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NEWMAN AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

By David Phipps

On 9th October 1845, John Henry Newman, Oxford don and former Vicar of the University Church, was received into the Roman Catholic Church by Father Dominic Barberi. This caused a national scandal.

In autumn 2010 the Pope is visiting Britain and is going to beatify Newman, that is, give him the status of the Blessed John Henry Newman. The event, which is the second step towards becoming Saint John Henry Newman, has been greeted with national acclaim. The first step was when he was declared a 'Venerable Servant of God' in 1991. Then Deacon Jack Sullivan was apparently healed of a bad back in Boston in 2001 after 'prayers for Newman's intercession.' This qualifies Newman to be declared Blessed, and one more healing will qualify him for sainthood.

Sullivan now says that Newman 'now directs all my efforts,' and even Cardinal Vincent Nichols (who ought to know better) says that, 'I am sure that he will help us greatly in the task of protecting the Faith amidst the difficulties he foresaw so clearly.' Making Newman a saint will also qualify him to have his relics on display so that people can pray in front of (dare we say worship?) them, as they did with Therese of Lisieux last year.

This raises all sorts of questions. Is it not sufficient that we have 'a high priest [who] meets our need - one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens,' and who 'always lives to intercede' for us? (Hebrews 7:25, 26)

As Evangelicals, we have to ask what authority Rome has for its teaching. We find nothing like it in the Bible. They had better have some because this teaching would seem to subvert the mediation of Christ, and possibly the work of the Holy Spirit too. Their answer is that they say they need no authority other than their own. They have put the church in the position of a football referee, whose decision is final. If the referee says that Thierry Henry did not handle the ball when playing against Ireland, then officially he did not handle the ball. No other evidence could possibly be strong enough to upset this ruling.

To understand their thinking, we can gain a lot of light if we look at Newman's own conversion to Roman Catholicism. There is one very instructive letter, which he wrote to his brother Francis, in August 1845 when he had decided to go to Rome, but had not yet gone. It is very pertinent to those who are considering this step at the moment. He protests against the idea that one can choose one's religion on the basis of what one finds most congenial: 'I have always resisted, and do heartily resist, the notion of choosing a religion according to my fancy.' His reason for going to Rome was that he considered himself forced into it:

My reason for going to Rome is this:- I think the English Church is in schism. I think the faith of the Roman Church the only true religion. I do not think there is salvation out of the Church of Rome.

There are three important ideas in this sentence: that he thought the Anglican Church was in schism - not a part of the true Church of Christ, that the Roman Catholics had a monopoly of truth, and that it was not possible for him to be saved as an Anglican. It is the second of these ideas that concerns us here.¹

The focus of his teaching all through his Anglican career had been that the Church had been given to us by God in order to teach us the truth. This meant that the devout Christian has to submit to the teaching of the church. In a sermon of 1833 he tells his hearers that the relationship of Christians to the church is that they have to “have the minds of children, who do not reason, but obey their mother.”

He saw, however, a great difference between Canterbury and Rome, in that Roman Catholics were quite prepared to keep adding to their faith, whilst Anglicans tried to be faithful to the teaching of the apostles as understood by their immediate disciples. As he said in *The Prophetical Office of the Church* in 1837:

[The Roman Catholics] understand by the Faith, whatever the Church at any time declares to be faith;... The creed of Rome is ever subject to increase; ours is fixed once for all.

In the 1830s he was talking a lot about the mind of the early church, but this ignores the difficulty that we have very limited access to the teaching of the early Christians, and, in what little we have, they are far from speaking with one voice.

It follows from this for him that, since the church is the teacher, it is not necessary for individual Christians to check doctrines themselves, for the idea of every man judging (or checking) the truth for himself was always anathema to him. He believed that it led to doctrinal chaos. Rather, the task of the individual is to verify the credentials of the teacher. If we can discover where the true church is, then we have found the true teacher, and we can receive its teachings with confidence.

In the light of all this, we can see that when Newman converted to Rome, he was not converted to the contents of Roman Catholic doctrine – indeed, there were some parts of their teaching which he did not like - but to the Church of Rome itself. Nowhere, perhaps, did he ever put the essential position of the Roman Catholic Church with such brutal honesty as he did in 1849, four years after his conversion, in a series of lectures which became *Discourses to Mixed Congregations*.²

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.

When he became a Roman Catholic, he was committing himself to whatever the Church had taught, or would teach in the future – whatever it was. He tells others that if they are contemplating the same step, then they should count the cost. They could not pick and choose, they could not examine (and possibly reject) individual doctrines. Their faith had to be in the Church and not in the doctrines of the Church. It was all or nothing.

Becoming a Roman Catholic on these terms really is a fundamentalism of the most extreme kind. All rational and critical faculties have to be switched off in a conscious act of intellectual abdication. Not only is it a sin to deny what the Church teaches, it is an expression of doubt, and thus a sin, even to open the Bible to check that the teaching of the Church is there. Newman says that it is an act of unbelief to come to the Bible to look for truth. This displays ‘an unbelieving spirit.’ One simply has to take the word of the Church.

As Bible-believing Protestants we rejoice in teaching from the Bible and often encourage congregations to go home and check the doctrine against the Bible. Our glory is, for Newman, a confession of weakness, and a proof that all other denominations are inferior to Rome. Rome does not need to refer to the Bible because it believes that it has an assurance that the Holy Spirit will protect its teaching from error, and therefore that its teaching will be infallible.

This casts light on our dealings with those Roman Catholics who follow this traditional teaching. We might think that when they are pointed to the Bible, then they must see the great truths contained in it. Newman would say that by the very fact that they read the Bible in this way, they have already abandoned their faith in the Church. It is very difficult to describe this closed system as anything other than brainwashing.

It should be noted that Newman was saying this twenty years before the definition of Papal Infallibility in 1870. In that definition, there was nothing essentially new – it merely set out the position of the Pope in the process of defining doctrine. Newman actually thought that it was unwise to be so definite – he preferred a more imprecise process involving bishops, clergy and laity, but he still had no doubts about the infallibility of the Church, which stood above the Bible.

This was, of course, the position Rome had taken for centuries and continues to take today. They might talk about studying the Bible, but they do not seek to obey it. For example, at the Diet of Worms Luther was told there

If it were once acknowledged that whoever contradicts Councils or the opinions of the Church has to be convinced by Scripture, there would be nothing left in Christianity which was certain or settled.

Newman's attitude was still prevalent a hundred years later. Cardinal Bea, whom Pope John XXIII appointed Head of his Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, perpetuated the attitude of 'we will talk, but we will never reform because we can never be wrong,' when he wrote

*Our adherence to the truth of our faith, as contained in Holy Scripture and Catholic tradition and presented to us by the teaching authority of the Church must be complete and unconditional. No approach to our separated brethren, no work for union must ever weaken that absolute adherence.*⁴

To bring it up to date, the present Pope, as Cardinal Ratzinger, wrote in 1998 of the teaching of the Church 'whether written or handed down in tradition, which the Church... sets forth to be believed as divinely revealed.' He says that 'all those doctrines of divine and catholic faith which the Church proposes as divinely and formally revealed [are] irreformable,' and that 'whoever obstinately places them in doubt or denies them falls under the censure of heresy.'

In contrast to this we need to hold on to the teaching of Article VI of the 39 Articles:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

This means not only that there is no room for adding new content to the faith, but also that everything taught has to be 'proved thereby' and therefore be open to the litmus test of Scripture. Long may we hold to that view. It is never sufficient, of itself, to say, 'The Church teaches.'

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Endnotes:

- 1) I have said more on the whole subject elsewhere. See the next issue of the Churchman.
- 2) See Discourses to Mixed Congregations (London 1891), especially Chapters X, XI.

- 3) The Trial of Martin Luther, James Atkinson, London, 1971, p. 162.
- 4) The Unity of Christians, London, 1963, pp. 54f.