

# Reflections on God's Humility According to John Henry Newman

Fr. Hermann Geissler, F.S.O.



Which is the most important mystery of the Christian faith? What distinguishes Christianity from the great religious traditions of the world? How can anyone describe the fundamental nucleus of our faith? Along with blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890), we can affirm: “The Eternal Word, the Only-begotten Son of the Father, put off his glory, and came down upon earth, to raise us to heaven. Though He was God, He became man; though He was Lord of all, He became as a servant; “though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we, through his poverty, might be rich” (2 Cor 8:9).”<sup>1</sup> These were the words uttered by Newman, shortly after his conversion, in his discourse for Catholics and other Christians titled “The Mystery of Divine Condescension.”

## 1. God's Greatness

In order to better understand the great mystery of God's coming to the earth, we must above all take into account his infinite greatness. Newman is convinced that many are not able to grasp the profound meaning of the incarnation because they do not realize in a proper way who is the one who has stripped himself of his glory to enter into this world.

First of all, we are reminded that God has created everything from nothing: “He is one; He has no rival; He has no equal; He is unlike anything else; He is sovereign; He can do what He will. He is unchangeable from first to last; He is all-perfect; He is infinite in His power and in His wisdom, or He could not have made this immense world which we see by day and by night.”<sup>2</sup> In short, God is omnipotent as we profess while reciting the Credo.

Newman then speaks of the eternity of God: “It cannot be properly said of Him, that He was, or that He will be, but that He is; He is always; always the same.”<sup>3</sup> With infinite

---

<sup>1</sup> JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *Discourses to Mixed Congregations, Discourse 14: The Mystery of Divine Condescension*, Christian Classics, Westminster, Md. 1966, 284-304, here 284.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 286-287.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

sublimity, he hovers over us. “He was from eternity ever in action, though ever at rest; ever surely in rest and peace profound and ineffable, yet with a living, present mind, self-possessed, and all-conscious, comprehending Himself and sustaining the comprehension. He rested ever, but He rested in Himself; His own resource, His own end, His own contemplation, His own blessedness.”<sup>4</sup>

This great and eternal God, in his superabundant bounty, has created a world that can reflect his glory, a world in which there are free beings, made by him, who can also separate themselves from him. However, God, who is holy and totally perfect in himself, does not depend upon his creatures in any way. Although he loves all creatures, with his grace visits all men without exception and is totally for them, they neither increase his beatitude when they save themselves nor diminish it when they are lost. He carries in his hands all his creatures, who may otherwise fall into nothingness, but the creatures cannot increase his greatness.

Meditating on the omnipotence, eternity and holiness of God, Newman exclaims in front of his audience: “Such is the great God, so all-sufficient, so all-blessed, so separate from creatures, so inscrutable, so unapproachable. Who can see Him? who can fathom Him? who can move Him? who can change Him? who can even speak of Him? He is all-holy, all-patient, all-peaceful, and all-true. He says and He does; He delays and He executes; He warns and He punishes; He punishes, He rewards, He forbears, He pardons, according to an eternal decree, without imperfection, without vacillation, without inconsistency.”<sup>5</sup>



Today, we find ourselves sometimes in the danger of ignoring the majesty, greatness and holiness of God to the extent of thinking of him in a manner much too human, of creating one’s own image of him, eliminating thus all that is mysterious, incomprehensible and terrifying. But “God is different!” (Mother Julia)<sup>6</sup> God is greater and more glorious than what we imagine.

We should not succumb, therefore, to the temptation of a god “made by us.” On the contrary, we need to open ourselves ever again to what Revelation teaches us on the true, thrice-holy God (cf. Is 6: 3). However, Newman reaffirms this point in his

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>6</sup> KATHARINA STROLZ – PETER WILLI (ed.), *She Loved the Church. Mother Julia and the Beginnings of the Spiritual Family The Work*, Family Publications, Oxford 2009, 31.

reflection when he states: “I know that He is loving towards all His works, but how am I to believe that He gives to me personally a thought, and cares for me for my own sake? I am beneath His love; He looks on me as an atom in a vast universe... It is a want in my nature to have one who can weep with me, and rejoice with me, and in a way minister to me; and this would be presumption in me, and worse, to hope to find in the Infinite and Eternal God.”<sup>7</sup>

## 2. God’s Humiliation

The profound desire of a God who, regardless of his greatness and holiness, is also nearby to weep and rejoice with us, to get close to us and to draw us to his heart, has become reality in the incarnation.

Many think, Newman affirms, “that God and man never can be one, that man cannot bear the sight and touch of his Creator, nor the Creator condescend to the feebleness of the creature.”<sup>8</sup> However, he promptly adds, “but blush and be confounded to hear, O peevish, restless hearts, that He has come down from His high throne and humbled Himself to the creature, in order that the creature might be inspired and strengthened to rise to Him.”<sup>9</sup>

By descending into this world through the incarnation in Jesus Christ, the Son of God has shown “to act as if even humility, if this dare be said, was in the number of His attributes, by taking Adam's nature upon Himself, and manifesting Himself to men and Angels in it.”<sup>10</sup> God could not have come closer to man, could not have done more and could not have shown us his love in a more fascinating way.

Newman invites us to wonder at this humility of God and to contemplate with joy Immanuel, God with us, when he writes: “Well, my brethren, your God has taken on Him your nature, and now prepare yourself to see in human flesh that glory and that beauty on which the Angels gaze. Since you are to see Emmanuel, since ‘the brilliancy of the Eternal Light and the unspotted mirror of God's majesty, and the Image of His goodness’ (Wis 7:26), is to walk the earth, since the Son of the Highest is to be born of woman, since the manifold attributes of the Infinite are to be poured out before your eyes through material channels and the operations of a human soul, since He, whose contemplation did but trouble you in nature, is coming to take you captive by a

---

<sup>7</sup> JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *Discourses to Mixed Congregations, Discourse 14: The Mystery of Divine Condescension*, Christian Classics, Westminster, Md. 1966, 294.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

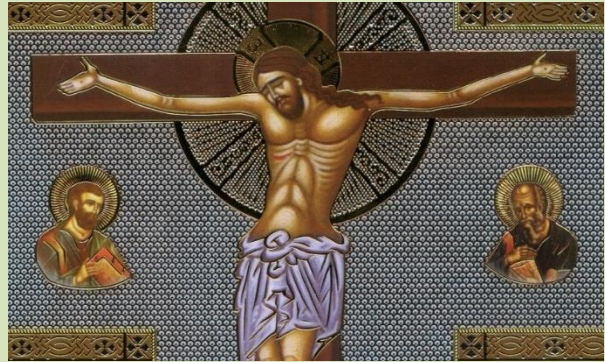
<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

manifestation, which is both intelligible to you and a pledge that He loves you one by one, raise high your expectations, for surely they cannot suffer disappointment.”<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, Newman shows again that God is different from how we often imagine him and is greater than whatever we can think of him. According to man, God should come into this world with glory and splendor. He, instead, comes in the form of the small, the weak and the suffering: “The Maker of man, the Wisdom of God, has come, not in strength, but in weakness. He has come, not to assert a claim, but to pay a debt. Instead of wealth, He has come poor; instead of honor, He has come in ignominy; instead of blessedness, He has come to suffer. He has been delivered over from His birth to pain and contempt; His delicate frame is worn down by cold and heat, by hunger and sleeplessness; His hands are rough and bruised with a mechanic's toil ... He wanders from place to place; He is the companion of sinners. He is followed by a mixed multitude, who care more for meat and drink than for His teaching, or by a city's populace which deserts Him in the day of trial.” And at the end He “is fettered, haled to and fro, buffeted, spit upon, mocked, cursed, scourged, and tortured... His clothes are torn off, and He is lifted up upon the bitter Cross, and there He hangs, a spectacle for profane, impure, and savage eyes, and a mockery for the evil spirit whom He had cast down into hell.”<sup>12</sup>

In Christ, the Son of God humbled himself until death, death on a cross (cf. Phil 2:8). The egocentric man rejects this confession of his humility, just as he rejects the holiness of God. In this regard, Newman, calling out “Oh, wayward man!”, exclaims: “discontented first that thy God is far from thee, discontented again when He has drawn near,—complaining first that He is high, complaining next that He is low!—unhumbled being, when wilt thou cease to make thyself thine own center, and learn that God is infinite in all He does, infinite when He reigns in heaven, infinite when He serves on earth, exacting our homage in the midst of his Angels, and winning homage from us in the midst of sinners?”<sup>13</sup>



When a man liberates himself from pride and begins to learn humility, he can recognize that the Crucifix inspires and arouses love: his martyred body, his head crowned with thorns, his wounded hands and his pierced heart. Emphasizing yet again the fact that

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 301-302.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

God's love for man is the source of his humility, he declares, "Thou canst not change, O Jesus; and, as Thou art still Mystery, so wast Thou always Love. I cannot comprehend Thee more than I did, before I saw Thee on the Cross; but I have gained my lesson. I have before me the proof that in spite of Thy awful nature, and the clouds and darkness which surround it, Thou canst think of me with a personal affection. Thou hast died, that I might live. 'Let us love God', says Thy Apostle, 'because He first hath loved us' (1 Jn 4:19). I can love Thee now from first to last, though from first to last I cannot understand Thee. As I adore Thee, O Lover of souls, in Thy humiliation, so will I admire Thee and embrace Thee in Thy infinite and everlasting power."<sup>14</sup> God is so great to make himself small, first as a child and, then, as crucified. Thus, he attracts us in love to his open heart and unites us to his body that is the Church.

### 3. The Mystery of the Cross

Four years before his conversion, on Palm Sunday, 9 April 1841, Newman preached on "*The Cross of Christ the Measure of the World*."<sup>15</sup> The content of this homily completes our reflections of the humility of God and explains once again the charm of the essential mystery of the Christian faith.

In this sermon, Newman starts from the fact that thinking men question themselves regarding the meaning and the right interpretation of the events of the world, of the course of history and of the events of their own lives. They search, in short, for a "key" to the understanding of the world. What is the right key, the Christian interpretation of the world? Newman answers that it is "the Crucifixion of the Son of God. It is the death of the Eternal Word of God made flesh, which is our great lesson how to think and how to speak of this world. His Cross has put its due value upon everything which we see."<sup>16</sup>

Newman applies this key in a concrete way to various dimensions of human life. He begins with the human search for power, prestige and pleasure when he states, "Go to the court of princes. See the treasure and skill of all nations brought together to honour a child of man. Observe the prostration of the many before the few. Consider the form and ceremonial, the pomp, the state, the circumstance; and the vainglory. Do you wish to know the worth of it all? look at the Cross of Christ."<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>15</sup> JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *Parochial and Plain Sermons, Vol. VI, Sermon 7. The Cross of Christ the Measure of the World*, Christian Classics, Westminster, Md. 1967, 83-93.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

The preacher, drawing attention to the jealousy, envy and selfishness in the political, economic and social world, declares: “See nation jealous of nation, trade rivalling trade, armies and fleets matched against each other. Survey the various ranks of the community, its parties and their contests, the strivings of the ambitious, the intrigues of the crafty. What is the end of all this turmoil? the grave. What is the measure? the Cross.”<sup>18</sup>

Speaking, therefore, of pride, haughtiness, the intellect, and science, Newman affirms, “Consider the wonderful discoveries which the human mind is making, the variety of arts to which its discoveries give rise, the all but miracles by which it shows its power; and next, the pride and confidence of reason, and the absorbing devotion of thought to transitory objects, which is the consequence. Would you form a right judgment of all this? look at the Cross.”<sup>19</sup>

Newman tries to understand the desperate world of poverty and misery in the light of the cross, when he says, “Look at poverty and destitution, look at oppression and captivity; go where food is scanty, and lodging unhealthy. Consider pain and suffering, diseases long or violent, all that is frightful and revolting. Would you know how to rate all these? Gaze upon the Cross.”<sup>20</sup>

The subtitle of this sermon is from St. John, “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all people to myself” (Jn 12:32). Basing himself on this saying, Newman is convinced that in the cross everything and everyone meet each other: “Thus in the Cross, and Him who hung upon it, all things meet; all things subserve it, all things need it. It is their center and their interpretation. For He was lifted up upon it, that He might draw all men and all things unto Him.”<sup>21</sup>



However, this key of interpretation is not accessible to all. The world appears to be more attractive than austere Christian principles. Men think that they are created to enjoy the things of the world. The doctrine of the cross seems to render incompatible the two elements of a system that seem instead made for each other, distancing the fruit from him who is destined to eat it, and the joy from him who instead should enjoy it.

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Newman responds to this objection by referring to the temptation in paradise. Seduced by the demon, Eve realized that the fruit of the forbidden tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eyes (cf. Gen 3:6). She ate the fruit and gave it to Adam. “Well, then, is it wonderful that we too, the descendants of the first pair, should still be in a world where there is a forbidden fruit, and that our trials should lie in being within reach of it, and our happiness in abstaining from it?”<sup>22</sup>

The Oxford theologian adds that it is superficial to hold that life in this world is made for pleasure. One who does not remain at the mere appearance of things and events looks profoundly and soon sees the prevalent reality of misery, suffering, sadness, and sin. “Therefore the doctrine of the Cross of Christ does but anticipate for us our experience of the world. It is true, it bids us grieve for our sins in the midst of all that smiles and glitters around us; but if we will not heed it, we shall at length be forced to grieve for them from undergoing their fearful punishment.”<sup>23</sup>

We can admit that the doctrine on the cross does not appear evident to the world. “The doctrine of the Cross is not on the surface of the world. The surface of things is bright only, and the Cross is sorrowful; it is a hidden doctrine; it lies under a veil; it at first sight startles us, and we are tempted to revolt from it. Like St. Peter, we cry out, ‘Be it far from Thee, Lord; this shall not be unto Thee’ (Mt 16:22). And yet it is a true doctrine; for truth is not on the surface of things, but in the depths.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, true Christians do not tell everyone their secret, but live “in faith, faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). In addition, Christian fasting, for example, should be hidden in such a way that the other does not notice (Mt 6:17). In a similar way, the truth of the crucified Lord is, according to St. Paul, a mystery of the hidden “wisdom” of God (1 Cor 2:7), hidden from the world and hidden in the soul of the believer.

For these reasons, Newman calls the sublime doctrine of the cross “the heart of religion” and explains: “The heart may be considered as the seat of life; it is the principle of motion, heat, and activity; from it the blood goes to and fro to the extreme parts of the body. It sustains the man in his powers and faculties; it enables the brain to think; and when it is touched, man dies. And in like manner the sacred doctrine of Christ's Atoning Sacrifice is the vital principle on which the Christian lives, and without which Christianity is not. Without it no other doctrine is held profitably; to believe in Christ's divinity, or in His manhood, or in the Holy Trinity, or in a judgment to come, or in the

---

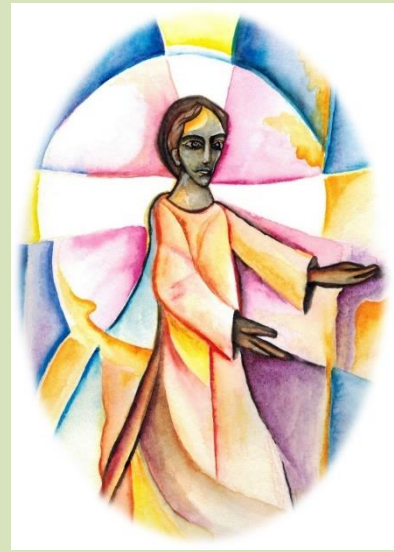
<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

resurrection of the dead, is an untrue belief, not Christian faith, unless we receive also the doctrine of Christ's sacrifice."<sup>25</sup>

Finally, Newman highlights the fact that Christianity is not a sad religion. It is true that the Christian faith prevents us from becoming superficial and losing ourselves in passing and vain enjoyments. The cross of Christ appears painful at first sight, but slowly, and also through suffering, it brings peace and consolation. The cross thus opens the way towards the resurrection, joy, and the paschal victory. Newman, therefore, affirms that we must neither trust the world nor take it as our starting point. Instead, he advises, "Let us begin with faith; let us begin with Christ; let us begin with His Cross and the humiliation to which it leads. Let us first be drawn to Him who is lifted up, that so He may, with Himself, freely give us all things. Let us 'seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness', and then all those things of this world 'will be added to us' (Mt 6:33). They alone are able truly to enjoy this world, who begin with the world unseen. They alone enjoy it, who have first abstained from it. They alone can truly feast, who have first fasted; they alone are able to use the world, who have learned not to abuse it; they alone inherit it, who take it as a shadow of the world to come, and who for that world to come relinquish it."<sup>26</sup>



## Conclusion

How does the humility of God reveal itself? In the spirit of Newman, we may profess that it is shown in the fact that the Omnipotent has become impotent, the Eternal has become the temporal, and the great God has become a small and crucified man. It is through his condescension resulting from his love for us that he draws us to himself, receives us as his children and gathers us in his Church. The cross is indeed the key to the understanding of our vocation in the world and the ladder to reach true and lasting happiness.

© International Centre of Newman Friends  
Via Aurelia 257, 00165 Rome  
[newman.roma@newman-friends.org](mailto:newman.roma@newman-friends.org)  
[www.newmanfriendsinternational.org](http://www.newmanfriendsinternational.org)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.