

Newman – the Father of Vatican II

Text of a talk originally given by Rev. Gregory Winterton, Cong. Orat. of the Birmingham Oratory at the Newman Association conference “Lead Kindly Light” held on 12 June 2010 at Maryvale, Birmingham

John Henry Newman was not a systematic philosopher or theologian, but one way or another wrote to the occasion. The occasion sometimes elicited the production of a long book, but more often something as short as a letter, of which 20,000 are extant, something a bit longer like his published (and unpublished) sermons, lectures, articles and essays, which he gathered together later on in the 1870s when he was putting together a uniform edition of his works. *Historical Sketches, Discussions and Arguments, Essays Critical and Historical* are in this category, as is the expanded edition of *The Idea of a University*.

This has one great advantage for anyone charged to speak on “Newman the Father of Vatican II”. Newman’s thought and literary productions were – like his actual activities – far reaching and match the wide range of the topics treated by the bishops at the Second Vatican Council. When I sat down and scribbled a list of subjects treated by Newman which were also subjects debated at Vatican II, it is extraordinary how they parallel one another: Education, The Laity, Ecumenism, the Church, Bishops, Holiness, Our Lady, Conscience, Faith and Reason, Revelation, Scripture and Tradition, Mission and the Church in the Modern World, Authority and Freedom in the Church, and so forth. Thus the subject of this lecture gives great freedom to the lecturer in treating of it, and in hazarding a guess at Newman’s thought and its possible or probable influence on the bishops and theologians at the Second Vatican Council.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council at the beginning of their deliberations tended, following Pope John XXIII’s encyclicals *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*, to have been interested in the Church’s role in the modern world. Such was not the predominant interest of John Henry Newman; he was much more theocentric in his interests. Of course he was concerned with men and women in their life in this world, and in their personal difficulties, but his great concern was to bring them into friendship and union with Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus as far as having an influence of the Second Vatican Council is concerned he can be said to have influenced the Constitution on *The Church* more than he did the one on *The Church in the Modern World*, because the constitution on *The Church* deals with holiness for all its members, with Our Lady’s place in the Church, with the role of the Laity, and with the ultimate destiny of the human race, all of which were of special interest to our cardinal. I am personally no expert on how Newman did or did not influence the individual bishops who spoke at the Council and therefore in this lecture I shall make no attempt to say anything about that. What I shall do is to try to give you a sketch of some of the themes of Newman’s teaching which are also treated in the documents of Vatican II and which you may like to follow up, especially if they seem relevant and help forward your own faith.

Logically the first subject which was of abiding interest to Newman himself was how men and women come to belief in Almighty God at all; why some do and some do not; again what is the advantage of being brought up in a *revealed* religion like Old Testament Judaism and Christianity, or in a *natural* religion, like the “gentiles”. What sparked the interest in his mind initially was the attitude taken up by his brother Charles who lapsed from his religious duties and to whom John Henry wrote a long letter in defence of religion. Later on, faced with the same problem by his students and fellow dons (e.g. Blanco White), Newman treated of it in his *University Sermons* and especially in his Catholic days in *The Grammar of Assent*. These writings have special importance in the emphasis he puts on conscience as the way that *all* men may eventually find their way to God if they are obedient to its voice. In fact Newman has been called the “Doctor of Conscience” – I quote here an example of his writing:

“Whether a man has heard the name of the Saviour of the World or not...he has within his breast a certain commanding dictate, not a mere sentiment, not a mere opinion, or impression or view of things, but a law, an authoritative voice, bidding him do certain things and avoid others. I do not say that its particular injunctions are always clear, or that they are always consistent with each other, but what I am insisting on here is this, that it commands, that it praises, it blames, it promises, it threatens, it implies a future or it witnesses the unseen. It is more than a man’s own self. The man himself has no power over it, or only with extreme difficulty; he did not make it, he cannot destroy it. This is conscience and from the nature of the case its very existence carries on our mind to a being exterior to ourselves, or whence did it come? And to a Being superior to ourselves, else whence its strange troublesome pre-emptoriness?” (*Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*).

Conscience gives us an idea of God's character from what it commands. But its dominant idea "is that he is our Judge. In consequence the special attribute under which it brings Him before us, to which it subordinates all other attributes, is that of Justice – retributive Justice".

Newman in many of his sermons and teachings goes on to examine why one person obeys a dictate of his conscience, and another does not and so fails to arrive where God his Father is trying to lead him. His teaching, hard as it is, is to urge everyone to surrender day-by-day and minute-by-minute to the demands that conscience and his or her daily life makes upon him.

In his *Meditations and Devotions* this teaching, originally given to the Fathers of the Oratory, is summed up in what he entitles "A short road to perfection" which is a way suitable to all classes of men and to any of us whether we are clergy or religious or laity. I quote the end of it: 'He then is perfect who does the work of the day perfectly, and we need not go beyond this to seek for perfection. You need not go out of the round of the day. If you ask me what you are to do in order to be perfect, I say first, do not lie in bed beyond the due time of rising, give your first thoughts to God, make a good visit to the Blessed Sacrament, say the Angelus devoutly, eat and drink to God's glory, say the rosary and be recollected, keep out bad thoughts, make your evening meditation, and examine yourself daily and go to bed in good time, and you are already perfect.'

Newman's emphasis on perfection is all one with his insistence that Holiness is the standard to which we are all called as Christians. In fact the very first sermon in the *Parochial and Plain Sermons* is entitled "Holiness without which none can see God". The same teaching is dominant also in his early sermons as a Catholic "*Discourses to Mixed Congregations*". This teaching links up with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (in the Constitution on the Church) that we are all called to holiness. It links up with the practice of Pope John Paul II to beatify and canonise people from every nation under heaven, to show that holiness and a supernatural destiny is God's intention for everyone, Christians and non-Christians alike.

The mention of non-Christians and the road to salvation raises another aspect of Newman's teaching which finds echoes in the debates of the Fathers of the Council on the place of non-Catholic religions in the place of God's scheme of things. Newman tells us in his *Apologia* how he was attracted in his reading of the early Fathers of the Church, not only by St Ignatius of Antioch and his letters to the Churches of Asia, not only by Athanasius and his defence of the Divinity of Christ against the Arians, but also by the teaching of the early Alexandrian Fathers, Clement and Origen. What was unusual in their teaching was their affirmation that Almighty God was and is present, not only in the authoritative Judaeo-Christian Revelation, but also in the Disposition of Pagans or Universal Revelation; that is to say that all religions and cultures contain some measure of revealed truth from Almighty God even though it has to be disentangled from the false ideas and teaching with which it is mixed up.

John Henry Newman's life and teaching were not bound up for the most part with the teaching of Natural Religion but with the revealed teaching of Jewish-Christian religion. He was concerned with the definite message sent by God the Creator and Upholder of us all, through the words and deeds of the people of the Old Covenant and the fulfilment in the teaching and message of God the Son in the New Testament. Later on in his essay on the *Development* of those teachings he goes on in one of his most original and important writings to see how those teachings developed in the life of the Church in the course of Christian history. This finds an echo especially in the Council debates on Divine Revelation.

Since we have now got on to the subject of revelation it is perhaps a suitable moment to introduce the subject of Mary in Newman's teaching and in his possible influence on the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. After at first proposing to have a special decree about her place in the life of the Catholic Church, the Fathers eventually included their discussions about her in the Constitution on the Church.

Newman himself tells us in the *Apologia* that he was time and again under Our Lady's sway. He was a member of her college as a Fellow of Oriel; he was vicar of her church as vicar of the University Church. When he came to live here at Old Oscott as a Catholic he christened the place Maryvale, a name derived from Santa Maria in Vallicella – the Oratory church in Rome. When he opened a church at Edgbaston he consecrated it to the Immaculate Conception – even before the dogma was defined. And he tells us that back in his Anglican days his friend Richard Hurrell Froude had taught him to have a high regard for Our Lady's purity and excellence in order that she might fittingly be the Mother of God Himself. Newman's understanding of Our Lady's role in the economy of salvation developed slowly and relentlessly as an Anglican, but finds its full force in Newman's teaching on Our Lady, as a Catholic. His one formal work on the subject was his letter to Pusey written in the 1860s. Pusey had written what he called an *Eirenicon* – which far from being peacemaking was in fact a large-scale attack on Catholic doctrine and practice. Two elements in Newman's letter to Pusey contributed to his influence on the Fathers of Vatican II. First of all was the teaching he derived from his study of the Early Church, namely that Mary is the New Eve cooperating with Almighty God introducing the new order of things won for us by our Saviour's redemptive work; and the second was his answer to Pusey's attack on what we may call the Italianate devotion to Mary. Newman is at pains to explain that what appears to be an exaggerated

devotion to Mary is not insisted on in the Church at large, and the Fathers of Vatican II take the same line in their decree, especially they say that variety in different countries and cultures is the order of the day, especially do they not wish to upset the separated brethren, i.e. Christians in other churches.

Now to speak of two other matters on which Newman influenced Vatican II. When Newman was asked towards the end of his life what he had done with it, he replied that “Education in a broad sense was his line” and was probably the dominant thing in his life other than religion, both as an Anglican and as a Catholic. And if we cast our eyes over his activities at Oxford, Birmingham and Dublin we can see how that is. Leaving aside the general education role of Newman the pastor of souls, we can see Newman the educator in his work of tutor at Oriel College where he insisted on his duty to teach and inculcate good living as well as good learning, an insistence that resulted in his losing his job. We can recall his work as founder of the Catholic University of Ireland, and as a sort of housemaster there as well as his *University Sermons* for their benefit. Finally we can go on to his founding of the Oratory public school to give the sons of his fellow converts a Catholic education. In the days before the education of women we see him too helping to educate his sisters by what would now be called “distance learning”. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council dealt with this too in what is one of their most uninspired declarations, drawn up near the very end of their deliberations – but which is notable for its insistence on the educative role of the Council.

If we cast our eyes also on Newman’s life as a whole and its impression on the minds of those who observed it and followed it, including the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, what impressed people most was his conversion to the Catholic Church and Faith in a country as doggedly Protestant as England was at that time in the 19th century.

The first half of his life when he was an Anglican was taken up with the gradual search and discovery that true Christianity was to be found in the one Holy, Catholic, Roman and infallible Church, a search in which he was aided by the Fathers of the Early Church. This is of course the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the belief of the bishops who constituted its members, but it is a truth which also raised the question which is treated in the Decree on Ecumenism as to the relationship of that True Church with non-Catholic Christians and churches and their members, who believe in the Blessed Trinity and in Jesus as their Saviour, but do not believe in the Pope and Rome. Newman prayed for, wrote countless letters to, these non-Catholic separated brethren, particularly in the 1840s and 1850s following his own reception into the Catholic Church, a period which was brought to a most satisfactory end by his dispute with Kingsley and the writings of his *Apologia* – after which he renewed his friendship, especially with Anglican friends like Richard Church, Frederick Rogers and Lord Blachford who had cut themselves off from him completely. This period also is that in which he begins to re-issue works produced in his Anglican days like the *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, edited by his old Anglican curate, Copeland, which had a great sale and corresponding influence on many non-conformist Christians – showing that Newman’s clear exposition of the doctrines of the Faith and the Christian way of life can help forward the desire of Our Lord for the unity of all his followers, the aim of course of the Decree on Ecumenism.

Another aspect of Newman’s life and teaching that affected the Second Vatican Council and still affects the Church and the churches today is his consistent attack on *Liberalism*, as he mentions in his Biglietto speech when he was made a Cardinal. We see all too clearly today how the failure to preserve the traditional moral teachings of the Church under the influence of Liberals has and is having the effect of disintegrating and breaking up the churches of the Anglican Communion instead of building up Christian unity. And it is not only the moral teaching of the Church that this liberalism tends to attack but it tends also to encourage doubts about the Divinity of Our Lord himself, as Newman saw illustrated in the lives of Blanco White his companion in the Oriel Common Room and in his own brother Frank who had become a virtual unbeliever by his life’s end.

Newman on the other hand insists with great force that the Catholic Church – inspired and sustained by the presence and influence of the Holy Spirit – is the great preserver of revealed truth both of faith and morals in a world so hostile to them, and a witness to that unbelieving world from one end of the globe to the other, a teaching that is the essence of the decree on the Missionary Work of the Church at the Second Vatican Council.

I think it suitable to end with saying what is also brought out in the documents of the Council – that the Catholic Christian mind needs constantly to keep in touch with the four last things – Heaven, Hell, Death and Judgement. Poetically of course this teaching has attained great force through Newman’s poem “the Dream of Gerontius”, the more so since Elgar set it to music. But in his preaching Newman continued to insist of the real possibility of many souls going to hell, as well as the possibility of the divine mercy extending to many souls whose outward conduct gives the impression that they will be very lucky to get into Purgatory let alone Heaven. May his prayers assist all of us to attain the beatific vision he longed for himself and which he teaches us all to long for.

Note

This article has also appeared in the Summer 2010 Edition of the Newsletter of the Friends of Cardinal Newman.