] All references to Newman's works are taken from the Uniform Edition (1868–1881, 36 vols, Longman, Green & Co, London), and the references to his letters are taken from C.S. Dessain et al (eds.), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman* i-xxxii (London and Oxford, 1961–2008).

[4] Henry Tristram (ed.), *John Henry Newman: Autobiographical Writings*, (London, 1956), p. 200.

[5] In passing it may be amusing to note the contrast with Newman's reaction when he was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1847. He sent a letter that day to Elizabeth Bowden, widow of his first, close Oxford friend, John Bowden. He told her: 'You will be pleased to hear I was ordained Priest about two hours ago; surprised perhaps, for things have progressed so rapidly that I do not know what I said in my last letter' (*Letters and Diaries* xii, p. 84). It is not always easy to catch the tone of written remarks, but there seems to me to be a note of slightly amused bewilderment, very different from the earnest words twenty-three years earlier.

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the *onus probandi* lay with those who asserted an individual to be a real Christian; and now I think it lies with those who deny it.' He was still not convinced that 'the Spirit always or generally accompanies the very act of baptism', but his position had shifted. Some weeks later, on 17 July, he explained the change. 'I have been principally or in great measure led to this change,' he recorded, 'by the fact that in my parochial duties I found many, who in most important points were inconsistent, but whom I could not say were altogether without grace.'[6] What had made the difference? The people who were his parishioners. Theoretical theology had been qualified by pastoral practice. His pastoral instinct had been stirred.

b) *Tutor at Oriel*

Oxford tutors in Newman's day were expected to teach. In many ways what they did was an extension of the practice in the great public schools, like Eton, Harrow, and Winchester. Tutors were to teach, but had no responsibility for the spiritual, moral, or pastoral welfare of their pupils. Newman as a tutor soon rebelled against that tradition. For him just to teach was not enough. He saw personal influence as something positive, not manipulative, and as an essential part of a tutor's role. One of his University Sermons, preached in 1832, was called, 'Personal Influence, the Means of Propagating the Truth',[7] and years later, while working in the University in Dublin that he had founded there, he famously affirmed, 'An academical system without the personal influence of teachers upon pupils, is an arctic system; it will create an ice-bound, petrified, cast-iron University, and nothing else'.[8] He was insisting on the need for the pastoral dimension to a tutor's work. But his views were resisted at the time and soon no more pupils were allotted to him.

c) *Preaching and the Oxford Movement*

Deprived of pupils, Newman had time on his hands and, when the Oxford Movement began, he was able to devote himself to it wholeheartedly. Central to the Movement was preaching. As Owen Chadwick observed long ago, 'It is of the essence of the [Oxford] Movement that its best writing should be enshrined in parochial sermons,'[9] and among those sermons Newman's were supreme.

[6] *Autobiographical Writings*, p. 206.
[7] *Fifteen Sermons preached before the University of Oxford*, pp. 75–98.
[8] *Historical Sketches* iii, p. 74.
[9] Owen Chadwick, *The Mind of the Oxford Movement*, (London, 1960), p. 42.

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There is a saying of his that I find particularly reassuring. At that time, when a volume of sermons was published, the convention was for it to touch upon the whole range of Christian doctrine. When Newman's first volume of *Parochial Sermons* appeared, he was criticized for concentrating too much on some points and neglecting others. He was unmoved by the criticism and during the correspondence that ensued, writing to Samuel Wilberforce, he observed, 'I lay it down as a fundamental Canon, that a Sermon to be effective must be imperfect.' What comforting words for those of us required to preach. Newman, of course, was not encouraging poor preaching, but making a vital pastoral point. Who has not heard sermons that are overlong because the preacher has tried to say too much, to include everything? Good preachers highlight one point on one occasion, another on another. As Newman remarked to Wilberforce, 'No one, who *habitually* hears me, ought to have any other than the whole Scripture impression'.[10]

That was in 1835. More than thirty years later, on 2 March 1868, Newman gave a detailed answer to a student from Maynooth who asked his advice about preaching.[11] Wilfrid Ward published the notes Newman prepared for his reply in his biography. They remain fascinating. Here they are. Newman began:

> '1. *A man should be in earnest, by which I mean he should write not for the sake of writing, but to bring out his thoughts*.' We might say: when preaching, be yourself.
> '*2. He should never aim at being eloquent*.' Don't be artificial or fancy.
> '*3. He should keep his idea in view, and should write sentences over and over again till he has expressed his meaning accurately, forcibly, and in few words*.' In the actual letter, Newman was specific, '*Take care that it should be one subject, not several*'.[12] Be clear and keep one subject in view.
> '*4. He should aim at being understood by his hearers or readers*.' Make sure those who hear or read you can understand you.
> '*5. He should use words which are likely to be understood. Ornament and amplification will come spontaneously in due time, but he should never seek them*.' Therefore, use language that is intelligible to those listening or reading.
> '*6. He must creep before he can fly, by which I mean that humility which is a great Christian virtue has a place in literary composition*.' Keep it simple.
> And then he concluded with a final point: '*7. He who is ambitious will never write well, but he who tries to say simply what he feels, what religion demands, what faith teaches, what the Gospel promises, will*

[10] *Letters and Diaries* v, p. 38.
[11] Ibid., xxiv, pp. 44–5.
[12] Cf. Ibid., xxiv. p. 44.

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be eloquent without intending it, and will write better English than if he made a study of English literature.'[13]

These guidelines reveal a keen pastoral instinct at work.

d) *The Birmingham Oratory*

Newman's correspondence gives plenty of evidence for his involvement in the Oratory parish. When Stanislas Flanagan left the community, for example, he wrote to Ambrose St John about who would be available to hear confessions.[14] And there was, of course, the famous occasion in 1864 after he had written the *Apologia* and when he was beginning once more to be held in high regard, when Mgr George Talbot sent him a pompous letter, inviting him to preach in Rome, 'where you would have a more educated Audience of Protestants than could ever be the case in England'. Newman's reply was curt and crisp. 'Birmingham people have souls;' he reminded Talbot, 'and I have neither taste not talent for the sort of work you cut out for me: and I beg to decline your offer'.[15] Newman loved Birmingham and its people. As Archbishop Vincent Nichols has often remarked, at Newman's beatification a Birmingham parish priest is being beatified.

e) *Newman in the 1860s*

Reviewing Newman's life, it is instructive to consider one particular decade, the eighteen-sixties. Recall the events of those years: there were still the consequences of his article about the laity rumbling on and the sense of being a failure that touched him so keenly; there was his dispute with Charles Kingsley that led him to write his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*; there was the uncertainty about whether or not he should found an Oratory in Oxford; he composed *The Dream of Gerontius*; he became involved in a controversy about Marian doctrine and devotion with his friend, Edward Pusey; the First Vatican Council was looming and there was anxiety about whether papal infallibility would be defined as a dogma and, if so, the terms in which the definition would be couched; he was at last clear about how to tackle a book he had long wanted to write, which became *A Grammar of Assent*; and, with regard to his correspondence, you will find that there are five and a half published volumes for this

[13] Wilfrid Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman* ii, (London, 1912), pp. 335–6.

[14] See, *Letters and Diaries* xx, p. 261.

[15] *Letters and Diaries* xxi, pp. 166–7.

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decade alone. Plenty was happening. And at the same time, as well as his care for the parish, Newman had a day-job. In 1862, after a controversy that led to the headmaster, Fr Nicholas Darnell, and various other staff members resigning, he became much more closely involved in running the Oratory School that he had founded in 1859.

The great public schools at the time had a high academic reputation, but they were largely unconcerned with the moral and spiritual welfare of their pupils. (That began to change at Arnold's Rugby.) By contrast, Catholic schools, like Stonyhurst, Downside, and Oscott, were stronger on moral and spiritual welfare, but weaker academically. Newman, bearing in mind those families that had become Catholic and wanted a Catholic education for their sons, but wanted as well that education to match the academic standard that would have been available at schools like Eton and Harrow, founded the Oratory School to combine the academic quality of those famous public schools with the moral and spiritual care that was more characteristic of their Catholic counterparts.[16] Once again, pastoral concern was crucial for him. What he championed as a tutor at Oriel and affirmed in Dublin was guiding him still. And education mattered, so it is time to consider Newman's approach to education more specifically.

2. Education

Newman spoke of education as being 'his line'. The remark appears in his Journal in 1863. He was reviewing his Catholic life and his mood was dark, even depressive. He was reflecting on the way his Catholic life seemed to be a failure. Others had had successes. Success for them was measured by the converts they had made. But Newman was wary of trophies of that kind. He had no desire to make 'hasty converts'. This is the place where he made his well-known remark that 'the Church must be prepared for converts, as well as converts for the Church'. And then he analyzed the situation:

> Catholics in England, from their very blindness, cannot see that they are blind. To aim then at improving the condition, the status, of the Catholic body, by a careful survey of their argumentative basis, of their position relatively to the philosophy and the character of the day, by giving them juster views, by enlarging and refining their minds, in one word, by education, is (in their view) more than a superfluity or a hobby, it is an insult. It implies that they are deficient in material points. Now from first to last, education, in this large sense of the word, has been my line . . . .[17]

[16] See Paul Shrimpton, *A Catholic Eton? Newman's Oratory School*, (Leominster, 2005).

[17] *Autobiographical Writings*, pp. 258–9.

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So he wants Catholics to use better arguments in advocating their position, better arguments grounded in a greater sensitivity to culture, 'the philosophy and character of the day'. That would make their position sounder and broaden and deepen their understanding, helping them to become more cultivated. It is education 'in this large sense' that is his line, not mere narrow learning. Once again, it is what is personal and pastoral that has a high priority.

This larger sense of education is, as we realize, under threat at the present time. Targets, value for money, and outcomes have pride of place and drive educational policy. The contrast between Newman's vision for education and contemporary priorities seems obvious and was discussed by John Roberts who was then Warden of Merton College, Oxford, twenty years ago. What Newman proposed comes from a very different world. Nevertheless, after noting the differences, Roberts also described Newman's vision as one 'which those of us who are concerned with education should from time to time try to refresh ourselves'. He noted that many of Newman's ideas are 'coherent with much that is regarded as the universities' best practice'. He referred to a care for something more than instruction or training and to attention to the individual, because universities should help its students to know themselves better and so transform their lives by revealing their potential. And he indicated the role of personal influence as the means for achieving this. Roberts summed up: 'Like many visions, Newman's can inspire, stimulate, and it can check. He can sometimes reanimate us to defend values now under threat. It is helpful to recall that an educated man is not a man who knows certain things, but a man whose mind has been formed in a certain way and who can take up a certain stance when confronted with a new experience.'[18]

That was twenty years ago. Is the pendulum beginning to swing back? In any case, Newman's larger vision evidently involved a pastoral dimension. And it is wise to be aware of his approach.

3. The Via Media

It is well known that as an Anglican Newman believed the great Church Catholic had lost its unity and was made up of three branches, Eastern, Roman, and Anglican. And he presented the genius of the Church of England as a middle way, a *via media*, within western Christendom between Protestant error and Roman excess. His loss of confidence in that position was what forced him to consider another possibility. He had no faith in Protestantism and so he began to

[18] John Roberts, '*The Idea of a University* Revisited', *Newman after a Hundred Years*, pp. 221–2.

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explore the idea that what he had hitherto regarded as Roman excess might in fact be evidence of living truth developing authentically. Only when he was convinced was he received into full communion as a Catholic. He had abandoned the *via media* as an ecclesiology, but he did not abandon it altogether. It continued to guide his approach as a pastor. Consider some of the major controversies of his Catholic life.

His dispute with Charles Kingsley that led to him writing his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* was outstanding. Then, while he was preparing it, he received a letter from Sir John (later Lord) Acton on 10 April 1864. Acton was concerned in case Newman's successful defence of his own behaviour was so specific that it left unanswered broader questions that non-Catholic society and some Catholics as well raised against the Church; he referred to the policy it adopted 'in order to avoid scandal . . . the practice of proscribing truth and positively encouraging falsehood in the Church'. It is hard not to hear echoes from our own times. Newman answered five days later, assuring Acton that 'I shall go as far as ever I can'.[19]

Two years later he became involved in a controversy with his friend, Edward Pusey, on Marian doctrine and devotion. It was an amicable dispute, but Newman felt Pusey had misunderstood and was misrepresenting Catholic teaching on Mary. In his reply, however, he was anxious not only to correct Pusey, but also to temper certain devotional excesses which more extreme Catholics were promoting as if they were essential. Newman explained his purpose in writing. He wanted others to know, 'did they come to stand where I stand, what they would, and what they would not, be bound to hold concerning [the Blessed Virgin]'.[20]

Again in 1875, when answering William Gladstone's attack on the Vatican decrees, he wanted to set the record straight, but he also grasped the opportunity to qualify ultramontane extravagance. While he took issue with Gladstone, he also confessed to 'a deep feeling, that Catholics may in good measure thank themselves, and no one else, for having alienated from them so religious a mind [as Gladstone's]'.[21]

In each instance Newman was walking a middle path, correcting error, but also moderating excess. A pastoral instinct was guiding him. Indeed, in his Preface written in 1877 for the third edition of his *Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church*, he spoke about those who would become Catholics, 'if their conscience would let them', but who do not 'on account of certain great difficulties which block their way, and throw them back'. And he went on to

[19] *Letters and Diaries* xxi, p. 94.
[20] *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching ii*, p. 25.
[21] Ibid., ii, p. 176.

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observe, 'It is so ordered on high that in our day Holy Church should present just that aspect to my countrymen which is most consonant with their ingrained prejudices against her, most unpromising for their conversion'.[22] He was lamenting that Catholic extravagance that hampered the attempt to overcome people's misunderstandings and correct their mistakes. The middle path has its place. Yet again, the driving force was pastoral concern.

4. Conclusion

When we survey Newman's long life, as newly ordained, as a College tutor, as a preacher, as a parish priest, as an educator, and as a walker along the middle way, his pastoral instinct is unmistakable. Newman was an occasional writer which, as we know, does not mean that he wrote only occasionally, but that he wrote for occasions, in response to need. That policy too is pastoral. Even the one exception, his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, was also deeply pastoral in fact, inspired by his concern to show how the Gospel mysteries come alive, are made real for us.

A pastoral disposition involves relationships, relationships with oneself, with God, and with others, so at the end let us return to the beginning, to the young John Henry Newman, just fifteen years of age, convinced, even were he to doubt everything else, of the existence of 'two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings,' himself and his Creator. It offers a kind of snapshot: he knew himself and he was convinced of the reality of God. Then as a young Anglican deacon he soon discovered grace in his first parishioners; he was learning from his relationships with them. The foundation of his pastoral instinct had been laid. Here was the beginning of the man who in 1870 would declare that he had no truck with 'smart syllogisms' for winning converts, that he did 'not care to overcome [people's] reason without touching their hearts'.[23]

Newman was a pastor from the depths of his own heart to the pen at his fingertips.

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[22] *The Via Media* i, p. xxxvii.
[23] *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, p. 425.

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