

The Spirit of Newman

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

CATHOLICS IN BRITAIN and throughout the world confidently expect that Pope Benedict, in the course a papal visit this autumn, will canonize John Henry Newman, a famous Anglican clergyman who startled England by becoming a Catholic on 9 October 1845. As I read the newspaper articles about this expectation, I was reminded of an event that happened when I was teaching at the University of Saskatchewan. I had received from the president of a Newman Club an invitation to speak at a conference. The letter closed with the words, “Yours in the spirit of Newman,” and I pointed this phrase out to a colleague as an instance of Cardinal Newman’s enduring appeal. My friend, more cynical than I, wagered that no reference to Newman had been intended. The phrase, he claimed, was nothing more than an expression of camaraderie, of *esprit de corps*. Unfortunately, he was right. The “spirit of Newman” had less to do with John Henry than the “spirit of Vatican II” has to do with the actual Council.

It is a useful exercise to compare Newman and Vatican II (1962-65). Each has given rise to a “spirit” not altogether compatible with its source. In an old movie (*Behind the Veil*) I ran across a good example of the sins committed in the name of Vatican II. The film portrays some Catholics nuns celebrating a “eucharist” on their own, without an ordained (male) celebrant. A Catholic was asked how this could be justified. The reply? “Vatican II!”¹ It is, in fact, not completely absurd to invoke the Council to justify a departure from normative Catholic practice even as radical as this one. Vatican II introduced a number of remarkable alterations in Catholic life, the like of which had not been seen in the Church for a long time, if ever; certainly, a hundred and forty years ago no Catholic would have thought of defending a comparable innovation by exclaiming “Vatican I!” Consequently, people who want to continue an exhilarating

¹ Even now, some fifty years later, this “spirit” continues to be celebrated and invoked; cf. *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?*, D. Schultenover, ed. (New York: Continuum, 2008).

programme of renovation and reform will look upon themselves as extending a process begun, but not ended, with the Council.

There is a “spirit of Newman” analogous to this “spirit of Vatican II.” An essential part of each of them is a distrust of the ability or right of the Church’s magisterium to speak authoritatively. As with the “spirit of Vatican II,” there *is* a connection between Newman and the “spirit of Newman,” for Newman was critical of hierarchy, and with good reason: Newman’s life was marked by unhappy dealings with bishops. If he was never in open disagreement with any of them, he was often displeased with their behaviour. Acutely sensitive himself, he could only resent what seemed like neglect or even contempt on their part. In the 1850s, for example, he was shabbily treated by Archbishop Cullen of Dublin who had called upon Newman to establish a Catholic university and then, by continually interfering, made it impossible for him to function as rector. Newman was similarly frustrated in the execution of commission for a new English translation of the Bible, in the establishment of a Catholic residence at Oxford, and in his editorship of *The Rambler*, all of which he assumed, and subsequently retired from, at episcopal invitation. His most famous contribution to *The Rambler*—“On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine”—was formally delated to Rome as heretical by Bishop Brown of Newport. The offending statements describe the “temporary suspension of the functions of the *Ecclesia docens*” during the period after the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) when “the Catholic people in the length and breadth of Christendom were the obstinate champions of Catholic truth, and Bishops were not.” It was these experiences that in a letter of 16 April 1866 led Newman to write words that many Catholic would ascribe to: “. . . it is authority I fear.”

There is a different spirit of Newman, but it lies deeper than mere dissatisfaction with members of the hierarchy. A tender expression of it can be found in a book whose dry title belies its highly emotional content, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. At the end of chapter two Newman describes what brought him into the Church:

Did St. Athanasius or St. Ambrose come suddenly into life, it cannot be doubted what communion he would make to be his own. . . . were those same saints, who once sojourned, one in exile, one on embassy, at Treves, to come more northward still, and to travel until they reached another fair city [i.e., Oxford], seated among groves, green meadows, and calm streams, the holy brothers would turn from many high aisle and solemn cloister which they found there, and ask the way to some small chapel where mass was said in the populous alley or forlorn suburb.

In a letter of 8 February 1846, a few months after his conversion, Newman makes the same point more simply: “Were St Athanasius and St Ambrose now come to Oxford they would go to Mass in St Clement’s.” To the tiny Catholic congregation gathered in the chapel of Saint Clement on Sunday, 12 October 1845, a visit from these saints would have seemed as likely as what actually happened: Newman and his companions attending Mass with them for the first time.

The witness of antiquity to the Church is mentioned frequently by Newman in his letters of the 1840s: “. . . what I believe to be the One and Only Fold of the Redeemer, the Church of St. Athanasius, . . .” “The Church of the Fathers,” “. . . [the English Church] is a Church which the Fathers would not have acknowledged.” To me, this is the authentic spirit of Newman: that the Church is today what she has ever been.

I think the Church of Rome in every respect the continuation of the early Church. I think she is the early Church *in* these times, and the early Church is she *in* these times. They differ in doctrine and discipline as child and grown man differ, not otherwise.²

One is, therefore, not to be distracted from the nature of the Church by the presence of sin in her members.

If there was a Judas among the Apostles, and a Nicholas among the deacons, why should we be surprised that in the course of eighteen hundred years there should be flagrant instances of cruelty, of unfaithfulness, of hypocrisy, or of profligacy, and that not only in the Catholic people, but in high places, in royal palaces, in bishops’ households, nay in the seat of St Peter itself?³


The mark of the Church is not the blameless character of her members, but her authority to teach:

It is perfectly true that the Church does not allow her children to entertain any doubts of her teachings; and that, first of all simply for this reason, because they are Catholics only while they have faith, and faith is incompatible with doubt. No one can be a Catholic without a simple faith, that what the Church declares in God’s name, is God’s word, and therefore true. A man must simply believe that the Church is the oracle of God; he must be certain of her mission as he is of the mission of the Apostles. . . . I

² *Letter*, 11 July 1845

³ *Occasional Sermons*

may love by halves, I may obey by halves; I cannot believe by halves: either I have faith, or I have not.⁴

When one starts quoting from Newman it is hard to desist, so attractive is his refined and idiosyncratic prose. It is suffused throughout with a tender love for Christ and his Church that represents for me the authentic spirit of Newman. 

⁴ *Discourses to Mixed Congregations*