

The Church of England and the Church of Rome

We have discussed so far the main tenets of Newman's personalism, i.e. his epistemology, grammar of assent, conscience. Now let us look at his historical studies. Personalism and history were the two lungs with which he breathed and followed to his ultimate goal.

How can we discriminate between two bodies which lay claim to be the true teachers? And Newman meant here the Church of England and the Church of Rome. It is indeed interesting that he writes, still before his conversion (e.g. in 1841), that "we must conclude that Providence foresaw that the difference between them would never be so great as to require of us to leave the one for the other."¹ Despite the fact that *the difference was apparently not so great*, Newman had not yet decided to leave the Church of England. The time span between 1841 and 1845, the year of his conversion, however, is very short. This corroborates his belief that human life is dynamic and likely to change. We can interpret the above words as follows: his belief that "Providence foresaw" this little difference between the two Churches was only theoretical and notional, the assent he always thought the weakest; perhaps the fact that they seemed to have been so close, paradoxically made the decision the more difficult. Someone might ask: why should I join the other Church, if we are so similar? Now, when it came to pass that he was actually confronted with the final decision, which agreed with the judgment of his conscience—whose sanctions are never theoretical and general, but always concrete—he could do nothing but to submit to this sanction. Certainly, some people may call his attitude procrastination, but I would like to say his behaviour was in accordance with his wish to be real, i.e. not to make any hasty decisions before he felt sure that they came from his inner belief.

How can we discriminate between the true teacher and the false one? It seems that the true teacher comes in the name of God, and the false teacher comes in his own name. As simple as this conclusion reads, we may still be justified in our doubts as to who is who. Our situation at present appears to be hopeless, taking into consideration that so many messages circulate in both our real world and our virtual world. In Newman's times, the main centre of news dissemination was the press. Nowadays, we are bombarded with millions

¹ *ESS.*, II, 358.

of messages from the press, the mass media, and the Internet, practically without any chance to check the trustworthiness of the source. Various scandals we learn about make matters worse. Nor does it facilitate our choice when we consider the fact that some of the incriminating charges have proven to be trumped-up. We seem to be at a loss, without any test to distinguish between the true prophets and the false ones; in other words, it is a question of authority. Writing about the Church of England and the Church of Rome, Newman states that “[t]his parallel is not happier than the former, for a test was to distinguish between them, which does not decide between the Church of Rome and ourselves. This test is the divine accomplishment of the prophet’s message, or the divine blessing upon his teaching, or the eventual success of his work, as it may be variously stated; a test under which neither Church, Rome or Anglican, will fail, and neither is eminently the foremost. Each Church has had to endure trial, each has overcome it; each has triumphed over enemies, each has had continued signs of the divine favour upon it.”²

We must remember that the author of these words is not trying to settle the matter in some general terms, but is trying to solve it for himself. He notes that even at the beginning of Christianity there were differences among its teachers; he is well aware that there must be a choice, and this choice must appeal to this concrete person. If we are exposed to different teachers and remain under their influence, we naturally may be overlaid with their own individual errors. Indeed this is a very grave dilemma, for if we are encouraged to find teachers and act in accordance with their teachings, what shall we do when their teaching is erroneous? Now that we have decided it may be wrong to think for ourselves and extol independence, and have found false teachers, there seems to be no way out.

And in 1841 Newman still believed, as was mentioned before, that there was not much difference between the Church of England and the Church of Rome; therefore, schisms were not only inexpedient, but they were also illogical. In like manner, although there were differences between St. Peter and St. Paul in the primitive Church, joining the one and rejecting the other would have merely amounted to party feelings and interests; choices superimposed on such motives can never be indicative of a true Christian spirit. Therefore the author concludes that it is not

our duty to leave our place and join them [the Church of Rome];—nothing would be gained by so unnecessary a step;—but our duty is, remaining

² *Ibid.*, 359.

where we are, to recognize in our own Church, not an establishment, not a party, not a mere Protestant denomination, but the Holy Church Catholic which the traditions of men have partially obscured,—to rid it of these traditions, to try to soften bitterness and animosity of feeling, and to repress party spirit and promote peace as much as in us lies.³

The reader of the above words may sense a certain undertone of hesitation running beneath the actual verbal formulations. I think I should repeat here what I have already written previously, namely, that Newman is trying to muster his notional inferences on what he otherwise is tacitly getting ready to give his real assent to, and to explain it away. It is still not the right moment and, as he frequently admits, to say more than one feels is a sure sign of unreality, and he shuns being unreal. Hence, the author of *Apologia* does not find sufficient reasons for his private judgment, concluding:

We may believe that our own Church has certain imperfections; the Church of Rome certain corruptions: such a belief has no tendency to lead us to any determinate judgment as to which of the two on the whole is the better, or to induce or warrant us to leave the one communion for the other.⁴

It seems clear that his conclusion here can be read as follows: a mere private judgment is helpless in making someone realize and act according to the truth they have recognized; a mere calculation of pros and cons will not give a satisfactory conclusion. Intellectual cognition is not coequal to a real comprehension which leads to respective action. Such dilemmas, as is typical of him, provide room for a display of his literary talent and rhetorical pursuits, writing “that it must soil our fingers to touch any other Church whatever upon the earth, in north, east, or south.”⁵ There is yet one more argument that can be used in favour of the Church of Rome and against the Church of England, namely that the latter is in “the arms of the State,” while the former is Catholic. Newman reduces the charge against the Churches into two objects: the Church of England is called schismatical and the Church of Rome idolatrous, the charges traditionally levelled against the two Churches in his times. His implication is, as Gilley notes, “that Rome and England were equally Churches,

3 *Ibid.*, 361.

4 *Ibid.*, 363.

5 *Ibid.*

though equally defective; and if Rome had corrupted the ancient Church, the Church of England now fell short of a full Catholicism.”⁶

Now meandering between the dangerous rocks of schism and idolatry the question arose: where is the truth? Which community was true? Indeed, Newman found it difficult to decide on the basis of concurring and converging probabilities. Yet, buttressed by his historical studies and unprejudiced studies, he succeeded in this personal task.

6 S. Gilley, *Newman and his Age*, 185.