

Newman and the Hermeneutic of Continuity/ Newman, Councils, and
Vatican II
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Newman has often been called 'the Father of the Second Vatican Council'. And it is undoubtedly true that he anticipated a number of the Council's teachings. It is also true that he offers salutary corrections of misinterpretations of these conciliar texts, that is, specifically of the exaggerations of those who wish to see the Council as a revolutionary event in disruption rather than continuity with the past, whether it is those who prefer to speak of 'the spirit of Vatican II' rather than of the actual Council documents or those who reject the Council as heretical or quasi-heretical.

There are six, six of the seven most important, conciliar documents which Newman anticipated and to which I would draw special attention. But first, let me say something about the other most important document, the first to be promulgated and the one which had far and away the most repercussions, the Constitution on the Liturgy. This, as is well known, stressed that the Eucharist is 'the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed' and 'the fount from which all her power flows' (# 10). But it did not in any way seek to diminish either prayer before the reserved Sacrament in the tabernacle or Eucharistic adoration – nor, for that matter, traditional devotions like the rosary. It simply wanted to emphasise the centrality of the Eucharist. And yet, notoriously, after the Council the prominence of the tabernacle was downplayed, Eucharistic adoration discouraged or even forbidden, and Marian and other devotions rejected out of hand. Nothing would have more horrified Newman, who wrote, after his conversion to Rome and his discovery that the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in every Catholic church, of 'the Great Presence, which makes a Catholic Church different from every other place in the world'.¹ Those words are taken from his first novel, *Loss and Gain* (1848), which ends with the hero kneeling before the tabernacle, having attended Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, his first service in a Catholic church. It was the same Newman, however, who ends his second novel, *Callista* (1856), with a pre-Tridentine Mass of the third century, having described the Mass in his previous novel as 'the greatest action that can be on earth'.²

It is the same kind of balance that characterizes all Newman's anticipations of the Council. Thus, for example, as an early supporter of the importance of Christian reunion and an opponent of the kind of intolerant bigotry that was commonplace before the Council, he anticipated the Decree on Ecumenism. However, he would have been very sceptical of the widespread sanguine expectation after the Council of the reunion of Canterbury and Rome: to make, he wrote privately, the 'actual, visible, tangible body' of the Church of England 'Catholic, would be simply to make a

¹ *Loss and Gain*, 427. All references to Newman's works are to the Longmans, Green collected edition.

² *Ibid*, p. 328.

new creature – it would be to turn a panther into a hind.’³ He was, then, ecumenical in the best sense but he was also realistic and perhaps knew more about the inroads that liberal Protestant theology had made in the Churches of the Reformation than those who formulated the Decree on Ecumenism.

In his first book, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (1833), Newman not only echoed Clement of Alexandria in speaking of the ‘Dispensation of Paganism’,⁴ but also raised ‘a possibility which ‘Vatican II [in its Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions] never considered, namely, that the mediation of the Church might not be essential for the salvation of every man and woman’,⁵ even going so far as to say years later that ‘it does not follow, because there is no Church but one, which has the Evangelical gifts and privileges to bestow, that therefore no one can be saved without the intervention of that one Church’.⁶ However, radical as Newman was, he never embraced the kind of pluralist theology by which many Catholics were tempted after the Council. In his *Grammar of Assent* he insisted that ‘All the providences of God centre’ in Christ.⁷ As he had declared in an Anglican sermon, Christ’s ‘Death upon the Cross is the sole Meritorious Cause, the sole Source of spiritual blessing to out guilty race’.⁸

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation emphasises that God reveals his own self in Christ rather than truths about himself: Christ, it declares, ‘is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation’ (# 2). This understanding of revelation as primarily personal rather than propositional is also that of Newman: ‘What Catholics, what Church doctors, as well as Apostles, have ever lived on, is not any number of theological canons or decrees, but ... the Christ Himself, as He is represented in concrete existence in the Gospels.’⁹ But, whereas there was a tendency after the Council to downplay dogmatic propositions, as was illustrated most disastrously in education and catechetics, Newman himself was in no doubt that the self-revealing of God necessarily involves propositional revelation: ‘Why should God speak, unless He meant to say something? Why should He say it, unless He meant us to hear?’ If there has been a revelation, then ‘there must be some essential doctrine proposed by it to our faith’: ‘Religion cannot but be dogmatic; it ever has been.’¹⁰ After all, the Christian revelation ‘is no mere philosophy thrown upon the world at large, no mere quality of mind

³ *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. Charles Stephen Dessain *et al.* (Edinburgh : Nelson, 1961-1972 ; Oxford : Clarendon/Oxford University Press, 1973-2008), xxii.170. Hereafter abbreviated to *LD*.

⁴ *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, 81.

⁵ Terrence Merrigan, ‘The Anthropology of Conversion: Newman and the Contemporary Theology of Religions’, in Ian Ker, ed., *Newman and Conversion* (Edinburgh T&T Clark, 1997), 131.

⁶ *Difficulties of Anglicans* ii. 335.

⁷ *Grammar of Assent*, 57.

⁸ *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, ii. 304. For these points, I am indebted to Merrigan, ‘The Anthropology of Conversion: Newman and the Contemporary Theology of Religions’, 130-1.

⁹ *Discussions and Arguments*, 388.

¹⁰ *Discussions and Arguments*, 130-1, 134.

and thought, no mere beautiful and deep sentiment or subjective opinion, but a substantive message from above'.¹¹

The Declaration on Religious Liberty, it is surprising for us today to recall, was at the time the most controversial of the Council's documents, raising as it did very clearly the whole thorny question of doctrinal development. The late Archbishop Lefebvre voted against it on the ground that it represented a complete departure from the constant teaching of the Church. Five years ago I hope I showed in a paper delivered at a conference to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the Declaration that in fact it passed all seven of the 'tests' or 'notes' that Newman offered in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) to distinguish changes that are developments from changes that are corruptions.¹² The old teaching had to be changed because the Church was no longer operating within a Christian Europe in which religion provided the moral and cultural framework and where an attack upon the established religion was seen as a civil offence. Papal condemnations of religious freedom in the nineteenth century should also be seen against the anti-clerical claim that freedom of conscience meant that religion was a purely private matter in a secular society that had no connection with religion. There had to be a development of the teaching in a vastly different society so that the essential teaching that Catholicism is the true religion should remain the same, intact but unadulterated by factors relevant to a very different political and social context. Newman himself was well aware that a change was already necessary in his own time: 'I am not at all sure that it would not be better for the Catholic religion every where, if it had no very different status from that which it has in England. ... I think Italy will be more religious ... when the Church has to fight for its supremacy, than when that supremacy depends on the provisions of courts, and police, and territorial claims.'¹³

There is little doubt, I think, that the conciliar document with which Newman would have been least comfortable is the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. He would have been suspicious of the sixties optimism it reflects. And he would have been alarmed by that notorious phrase 'the autonomy of earthly affairs' (# 36) - even though the article in which it occurs concludes by hastily denying that 'material being does not depend on God'. The chances of that phrase being taken out of context - and particularly if detached from the earlier text so beloved of Pope John Paul II, 'it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear' (# 22) - would have struck Newman, and he would not have been surprised by the emergence of the notion that justice and peace practically constitute the gospel of Christ. For Newman it was intolerable to identify the 'vision of Christ's Kingdom with ... mere human civilisation', which is 'a second-rate perfection of nature, being what it is, and

¹¹ *Discussions and Arguments*, 130-1, 134, 296, 388.

¹² Ian Ker, 'Is *Dignitatis Humanae* a Case of Authentic Doctrinal Development?' *Logos*, 11:2, Spring 2008, pp.149-157.

¹³ Cit. Ker, *Newman: A Biography*, 538-9.

remaining what it is, without any supernatural principle', particularly when the means employed to achieve this civilisation are based on 'unchristian principles'.¹⁴ That said, however, Newman certainly anticipated the document in wanting the Church to engage with the modern world and abandon the siege mentality of Pio Nono. He held the highly unfashionable and unpopular view that the temporal power of the papacy was inimical to the Church's interests, and, as we have already seen, he thought that the establishment of Catholicism as the state religion had become counter-productive and that it was inconsistent for Catholics to enjoy religious freedom in England while Protestants were denied the same freedom in Italy.

I have left to the last the conciliar document which is surely the most important of all and which has a special relevance to the second part of this lecture - *Lumen Gentium* or the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Since Vatican II was a council that was almost totally concerned with the Church, the document in which the Council examines the very nature of the Church itself must surely be the most important. Now it is of course only too well known that Newman was a lonely pioneer of the laity in the highly clerical Church of the nineteenth century, the author of what is held to be the classic text on the laity, his article 'On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine'. And there is no doubt that he would have welcomed the chapter on the laity in the Constitution. The other chapter that attracted most attention at the time of and after the Council was the chapter on the bishops. And Newman would certainly have seen this chapter as a necessary addition to and in that sense modification of the definition of papal infallibility at Vatican I, which had intended to produce a larger teaching about the Church, an intention that was frustrated by the indefinite suspension of the Council. To adapt his words about Pope St. Leo and the Council of Chalcedon, this chapter on the 'apostolic college' (# 22), 'without of course touching the definition' of the previous Council, 'trimmed the balance of doctrine by completing it.'¹⁵

However, there are two other chapters, which have been comparatively ignored in comparison with the chapters on the laity and bishops, but which constitute the Council's fundamental understanding of the nature of the Church and which were anticipated by Newman. I refer, of course, to the first two chapters, 'The Mystery of the Church' and 'The People of God', which define in thoroughly patristic terms the Council's definition of what Newman would have called 'the idea of the Church'. Here we find that same idea of the Church as Newman had discovered for himself as an Anglican from his reading of the Greek Fathers, who saw the Church as primarily the communion of those who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, the Church being therefore in Newman's words the Holy Spirit's 'especial dwelling-place', the Spirit having come 'to make us one in Him who had died and was alive, that is, to form the Church', 'the one mystical body of Christ ... quickened by the Spirit', and 'one' by virtue of the

¹⁴ *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, i. 315; *Historical Sketches*, i. 166.

¹⁵ *Difficulties of Anglicans*, ii. 312.

Spirit 'giving it life'.¹⁶ Or, as *Lumen Gentium* puts it, 'The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful as in a temple' (# 4), the people of God who 'are reborn ... from water and the Holy Spirit', a 'messianic people' in whom the Spirit 'dwells as in a temple' (# 9). The two consequences of neglecting these two fundamental chapters and exaggerating the significance of the chapters on the bishops and the laity would, I suspect, have easily been predicted by Newman: namely, an excessively Gallican emphasis on so-called 'collegiality', an emphasis that ignores the fact that the Church is papal as well as episcopal, and a preoccupation with the laity which has led to what I call 'laicism', which has often taken the place of the old clericalism. In fact, a closer look at 'On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine' shows that, while certainly Newman does speak of the 'laity' in the essay, the evidence he marshals from the time of the Arian heresy of the fourth century reveals that when he speaks of 'the fidelity of the laity' the laity apparently include 'holy virgins' and monks.¹⁷ Even more remarkably, a note Newman added in the appendix to the third edition of *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, when he republished it in 1871 in the collected uniform edition of his works, containing part of the original article, includes some amendments and additions, among which appears this extraordinary sentence: 'And again, in speaking of the laity, I speak inclusively of their parish-priests (so to call them), at least in many places ...'¹⁸ In other words, Newman in practice means by 'the faithful' not simply the laity but what *Lumen Gentium* calls 'the whole body of the faithful' (# 12), that is to say, he has the same conception of the Church as the organic communion of the baptised and not primarily as consisting of clergy and laity, an understanding that leads inexorably either to clericalism or to what I have called 'laicism'.

Before, during, and after the First Vatican Council, Newman adumbrated what I think we can call a mini-theology of Councils of the Church, which has much relevance for our own post-conciliar time. The first point to be made is that Newman was in no doubt that Councils had 'ever been times of great *trial*': history showed that they had 'generally two characteristics - a great deal of violence and intrigue on the part of the actors in them, and a great resistance to their definitions on the part of portions of Christendom'.¹⁹ Then there was the effect of a definition like that of papal infallibility: although in theory it might say very little, less than what the Ultramontanes had pressed for, the reality was that, 'considered in its effects both upon the Pope's mind and that of his people, and in the power of which it puts him in practical possession, it is nothing else than shooting Niagara.' The more general point here is that Councils have unintended consequences, larger consequences than the actual conciliar texts might seem to warrant; the more specific point is that a conciliar teaching cannot be taken in isolation out

¹⁶ *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, iii.224, 270; iv. 170-1, 174; v. 41.

¹⁷ *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, ed. John Coulson (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1961), 86, 88-90.

¹⁸ *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, 445.

¹⁹ *LD* xxvi. 281.

of context, or rather in this case lack of context, since the 'definition was taken out of its order - it would have come to us very differently, if those preliminaries about the Church's power had first been passed, which ... were intended'.²⁰ And Newman hoped that, if the suspended Council were able to reassemble, it would 'occupy itself in other points' which would 'have the effect of qualifying ... the dogma'.²¹ What Newman is thinking of here, of course, is a more general teaching about the Church that would have provided a context for papal infallibility. But that the Church had to wait for another Council for this to happen would not have surprised Newman: his study of the early Church showed how the Church 'moved on to the perfect truth by various successive declarations, alternately in contrary directions, and thus perfecting, completing, supplying each other'. The definition of papal infallibility needed 'to be completed' - 'Let us be patient, let us have faith, and a new Pope, and a re-assembled Council may trim the boat.'²² That prophecy obviously came true with Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. But the general point about Councils needing 'to be completed' applies no less to that later Council. And Newman means here completion not by augmenting what has already been taught - which in the case of Vatican I would have meant a strengthening of the definition - but by 'declarations ... in contrary directions'. In the case of Vatican II, it would suggest not a Vatican III, as many hoped at least until quite recently, that would 'go further' than Vatican II, but rather 'declarations ... in contrary directions' to those of Vatican II, contrary not in the sense of contradictory but of different. The dogmas of the early Church, Newman observed, 'were not struck off all at once but piecemeal - one Council did one thing, another a second - and so the whole dogma was built up.' What 'looked extreme' needed to be '*explained and completed*'.²³

Although Vatican II was not for the most part a dogmatic Council, nevertheless its teachings caused considerable dissension. After Vatican I Newman had observed that the Church had had three hundred years to absorb and digest the Council of Trent, but 'now we are new born children, the birth of the Vatican Council ... We do not know what exactly we hold ...'²⁴ The unhappy fact was, Newman pointed out, that Councils 'generally acted as a lever, displacing and disordering portions of the existing theological system', leading to acrimonious controversy.²⁵ Conciliar teachings require interpretation: they hardly speak for themselves, although after Vatican II there was much talk of 'implementing' its teachings as though they were self-evident. Not only theologians have to 'settle the force' of a teaching, just as 'lawyers explain acts of Parliament', but 'the voice ... of the whole Church diffusive' has to 'make itself heard', and 'Catholic instincts and ideas'

²⁰ LD xxv.262.

²¹ LD xxv. 278.

²² LD xxv. 310.

²³ LD xxv. 330.

²⁴ LD xxvi. 59-60.

²⁵ LD xxvi. 76.

eventually 'assimilate and harmonize' a conciliar teaching.²⁶ There was what Newman called the 'active infallibility' of popes and councils, but there was also what he called 'the *passive infallibility* of the whole body of the Catholic people' in determining the force and meaning of the teachings.²⁷

Given that one of the 'disadvantages of a General Council, is that it throws individual units through the Church into confusion and sets them at variance',²⁸ Newman could hardly have been surprised by either the Old Catholic schism led by Döllinger and the extremism of the Ultramontane party in exaggerating the scope of the definition of papal infallibility. Nor would he have been surprised by the analogous if reverse situation after Vatican II when both Lefebvre and his followers and the liberals on the opposite wing united in exaggerating the revolutionary scope and meaning of the Council. However, although Newman deplored the way Döllinger appealed to history against the Council as analogous to the Protestant appeal to Scripture against the Church, he could not deny he had been provoked by the extreme Ultramontanes like Cardinal Manning who had employed extraordinary 'rhetoric' in his pastoral letter of October 1870, which gave the impression that papal infallibility was unlimited.²⁹ Similarly, he would no doubt have sympathized with the Lefebvrists to the extent that he would have deplored the aggressive extremism of Hans Küng and 'the spirit of Vatican II' party.

I want at this point to supplement these reflections on Councils and their aftermaths with a striking point that Newman makes at the beginning of his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. In the first section of the first chapter of, where he is speaking about the process of development in ideas, he points out that a living idea cannot be isolated 'from intercourse with the world around'. But he argues that this intercourse is actually necessary 'if a great idea is duly to be understood, and much more if it is to be fully exhibited'. In Newman's terminology, Christianity is just such an 'idea'. Now there is an obvious objection to the argument: namely, that the further anything moves from its origin or source, the more likely it is to lose its original character. Conceding that certainly there is always a risk of an idea being corrupted by external elements, Newman nevertheless insists that, while 'It is indeed sometimes said that the stream is clearest near the spring', this is not true of the kind of idea he is talking about.

Whatever use may fairly be made of this image, it does not apply to the history of a philosophy or belief, which on the contrary is more equable, and purer, and stronger, when its bed has become deep, and broad, and full. It necessarily rises out of an existing state of things, and for a time savours of the soil. Its vital element needs disengaging from what is foreign and temporary ...³⁰

²⁶ LD xxv. 71, 284.

²⁷ Ld xxvii. 338.

²⁸ LD xxvii. 240.

²⁹ LD xxvii. 383; xxv. 230.

³⁰ *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 39-40.

In other words, the philosophy or belief becomes more rather than less its true self as it changes or develops in time. And it is ironic that the famous words which appear in the conclusion to this section are regularly quoted out of context to mean the opposite of what Newman intended: 'In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.' The point is not that Catholicism has to change or develop in order to be different but in order to be the *same*, as the preceding sentence makes clear; 'It changes with them [that is, external circumstances] in order to remain the same.'³¹

Now if Newman is correct in what he says about an 'idea' such as 'a philosophy or belief' becoming 'more equable, and purer, and stronger' as it develops, then the teachings of Vatican II will become 'more equable, and purer, and stronger' as time goes on. Those who participated in the Council no doubt thought they understood perfectly well the meaning of its teachings. Both Küng and Lefebvre had no doubt in their minds about how the Council was to be understood (as a rupture with Tradition), and, ironically, like Döllinger and Manning, were in close agreement about its significance. In retrospect, we can see much better the very limited scope of the definition of papal infallibility and appreciate the accuracy of Newman's interpretation. But for both Döllinger and Manning the definition signified far more than Catholic theology has since understood it to mean – an understanding which received the Church's formal endorsement at Vatican II. In the case of the latter Council, it similarly suited both Küng and Lefebvre to exaggerate the revolutionary nature of the Council, even though the so-called revolution aroused in them very different feelings. If it is appropriate to call Newman 'the father of Vatican II', then it is not unreasonable to apply the mini-theology of Councils which he adumbrated at the time of Vatican I, together with his theology of development, to the question of the reception and interpretation of Vatican II, as well as to likely future developments. As Nicholas Lash puts it, while before the Second Vatican Council Newman was 'still an occasionally suspect stranger, an outsider to the neo-scholastic world' of Catholic theology, after the Council he became 'its godfather and our guide into the strange territory that now lay before us'.³²

If we may take Newman as our guide, then, we may legitimately use that passage in the *Essay on Development* to argue that those who participated in or lived through the Second Vatican Council are less likely to understand the true meaning and significance of the Council's teachings than posterity. The 'idea' of Vatican II will, if Newman is correct, grow 'more equable, and purer, and stronger' as the 'stream' moves away from the 'spring' and 'its bed has become deep, and broad, and full'. Far from taking place in a historical void, the Second Vatican Council met at a time of enormous upheaval in Western society, a time of optimistic euphoria but also a time of great moral and spiritual devastation. It took place in a period of revolution and

³¹ *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 40.

³² Nicholas Lash, 'Tides and Twilight: Newman since Vatican II', *Newman after a Hundred Years*, ed. Ian Ker and Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 454.

inevitably 'savoured' of the 'soil' of the 1960s, of, to use Newman's words, the 'existing state of things' of that decade. Consequently, its 'vital element needs disengaging from what is foreign and temporary'. After Vatican I Newman constantly urged worried correspondents, 'our duty is patience ...' A year after that Council he wrote in a private letter: 'Our wisdom is to ... pray that He, who before now has completed a fifth Council by a second, may do so now.'³³ Newman, of course, was praying not for another Council that would extend and strengthen the definition of papal infallibility as the Ultramontanes would doubtless have liked, but for a Council that would modify the definition by setting it in the larger perspective of a fuller teaching on the Church. In our time there has been no Vatican III that would have extended and strengthened the equivalent conciliar texts as the liberal wing of the Church would have liked, but rather the popes from Paul VI to Benedict XVI have endeavoured to set the teachings of the Council in the wider perspective of the whole history and tradition of the Church, so that the Council can be understood in continuity rather than rupture with the past.

This brings us to the second kind of development that Newman speaks of in his mini-theology of Councils. For it is not only a question of the meaning and significance of the 'idea' of Vatican II becoming more luminous as it is seen both in the light of the past and in the developing life of the Church, but there is also the consideration that Councils open up further developments because of what they *don't* say or stress. In the case of Vatican I, Newman saw that the isolated teaching on the papacy and the lack of a general teaching on the Church must open up the kind of development that would reach fruition nearly a century later in *Lumen Gentium*. The priorities similarly had to change after Vatican II, both because of unbalanced exaggerations of its teachings and because of the emergence of new problems. This change in fact began to happen very soon after the Council. After only nine years had elapsed, Pope Paul VI issued *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in 1974, in which he called for a new evangelization. Apart from the decree on the foreign missions, Vatican II was virtually silent on evangelization, which of course was to become the great theme of Pope John Paul II's pontificate.

These two kinds of development have come together in a wholly unexpected post-Vatican II phenomenon, which is vitally connected with the new evangelization, and which exemplifies both the two kinds of Newmanian development that I have been speaking of. The rise of the new ecclesial communities and movements, some of which in fact pre-date the Council, on the one hand can be said to represent a response to what the Council failed or omitted to speak about, and on the other hand to make much clearer and more luminous the first two chapters of *Lumen Gentium*, which I have argued must be the key text of the Council, by realizing in the concrete their real meaning and significance. For the whole point, one might say, about these communities and movements is precisely that they are *not lay* communities and movements, although they have been often called such, but *ecclesial* communities and movements. They are ecclesial and not lay because they

³³ LD xxv. 278.

consist not only of lay members but also of clergy, bishops, and religious or consecrated lay members. For what is so significant is that they bring together the baptised, whatever their particular status in the Church, into an organic communion. It was this organic communion that Newman portrayed in the Church of the fourth century in his article 'On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine'. And it is this same organic communion of the baptised that is the subject of the first two chapters of *Lumen Gentium*, which absolutely avoid speaking of the Church in the usual clerical/lay terms and where the terms do not even occur, the 'ministerial or hierarchical priesthood' being simply referred to in connection with the sacrament of holy orders when the seven sacraments which build up the 'common priesthood of the faithful' are listed (# 10-11).

This movement of the Spirit has been a novel and often unpopular phenomenon in a Church that had grown increasingly clericalised until the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the laity provoked a sharp reaction in favour of a laicised Church. However, the phenomenon was entirely in continuity not disruption with the Church's tradition insofar as it was simply another manifestation of the Church's charismatic as opposed to hierarchical dimension. This charismatic dimension is in fact referred to three times in the first two chapters of *Lumen Gentium*. And this rediscovery of the charismatic dimension as one of the Church's 'constitutive elements' Pope John Paul II described as one of the most important achievements of the Council.³⁴

Lumen Gentium employed the new theological term 'charism', a transliteration of the New Testament Greek word *charisma* in place of the Thomist phrase *gratia gratis data* ('grace freely given'). Naturally enough, then, Newman does not use the word. However, the idea of special graces given to individuals for the benefit of the Church was very much part of Newman's thinking both as an Anglican and as a Catholic.

The Anglican Newman well understood the immense significance of the monastic charism when the Church was no longer persecuted but had become the state religion and was in danger becoming too much of this world. The 'one great purpose answered' by monasticism, he wrote, 'was the maintenance of the Truth in times and places in which great masses of Catholics had let it slip from them.' At a time when Christians were in danger of becoming 'secular', monasteries became 'the refuge of piety and holiness'. Indeed, Newman adds, 'such provisions, in one shape or other, will always be attempted by the more serious and anxious part of the community, whenever Christianity is generally professed'. In other words, the charismatic dimension of the Church is essential for Christians wishing to practise their faith in a more committed and devout way. Where no spiritual outlet exists for more serious Christians, they will be liable to 'run into separatism', 'by way of searching for something divine and transcendental,' as in Protestant countries 'where monastic orders are unknown': 'Methodism has carried off many a man who was sincerely attached to the Established Church, merely

³⁴ *Movements in the Church: Proceedings of the World Congress of the Ecclesial Movements, Rome, 27-29 May 1998* (Vatican City: Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis, 1999), 221.

because that Church will admit nothing but what it considers “rational” and “sensible” in religion.’ The early Church, on the contrary, dealt ‘softly with the arduous and impetuous, saying, in effect - “... You wish to live above the common course of a Christian; - I can teach you to do this, yet without arrogance.”’ By contrast, Newman complains, the Church of England is guilty of ‘the tyranny of those who will not let a man do anything out of the way without stamping him with the name of fanatic’. In the early Church charism and hierarchy were in harmony and unity, with the result that ‘enthusiasm’ could flourish without getting out of control and without being suppressed. Thus St. Antony, the founder of monasticism, would be condemned as an ‘enthusiast’ in the Church of England, with the result that he ‘would be exposed to a serious temptation of becoming a fanatic’: ‘Longing for some higher rule of life ... and finding our present lines too rigidly drawn to include any character of mind that is much out of the way ... he might possibly have broken what he could not bend.’ Antony, however, benefited from a hierarchical Church which accepted his charism but gave it ‘form ... It was not vulgar, bustling, imbecile, unstable, undutiful; it was calm and composed ... full of affectionate loyalty to the Church ...’ Like *Lumen Gentium*, Newman is insistent that the charisms need the hierarchy to regulate them: ‘enthusiasm is sobered and refined by being submitted to the discipline of the Church, instead of being allowed to run wild externally to it.’³⁵

In his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Newman again wrote about monasticism, emphasising the immense significance of this charismatic movement for the history of the Church: ‘Little did the youth Antony foresee, when he set off to fight the evil one in the wilderness, what a sublime and various history he was opening, a history which had its first developments even in his own lifetime.’ Antony had simply intended to be a hermit in the desert, ‘but when others followed his example he was obliged to give them guidance’. The next stage in the development was when these hermits came together to form a community. There then followed further developments with St. Pachomius and St. Basil, until finally St. Benedict consolidated these developments, as well as introducing the vital new element of education that was to be so crucial for the Church in the dark ages when the monasteries became the repositories of learning.³⁶

Newman was well aware the charisms are not given simply for the benefit of the recipient, but are intended for the whole Church. They therefore are the Holy Spirit’s answer to the particular needs of the Church at the time. And so, while ‘St. Benedict had come as if to preserve a principle of civilization, and a refuge for learning, at a time when the old framework of society was falling, and new political creations were taking their place ... when the young intellect within them began to stir, and a change of another kind discovered itself, then appeared St. Francis and St. Dominic ...’ Finally, Newman concludes, ‘in the last era of ecclesiastical revolution’ the charism of St. Ignatius Loyola was given to the Church to meet new needs. : ‘The

³⁵ *Historical Sketches* ii. 96, 98-9, 103, 164-5.

³⁶ *Essay on Development of Christian Doctrine*, 395-7.

hermitage, the cloister ... and the friar were suited to other states of society; with the Jesuits, as well as with the religious Communities, which are their juniors,' the 'chief objects of attention' were new kinds of apostolate, such as teaching and the missions.³⁷

There are half a dozen rhetorical passages in the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* where Newman offers an impression of the early Church and asks the reader whether it is not also a likeness of the modern Roman Catholic Church. It is significant that in the first two of these passages it is the charismatic aspect which is singled out as the most characteristic feature in common. The first, in which Newman appeals to the imagination of the reader, begins with the provocative assertion: 'On the whole, all parties will agree that, of all existing systems, the present communion of Rome is the nearest approximation in fact to the Church of the Fathers, possibly though some may think it, to be nearer still to that Church on paper.' He insists: 'Did St. Athanasius or St. Ambrose come suddenly to life, it cannot be doubted what communion he would take to be his own. All surely will agree that these Fathers ... would find themselves more at home with such men as St. Bernard or St. Ignatius Loyola ... or the holy sisterhood of mercy ...' And a couple of pages later he asks whether the faith of the Roman Catholic Church is not the 'nearest approach, to say the least, to the religious sentiment, and what is called *ethos*, of the early Church, nay, to that of the Apostles and Prophets; for all will agree so far as this, that Elijah, Jeremiah, the Baptist, and St Paul are in their history and mode of life ... in what is external and meets the eye ... these saintly and heroic men, I say, are more like a Dominican preacher, or a Jesuit missionary, or a Carmelite friar, more like St. Toribio, or St. Vincent Ferrer, or St. Francis Xavier, or St. Alphonsus Liguori, than to any individuals, or to any classes of men, that can be found in other communions.'³⁸

The success of the Oxford Movement raised, in Newman's view, a very serious problem: the Church of England's lack of the charismatic dimension. 'Give us monasteries,' he demanded, otherwise there would be 'continual defections to Rome'. In 1842 he himself began what was in effect a 'monastic house' at Littlemore.³⁹ But next year he decided 'to master St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*' as being 'very instructive'.⁴⁰ However, the charism of St Francis of Assisi had also already played a part in the process of Newman's conversion to Rome. In 1837 he had read with delight Manzoni's novel *I promesi sposi*; and two years later in the autumn of 1839, the time when his first serious doubts about Anglicanism as a *via media* had begun, he admitted to one of his closest friends: 'That Capuchin in the "*Promesi Sposi*" has stuck in my heart like a dart. I have never got over him.'⁴¹

After his conversion, Newman became an Oratorian. He was drawn to the charism of St. Philip Neri with his mixture of 'extreme hatred of humbug,

³⁷ Ibid, 398-9.

³⁸ Ibid, 97-8, 100.

³⁹ LD vii. 133, 264.

⁴⁰ LD ix.260.

⁴¹ LD vii.151.

playfulness, nay oddity, tender love for others, and severity'.⁴² Newman thought that the Oratorian charism was important in the Counter-Reformation for the reform of the diocesan clergy. Nevertheless, he also saw Oratorians as being in some respects like the early monks, who also did not take vows. For he thought the charism of St. Philip was boldly to go back to primitive Christianity in its 'plainness and simplicity', not least in the informal 'exercises', consisting of singing, prayer, readings, talks, and discussion, in which, extraordinarily for the time, laymen participated.⁴³ Newman liked to contrast Philip's charism with the very different charism of St. Ignatius Loyola, whose followers was disciplined soldiers as compared with the more individualistic, easy-going Oratorians.

Naturally, Newman had no illusion about which of the two charisms had been more important for the Church: in terms of influence and numbers there was no comparison between the Society of Jesus and the Oratory of St. Philip Neri. In a sermon of 1850, 'The Mission of St. Philip' he called Saints Benedict, Dominic, and Ignatius 'the three venerable Patriarchs, whose Orders divide between them the extent of Christian history'. Certainly Philip was a minor charismatic figure compared with these giants, but nevertheless Newman points out that he 'came under the teaching of all three successively'. Although he did not have the term 'charism' in his theological vocabulary and although he lived at a time when the hierarchical dimension was exaggerated, Newman never underestimated the significance of the charismatic dimension. For these 'masters in the spiritual Israel' had, 'in an especial way, ... had committed to them the office of a public ministry in the affairs of the Church one after another, and ... are, in some sense, her nursing fathers.'" From his youth in Florence at San Marco Philip imbibed the spirit of Dominic, whose vocation was 'to form the whole matter of human knowledge into one harmonious system, to secure the alliance between religion and philosophy, and to train men to the use of the gifts of nature in the sunlight of divine grace and revealed truth'. Such a Christian humanism was crucial in the age of the renaissance, when 'a violent effort was in progress ... to break up this sublime unity, and to set human genius, the philosopher and the poet, the artist and the musician, in opposition to religion'. Leaving Florence, Philip came to live near Monte Cassino, where in turn he imbibed the simpler Benedictine spirit; 'and, as from St. Dominic he gained the end he was to pursue, so from St. Benedict he learned how to pursue it.' Philip's Oratory resembled the early independent monastic communities without formal vows and not organized in any order or congregation, which 'were simple in their forms of worship, and ... freely admitted laymen into their fellowship'. Finally, he met Ignatius Loyola in Rome, with whom 'in the care of souls he was one', as 'in theological traditions [he] was one with St. Dominic'. Newman sums up the influence on Philip of these three great charisms: 'As then he learned from Benedict *what to be*', and from Dominic *what to do*, so let me consider that from Ignatius he

⁴² LD xii.25.

⁴³ *Newman the Oratorian*, ed. Placid Murray, OSB (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1969), 186, 188, 203.

learned *how he was to do it*'. To these he contributed his own special charism: '[he] had the breadth of view of St. Dominic, the poetry of St. Benedict, the wisdom of St. Ignatius, and all recommended by an unassuming grace and a winning tenderness which were his own'.⁴⁴

In 1855 Newman gave a lecture entitled 'The Three Patriarchs of Christian History, St. Benedict, St. Dominic, and St. Ignatius', of which some notes survive.⁴⁵ He had had it in mind, he wrote fifteen years later, to write a book on the 'Historical contrast of Benedictines, Dominicans, and Jesuits, which I suppose I shall never finish'. In the end, he only managed to write the part on the Benedictines, which was first published in the *Atlantis*, the academic journal he founded at the Catholic University of Ireland, and then republished in the second volume of *Historical Sketches*.⁴⁶ It was a source of regret to him, he explained later, but, after what he had written on the Benedictines was criticized by a Benedictine abbot, he was nervous about trying to write about Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits. One can only regret that Newman was never able to complete this book on these three great charismatic movements in the history of the Church.

'The Mission of the Benedictine Order' was published in the *Atlantis* in 1858 and 'The Benedictine Centuries' in 1859; they were later republished in *Historical Sketches* in 1873 under the titles of 'The Mission of St. Benedict' and 'The Benedictine Schools'. Unlike the Church of the Fathers, this was not a period of history he knew well. His concern was chiefly educational, occupied as he was at the time with the Catholic University of Ireland. He thought that the history of Christian education could be divided into three periods, ancient, medieval, and modern, dominated by the names of Benedict, Dominic, and Ignatius. The monastic charism was 'a reaction from ... secular life', a 'flight from the world', it offered 'retirement and repose ... peace'. It was a 'poetical' charism, unlike the Dominican which was 'scientific' and the Ignatian which was 'practical'. It evoked the 'primitive age of the world' and 'was a sort of recognized emigration from the old world' ever since St. Antony - and Newman uses a colourful contemporary image to convey the excitement Antony's charism had aroused - had found 'gold ... and on the news of it thousands took their departure year after year for the diggings in the desert'. It was more devotional than intellectual. But the charism was poetical not because the monks were 'dreamy sentimentalists, to fall in love with melancholy winds and purling rills, and waterfalls and nodding groves; but their poetry was the poetry of hard work', since Benedict's 'object ... was ... penance'. Still, monasticism was 'romantic' in its 'adventures' and history. And the paradox was that the very monasticism which had been a retreat from a dying world became 'in no small measure [the] very life' of the 'new order'⁴⁷ So far as Newman was concerned, it was not the hierarchy but the

⁴⁴ *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, 220-1, 224-5, 228, 240.

⁴⁵ *LD* xvi.378.

⁴⁶ *LD* xxv.228.

⁴⁷ *HS* ii.366, 373, 375, 384-5, 388, 398, 400, 436, 443.

charism of one man, who was not even a priest, that saved both the Church and Christian civilization.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Newman actually anticipated the twentieth-century ecclesial movements and communities, and not only through his ecclesiology of organic communion, but also in practice. For he himself led a movement in his own time, the Oxford or Tractarian Movement, which, far from being a clerical association as some of its initiators had wanted, consisted of both clergy and laity, some of its most prominent members being lay people. Later, at the time of the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850, Newman hoped that a similar kind of movement might arise to support the Catholic cause but the clerical nature of nineteenth-century Catholicism prevented this. Furthermore, Newman's understanding of the original nature of Philip Neri's Oratory shows how like a modern ecclesial community it had been to begin with. It had begun as an entirely lay community not as a priestly order or congregation. From this original community emerged a smaller community of priests but still closely linked to the larger lay community. Together, the congregation of priests and the lay community constituted the Oratory as one organic community.

I hope that this lecture has shown how Blessed John Henry Newman, soon we hope to be canonized when he will certainly be declared a Doctor of the Church, interpreted Councils and their aftermaths in accordance with that hermeneutic of continuity that has come to be associated with the pontificate of Benedict XVI.

ⁱ HS 366, 373, 375, 384-5, 388, 398, 400, 436, 443.

Further Reading

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