

To Live is to Change – Newman the Thinker

Rome, declared Newman: ‘ought to be a name to lighten the heart at all times – to inspire the faithful with hope and confidence.’ But, when Pope Pius IX in 1869 summoned the bishops to what is now called the First Vatican Council, Newman worried that he was driven by ‘fear and dismay’. At a time of political turmoil and social unrest the Church felt under siege and was busy closing the city gates. That Council defied the storms of revolution and secularism by declaring the circumstances in which the Pope could articulate with confidence the faith of the Church. But it was in fact cut short by that same threatening world. It ended with both a natural and political thunderstorm. The thunder rolled and the heavens opened at the same time as French troops guarding Rome were pulled out and the hostile forces of the Italian state came pouring in. The Pope may have got his infallibility but he was now a prisoner in the Vatican. And this was mightily to strengthen the siege mentality of the Church.

But Newman resisted this fearful retreat. ‘We are shrinking into ourselves, narrowing the lines of communion, trembling at freedom of thought and using the language of dismay and despair at the prospect before us, instead of with the high spirit of the warrior, going out conquering and to conquer.’ Newman believed that the task of this Council which had been cut short by political events would one day be taken up and developed, providing a more balanced picture of the Church. ‘Let us have faith’, he wrote ‘and a new pope and a reassembled council may trim the boat.’ And so it was to be. In 1962 Pope John XXIII did just that. He was declaring the end of the siege for as he looked out from the Vatican he saw a: ‘world starving for peace.’

Christ, he said: ‘has been there on the cross with his arms outstretched for 2000 years’. The question for the Church was not how to protect the good News but how to present it to our contemporaries. So, in October of that year, Pope John opened the council which was to throw open the gates of the Church and commit Catholics to embrace: ‘the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time.’ And of that Council, his successor Pope Paul VI, declared that Newman was its true architect.

So far I have tried to show that Newman was something more than that lecturer standing at a lectern or that preacher in his pulpit. But he was that as well – a real teacher, a profound thinker. I believe that his teaching and his thinking ring bells with us today. Newman saw very clearly what it meant for the Gospel treasure to be carried, not only to the furthest corners of the earth but also down the ages in different cultures and in different circumstances. ‘In a higher world’, he declared: ‘it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often.’ For the Good News to be shared, the risk must be taken of throwing it into the stream of time – and that means change. Newman as a student of history knew well that ‘change’ in the Church was as much a fact of life as it was in all institutions. The pots that carry the treasure are indeed earthen pots. For Christians the living, dying and rising of Jesus was something like the striking of oil, an overwhelming event, an eruption of new life. As the people of Florida know only too well such events can bring chaos and disruption. If the oil is to be

available for our good, it must be piped and channelled to us, so there is in the life of the Church the growth and development of its distribution system.

Of course there is the risk of the treasure being diminished or damaged in this process of transmission so due care has to be taken that precious bits of it do not get lost. But Newman also recognises that in this process there is the hope, the possibility that: ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ’ may become more valued, more deeply understood. So he points to Mary as ‘our pattern of faith... She does not think it enough to accept, she dwells upon it; not enough to possess, she uses it; not enough to assent, she develops it; not enough to submit the reason, she reasons upon it.’ In fact declares Newman one ‘cause of corruption’ is halting this journey into the truth ‘the refusal to follow the course of doctrine as it moves on and an obstinacy in notions of the past.’

Newman was clear that the treasure so carried in these earthen pots is not a human achievement but the gift of God. So he fiercely attacked those who would reduce the Gospel to a matter of ‘sentiment or taste’, those who held that the truth is whatever each one of us would have it be. We may not be able to get our minds around the truth, nor be able to express it in words but that is not because truth is a will-o-the-wisp and all we have are our notions and fancies, but because that truth is so overwhelmingly big, the riches of Christ are ‘unsearchable’.

But, if Newman attacks the sort of religious liberalism which tries to cut the cloth of the gospel to the measure of human minds, he yet energetically defends what we call ‘liberal’ social values – ‘the precepts of justice, truthfulness, sobriety, self-control, benevolence’. So he wrote a great manifesto on what universities were for – not to equip students for particular jobs but to promote such values, to be places of openness and debate, dedicated to the pursuit of truth wherever it may be found. So he wanted a Church in which: ‘the intellect could range with the utmost freedom.’ And Newman saw no contradiction between these two positions. Only a weak fearful organisation, which has lost confidence in what it stands for, nervously shuts down exploration and silences debate. ‘The stronger and more living is an idea, the more powerful hold it exercises in the minds of men, the more able it is to dispense with safeguards and to trust to itself against the danger of corruption.’ As Jesus warns us – it is the faithless anxious servant who keeps his master’s money safe by burying it in the ground, while the faithful ones are those who risk it on the markets of the world. That is what Pope John XXIII did when he threw open the gates and that is why Pope Paul VI called Newman the architect of that Council.

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