

## The identifying signs of a Christian according to a sermon by Saint John Henry Newman.

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St. John Henry Newman (1801-1890) was deeply convinced of the light and strength of faith in Jesus Christ. He recognized the impressive developments of his century, appreciated the progress in social life, and made use of the resources offered by the world. At the same time, he continually urged the faithful not to be contaminated by the spirit of the world. He reiterated that Christians are called to live "in the world", but not to be "of the world", following Jesus Christ, their Lord and Master (cf. John 17:14-16).



In a sermon given on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1843, entitled "The Apostolical Christian"<sup>1</sup>, Newman asks how the early Christians lived their specific mission in the world. Despite the awareness that the faithful of today cannot simply imitate the early Christians, the preacher invites his listeners to turn their eyes to the image of biblical Christians, in order to be inspired by their example. He cites a great number of biblical passages and highlights three characteristics which, in his opinion are as it were identifying signs that distinguish the disciples of the Lord Jesus.

The first characteristic of the biblical Christian is his orientation towards heaven:

“St. Paul says, 'our conversation is in heaven' (Phil 3:20) or, in other words, heaven is our city. We know what it is to be a citizen of this world; it is to have interests, rights, privileges, duties, connexions, in



some particular town or state; to depend upon it, to be bound to defend it; to be part of it. Now all this the Christian is in respect to heaven. Heaven is his city, earth is not."<sup>2</sup> For Christians, then, heaven has a name and a face: that of Jesus Christ. Newman can therefore state that "this is the very definition of a Christian, - one who looks for Christ;

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<sup>1</sup> John Henry Newman, *Sermons bearing on subjects of the day*. London, New York, Bombay 1902, 275-292.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

not who looks for gain, or distinction, or power, or pleasure or comfort, but who looks ‘for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.’”<sup>3</sup>

From this looking for the Lord Jesus we can infer some attitudes that are typical of the Christians of apostolic times. Among them, Newman highlights above all vigilance, mentioned by the Gospel in many passages, and the disposition of incessant prayer: "Christ was in his (the Christian's) heart, and therefore all that came from his heart, his thoughts, words, and actions, savoured of Christ."<sup>4</sup> The Christian religion, according to Newman, "begins with the conversion of the heart from earth to heaven".<sup>5</sup>

This inner orientation of Christians to heaven involves, in addition, a second characteristic, namely, detachment from the things of this world. According to the New Testament, early Christians were convinced of “the nothingness of this world and the all-importance of the other”.<sup>6</sup> Many of them therefore gave up their possessions, offered their dearest desires to the Lord, and were willing to be slandered and persecuted because of Jesus. The early Christians professed to have the love of truth in their hearts and gladly shared the fate of the Lord, drinking from His cup and partaking of His baptism.



According to Newman, from these two characteristics there follows a third distinguishing element for early Christians: "they would rejoice."<sup>7</sup> Newman describes true Christian joy with moving words: "Not only a pure heart, not only a clean hand, but, thirdly, a cheerful countenance. I say joy in all its forms, for in true joyfulness many graces are included; joyful people are loving; joyful people are forgiving; joyful people are munificent. Joy, if it be Christian joy, the refined joy of the mortified and persecuted, makes men peaceful, serene, thankful, gentle, affectionate, sweet-tempered, pleasant, hopeful; it is graceful, tender, touching, winning. All this were the Christians of the New Testament, for they had obtained what they desired. They had desired to sacrifice the kingdom of the world and all its pomps for the love of Christ, whom they had seen, whom they loved, in whom they believed, in whom they delighted".<sup>8</sup> This joy filled the hearts of the Christians of

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 281.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 282.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 286.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 286-287.

apostolical time, also and above all in the persecutions and tribulations for the faith in the Lord Jesus, as is confirmed by so many pages of the New Testament.<sup>9</sup>

Newman asks the faithful to contemplate this representation of the Apostolical Christian, “Do not shut your eyes, do not revolt from it, do not fret under it, but look at it. Bear to look at the Christianity of the Bible; bear to contemplate the idea of a Christian, traced by inspiration, without gloss, or comment, or tradition of man.”<sup>10</sup> Since times change and the discipleship of the



Lord can take a variety of forms, this image of Christians must be adjusted and updated continuously, but it remains a valid model for the faithful of all times.

Newman's sermon on the Apostolical Christian, held shortly before his conversion to the Catholic Church, provides us with a kind of Christian identity card. The heart of the faithful is rooted in Christ who invites them, according to the vocation of each one, to



detach themselves from the spirit of their times and to find true joy in their closeness to Him. "Rejoice in the Lord, always," St. Paul writes to the Philippians, "I repeat again, rejoice. Let all know your affability. The Lord is near" (Phil 4:4ff.). If Christians remain faithful to this identity, they can be apostolical and flavour the world also today with the "salt" of the Gospel.

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<sup>9</sup>Newman presents the life of the early Christians under an idealizing point of view, but his basic statements, taken from the Holy Scriptures, are valid also in the age of historical-critical research.

<sup>10</sup>John Henry Newman, *Sermons bearing on subjects of the day*, 289.