



Saint John Henry Newman: A Doctor of the Church?

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John Henry Newman was canonized by Pope Francis on 13th October 2019. Many are convinced that he would merit to be counted among the Doctors of the Church. Already in 1990 during a symposium marking the first centenary of Newman's death, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger stated: "The characteristic of the great Doctor of the Church, it seems to me, is that he teaches not only through his thought and speech but also by his life, because within him, thought and life are interpenetrated and defined. If this is so, then Newman belongs to the great teachers of the Church, because he both touches our hearts and enlightens our thinking"¹. Newman speaks to us by his example and his thoughts. In Newman, life and work are inseparably linked and intertwined.

Therefore, Newman cannot be called a representative of classical "Theology of the School Manual". He himself even wrote in some letters that he did not consider himself a real theologian, because he never sat down to write a theoretical tract e.g. on the Triune God, Christology, ecclesiology or another field of theology. Newman's theological thinking originates from concrete life and wants to contribute to understanding and facing life with faith. Therefore, his theology is not mere theory but always directed towards concrete life.

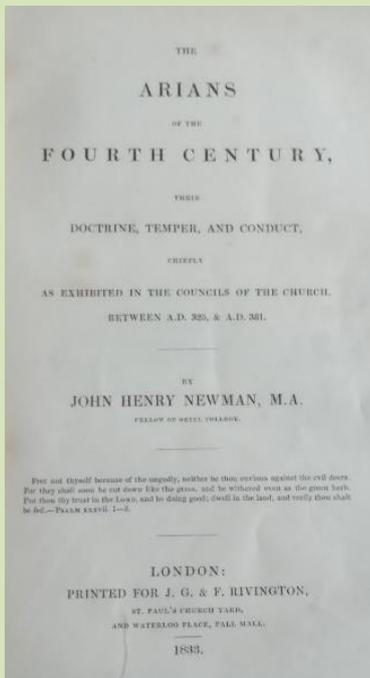
Almost all of his works were written because he found himself in a difficult situation and undertook an investigation to clarify this situation, or because others

¹ Strolz M.K./Binder M., John Henry Newman – Lover of Truth, Rom 1991, 146.

turned to him in their need and asked him for help and orientation. He himself once wrote that his writings were always the answer to a “call”.

This is obvious for the approximately 22,000 letters he wrote, which show that he was above all a spiritual father, a pastor and a counsellor of people. This is equally clear for his many sermons and lectures filling eleven thick volumes. Newman was a gifted preacher who spoke from the heart to the hearts of people and tried to lead them to the heart of the Redeemer. But even his larger systematic works are the fruit of concrete challenges, answers to a “call”. This makes Newman’s works true-to-life, interesting and relevant. In this short contribution, I wish to present briefly four of his works and point out how they relate to his journey through life, how they touch heart and mind, give courage and point upwards – into personal imitation of the Lord and service of the Church.

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The first of the larger works of Newman is entitled *The Arians of the Fourth Century*. It is little known, but of fundamental importance for Newman’s personal journey through life and in faith. Newman wrote this book in 1832 – thus aged 31, when he was professor at Oriel College in Oxford.

After a turbulent youth, at the age of 15, Newman had found to a deep personal faith in God, his Creator. “Myself and my Creator” (*Apologia pro vita sua*, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908, 4), two luminously self-evident beings, as he wrote at that time. After this “first conversion”, he studied theology, learnt parts of Scripture by heart and soon made the decision to enter the service of the Church of England. He became deacon and priest, started his work as a professor and before long became vicar of the University of Oxford.

Through some friends he became acquainted with the High Church movement of Anglicanism. And after a short time the conviction matured in him that the Church must be independent of the State, which obviously was not the case in

England. And he realized that superficiality and tepidity in faith increased everywhere. Where could he find help, light and guidance?

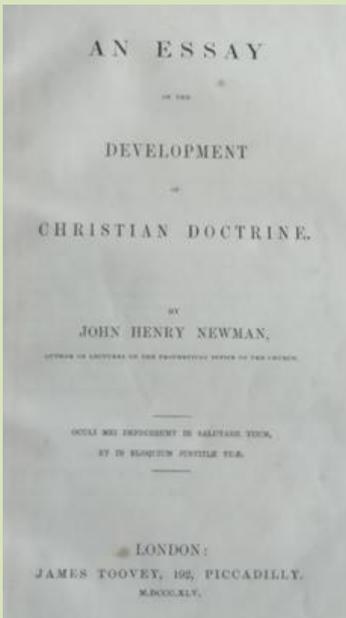
In the summer of 1828 he began to read systematically the Church Fathers. He was fascinated. He already knew the Scripture. Now the second source of faith opened up to him: tradition. He realized to what extent the Church Fathers were contested in their time, yet how courageously and firmly they held to their profession of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

He was particularly impressed by Saint Athanasius who had to fight all his life against Arianism. In his study *The Arians of the Fourth Century* he dealt with this spiritual battle. He was not concerned merely about the history of the fourth century, the Arians for whom Jesus was only a great man but not the Son of God. It also wasn't merely about Athanasius, the other confessor bishops, and the many faithful who did not waiver in their faith that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. He was concerned above all about his own time which had fallen into neo-Arianism, about his Anglican Church that to a great extent had lost its inner strength; it was about a fundamental renewal, a "second Reformation" in the spirit of the Church Fathers.

In the end it was about his own vocation to profess the faith openly – like the Fathers of the Church. The Oxford Movement which originated from there was to renew the Church of England in this spirit of the Church Fathers. It was to be a dogmatic, liturgical and ascetic reform movement to enkindle in people the fire of true faith.

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A second well-known work of Newman is *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. This book, which has become a classic in the history of theology, was written in 1845, the year of Newman's conversion. It is inseparably linked with Newman's burning question about the true Church.



The Oxford Movement intended to renew the Anglican Church in fidelity to the heritage of the Church Fathers. But it wanted to dissociate itself from the Roman Catholic Church, because the latter was regarded as “infected with heresy; we are bound to flee it as a pestilence”, as Newman wrote at the time (Tract 20). But he was aware that the Church of England needed a theologically firmer foundation. Thus he developed the theory of the “Via Media” according to which Protestants had rejected certain truths of the original faith, and Catholics had disfigured the faith of the Ancient Church through errors, whereas the Anglicans as “Via Media” had faithfully preserved the

heritage of the Fathers.

However, there was a problem with the theory of the “Via Media”. Does truth always lie in the middle? While studying the Church of the fourth century, Newman realized that this question had to be answered with “no”. Between the Arians and Rome there was a “Via Media”: the Semi-Arians. The Arians denied the divinity of Jesus. Rome taught that Jesus is true God and true man. The Semi-Arians claimed that Jesus is not equal to God, but similar to God. The truth did not lie with the Semi-Arians, but with Rome. The theory of the “Via Media” collapsed like a house of cards.

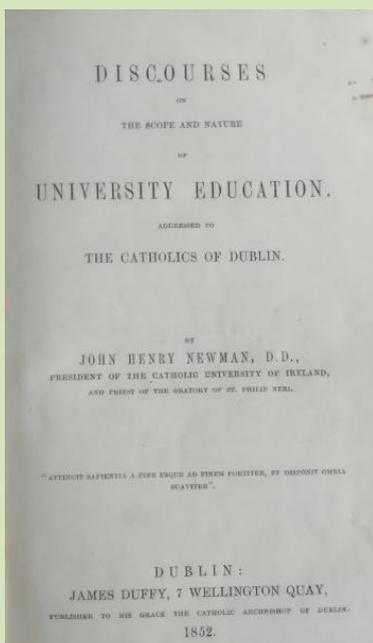
At the same time, Newman had to witness how his attempt to interpret the Anglican Creed in a Catholic way was officially condemned by the University of Oxford and rejected by the Anglican Bishops. Thus he decided to move with some friends to Littlemore, a village that belonged to the University and for which he had cared as a pastor for many years. There he wanted to find clarity about his future through prayer, fasting and study. From a letter written in January 1845 we see how much Newman struggled in his conscience with regard to his future: “The simple question is, Can I (it is personal, not whether another, but can I) be saved in the English Church? am I in safety, were I to die tonight? Is it a mortal sin in me, not joining another communion?” (Apologia, 231).

The problem for Newman was whether or not the “newer” Roman doctrines – e.g. on purgatory, the indulgence, the veneration of Our Lady and the Saints –

distorted the faith of the Church Fathers. Thus he decided to write a study on *The Development of Christian Doctrine*. In it, he looked for criteria to distinguish true development from corruption. Some of these criteria are: continuity of principles – the essential points of faith do not change; power of assimilation – faith can integrate new elements, e.g. new cultures; logical sequence – the development of faith must be coherent; chronic vigour – true development brings forth new life, corruption leads to a reduction and weakening of the faith.

The result of this investigation was decisive for his further journey through life. He reports: “As I advanced, my difficulties so cleared away that I ceased to speak of ‘the Roman Catholics’, and boldly called them Catholics. Before I got to the end, I resolved to be received, and the book remains in the state in which it was then, unfinished” (Apologia, 234). Moreover, here we also notice Newman’s single-mindedness: When in his faith-enlightened conscience he perceived something, he immediately took the appropriate steps. He obeyed the voice of conscience, he obeyed God’s call, he obeyed the truth.

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A third masterpiece from Newman’s hand is his study on *The Idea of a University*. Following his reception into the Catholic Church he moved to Rome where he studied for a few months and then was ordained a priest. He joined the Congregation of the Oratorians of Saint Philip Neri and founded the first English Oratory in Birmingham. There he engaged in a rich pastoral activity among the poor, accompanied countless persons on their faith journey, and continued his theological work. His soul had come “into port after a rough sea” (Apologia, 238).

Again and again, special requests were brought to him. In 1851 he was commissioned by the Irish bishops to found a Catholic university in Dublin and was appointed as first president. Newman was enthusiastic. He accepted the challenge with joy. He wanted to get a “Catholic Oxford” off the ground.

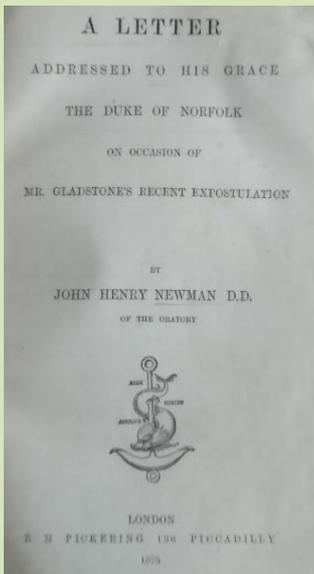
To prepare the whole project well, he held a series of lectures on the *Idea of a University* in Dublin. These lectures still belong to the best that was ever written on the subject. In them, Newman turns against one-sided specializations at the cost of general education. In his view, the goal of a University consists in forming “gentlemen”, mature personalities able to assume responsibility in Church and society.

True education according to Newman has always three fundamental dimensions: It has to do with knowledge, with virtue and with religion, whereby he always upheld freedom of religion. Today we would perhaps speak of integral education. In any case Newman turns with all his strength against the reduction to a mere transfer of specialized knowledge and also against a university dictated by the pragmatism of the economy. In his opinion, a true university must be open for all sciences, focus on education of persons as persons and grant to theology its due place at the centre.

Unfortunately, the project of this Catholic University in Dublin failed. Newman was too far ahead of his time. He did not want a merely pious training centre, but a cosmopolitan university where people would be educated for tasks in the world. Therefore, he also intended to include lay people in the teaching staff. This was, however, not common for a Catholic university at that time and led to tensions with the people in charge in Ireland. And ultimately Newman had to realize that his endeavours had come to grief. But his basic concepts of the *Idea of a University* have been preserved for us – and continue to be intensely relevant.

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As last and fourth work I wish to mention the *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*. Newman wrote it in 1874 and summarized therein his thoughts on conscience, especially on its relationship to the Church. The occasion that prompted him to write this book was a public accusation by the Governing Prime Minister Gladstone. The latter alleged that after the proclamation of Papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1870, Catholics could no longer be loyal subjects of the State because they had to surrender their consciences to the Pope.



In answer to this massive accusation, Newman wrote a long essay which he dedicated to the Duke of Norfolk and in which he tried to clarify the relationship between the authority of conscience and the Pope's authority. He wanted to show that Catholics primarily follow their conscience – and that this is exactly why they can at the same time be loyal servants of the Church and of the State. The basic lines of his argumentation can be summarized as follows:

Catholics do not obey the Pope because someone forces them to do so, but because of the free decision of their conscience, for they are convinced that the Lord guides the

Church through the Pope – and the bishops in union with him – and preserves it in the truth. Thus Newman can write: “Did the Pope speak against Conscience in the true sense of the word, he would commit a suicidal act. He would be cutting the ground from under his feet” (Letter to the Duke of Norfolk in John Henry Newman, *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, Vol. II, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900, 252).

Conscience needs to be formed and guided. Newman writes that conscience “is so delicate, so fitful, so easily puzzled, obscured, perverted, so subtle in its argumentative methods, so impressible by education, so biassed by pride and passion, so unsteady in its course”. As a consequence, it “is at once the highest of all teachers, yet the least luminous; and the Church, the Pope, the Hierarchy are, in the Divine purpose, the supply of an urgent demand” (Letter to the Duke of Norfolk, 253-254). Thus conscience retains its primacy. One is never permitted to act against conscience, for the definition of sin is exactly: acting against one's conscience. But conscience needs to be formed and directed to divine revelation which is preserved and passed on in the Church.

The authority of the Church and of the Pope is at the service of the conscience of persons and of society, but this authority is also limited. It reaches as far as revelation and the truths necessary for salvation reach. It has nothing to do with arbitrariness or worldly forms of government. The Pope is thus not infallible in matters of discipline or administration, let alone politics of the day. If everyone fulfilled their mission in obedience to the Lord, according to Newman “collisions

between the Pope's authority and the authority of conscience would be very rare". "On the other hand, in the fact that, after all, in extraordinary cases, the conscience of each individual is free, we have a safeguard and security ... that no Pope ever will be able ... to create a false conscience for his own ends" (Letter to the Duke of Norfolk, 258). The Pope is not above the truth, he is the servant of the truth that enlightens the consciences of the faithful.

In The Letter to the Duke of Norfolk, Newman concludes his remarks on conscience with the well-known toast: "If I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please,—still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards" (Letter to the Duke of Norfolk, 261). This toast means that our obedience to the Pope is not a blind obedience, but one supported by a believing conscience. The Pope's authority is not absolute and does not replace the authority of conscience. First comes in fact conscience, insofar as it directs people to what is good and true, and then the Pope who serves the good and the truth. Newman resolutely adheres to the correlation of conscience and Church. One cannot refer to his statement in order to oppose the authority of conscience to the authority of the Church or the Pope. Both authorities, the subjective and the objective one, remain interconnected: the Pope to the conscience and the conscience to the Pope, because both are at the service of the truth which ultimately is Christ himself (cf. Jn 14:6).



These simple remarks show the relevance of Newman's works, how they are interweaved with his life and how strongly they can speak to our hearts and minds. Will he soon be among the Doctors of the Church?

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