



## The Virtue of Hope in Christian life:

### Reflections Based on John Henry Newman's Discourses to Mixed Congregations

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Christians are called to have an answer ready for anyone who asks the reason for the hope that they have (cfr. 1 Pt 3:15). Blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890) can serve as both helper and counsellor in this task of ours. After his conversion to the Catholic Church (1845), priestly ordination and his foundation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri in England, in 1849 the famous English theologian gave a number of discourses addressed to Catholics and other Christians<sup>1</sup> whose object was to offer them a fundamental perspective on the great hope of Christian life. These discourses even today have lost none of their freshness, relevance or power to attract. We shall, therefore, trace three fundamental lines of thought which are strictly linked to the theme of Christian hope.

#### 1. Fixing our eyes on God

In the first of these discourses, entitled *The Salvation of the Hearer and the Motive of the Preacher*, Newman attempts to immerse himself in the thoughts of the inhabitants of Birmingham, who at that time knew neither him nor his Oratorian brothers, and to respond to the questions that he imagined they might bear in their hearts: what motivates them (the members of this new community) to come here? What do they want? What are they preaching? What are they promising? (cfr. Mix 1).

Newman knows that it is no simple matter to respond to these fundamental questions. He values the progress and the means of the world, but he is wary of the spirit of the world. What does the spirit of the world seek? According to Newman it

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<sup>1</sup> John Henry Newman, *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations* (=Mix), Christian Classics, Westminster 1966.

seeks name, influence, power, wealth, station; sometimes by relieving the ills of human life such as ignorance, sickness, poverty or vice (cfr. Mix 2). A soul born into this world and educated according to its principles may learn various things, acquire good habits and form his own judgements. But already at a young age he falls easily into the temptation of adapting himself entirely to the spirit of the world and cultivating purely worldly interests. And when this person becomes an adult, he takes up a profession or a trade and plays his part in the scene of mortal life; his connections extend as he gets older; he gains a reputation and influence: the reputation and the influence of being a sensible, prudent, and shrewd man in the eyes of his peers (cfr. Mix 13). The world acknowledges and praises this person.

The problem with such a person is that he will never think either of God or eternity. But, asks Newman, “What about his soul?—about his *soul*? Ah, his soul; he had forgotten that; he had forgotten he had a soul” (Mix 13). And he has forgotten that his earthly life will come to an end and then eternity waits for him. This, according to Newman, is the history of a man for whom the Gospel has not become real, in whom the good seed has not put down roots (cfr. Mix 15-16). This is the history of a worldly man who is in grave danger of losing his true life because he tries to live



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without God and, therefore, without hope. At this point Newman reveals to his listeners the real motive for his preaching: “is it a thing to be marvelled at, that we begin to preach to such a population as this, for which Christ died, and try to convert it to Him and to His Church? ... What is so powerful an incentive to preaching as the sure belief that it is the preaching of the truth?”

What so constrains to the conversion of souls, as the consciousness that they are at present in guilt and in peril? ... we come among you as ministers of that extraordinary grace of God, which you need; we come among you because we have received a great gift from God ourselves, and wish you to be partakers of our joy; because it is written, ‘Freely ye have received, freely give’ (Mt 10:8)” (Mix 18).

John Henry Newman, who as a young man experienced the fascination of God’s reality and was guided by the kindly light of His providence, could not remain silent about the grace he had received. He had to give witness to the invisible love of God,

which in his eyes was more real than visible realities; he had to bear witness to the great hope that filled his heart. He experienced the power of the truth that Benedict XVI so marvellously expressed in the following words: “Man's great, true hope which holds firm in spite of all disappointments can only be God—God who has loved us and who continues to love us ‘to the end,’ until all ‘is accomplished’ (cf. *Jn* 13:1 and 19:30). Whoever is moved by love begins to perceive what “life” really is. He begins to perceive the meaning of the word of hope that we encountered in the Baptismal Rite: from faith I await ‘eternal life’—the true life which, whole and unthreatened, in all its fullness, is simply life” (Encyclical *Spe salvi*, n. 27).

## 2. The Light of the Saints

In another discourse on *Saintliness the standard of Christian Principle*, Newman develops these ideas. As usual, he starts with the conscience, that instinct of the heart which tells “the difference between right and wrong, and is the standard by which to measure thoughts and actions” (Mix 83).

The light of conscience is given to us to guide the soul in its journey towards heaven: “to tell us our duty on every emergency, to instruct us in detail what sin is, to judge between all things which come before us, to discriminate the precious from the vile, to hinder us from being seduced by what is pleasant and agreeable, and to dissipate the sophisms of our reason” (Mix 84).

To perform this function the conscience “needs to be regulated and sustained. Left to itself, though it tells truly at first, it soon becomes wavering, ambiguous, and false; it needs good teachers and good examples to keep it up to the mark and line of duty” (Mix 83). According to Newman, the tragedy is that these necessary teachers and examples are often lacking. Even in those countries that boast of being Christian, that light which illuminates the hearts of so many people has become weak and impotent, because they have neither a clear idea of God nor of the true, the good and the beautiful.

To describe such people Newman employs a compelling image: they resemble men who live underground, “they live in pits and mines, and there they work, there they take their pleasure, and there perhaps they die.” They “never see the light of day” and although they have eyes like anyone else they cannot form a clear idea of “the sun's radiance, of the sun's warmth [...] of the beautiful arching heavens, the blue

sky, the soft clouds, and the moon and stars by night [...] of the high mountain, and the green smiling earth” (Mix 85). But because they cannot remain in the dark they make their own lights. Because of their own nature they must lift their gaze to something, and knowing nothing of God and his saints, instead they create idols of their own which become their objects of devotion (cfr. Mix 88).

One of the first among the lamps-idols adored and venerated by so many, are earthly riches. Newman writes: “Their god is mammon; I do not mean to say that all seek to be wealthy, but that all bow down before wealth. Wealth is that to which the multitude of men pay an instinctive homage” (Mix 89). Many recognize they themselves will never become rich, but still they measure happiness in terms of wealth, they consider the wealthy respectable and seek out friends amongst the wealthy, they think wealth can fix any problem.



Newman also mentions a second lamp-idol: “Wealth” he affirms “is one idol of the day, and notoriety is a second” (Mix 90). The modern means of communication have opened up new possibilities for men to seek after prestige and to make themselves appear important in the eyes of the world. “Notoriety, or, as it may be called, newspaper fame, is to the many what style and fashion, to use the language of the

world, are to those who are within or belong to the higher circles; it becomes to them a sort of idol, worshipped for its own sake” (Mix 91). Certainly not all achieve notoriety (perhaps in today’s language we would say “celebrity”), but they judge the value of a person based on his notoriety, on his public fame, on the prestige that person enjoys in the world’s eyes.

Before these idols Newman, full of pain, exclaims: “These are thy gods, O Israel! Alas! Alas! this great and noble people, born to aspire, born for reverence, behold them walking to and fro by the torchlight of the cavern, or pursuing the wildfires of the marsh, not understanding themselves, their destinies, their defilements, their needs, because they have not the glorious luminaries of heaven to see, to consult, and to admire!” (Mix 92). Wealthy and notoriety are not evil in themselves, but they become evils when they are venerated and adored. They become idols for those who live underground and do not know the true light.

What would happen, however, if men—through an intervention of God’s providence—reached the entrance of the cave and saw the light of day? “... what a change for them when they first begin to see with the eyes of the soul, with the intuition which grace gives, Jesus, the Sun of Justice; and the heaven of Angels and Archangels in which He dwells; and the bright Morning Star, which is His Blessed Mother; and the continual floods of light falling and striking against the earth, and transformed, as they fall, into an infinity of hues, which are His Saints; and the boundless sea, which is the image of His divine immensity; and then again the calm, placid Moon by night, which images His Church; and the silent stars, like good and holy men, travelling on in lonely pilgrimage to their eternal rest” (Mix 92). For those willing to escape the cave of worldly thought, marked by egocentricity and self-sufficiency, a Mount Tabor-like experience awaits as they open themselves to the true light of God. They recognize the true criteria that measure the good are not wealth, notoriety or high place, but “saintliness and all its attendants,—saintly purity, saintly poverty, heroic fortitude and patience, self-sacrifice for the sake of others, renouncement of the world, the favour of Heaven, the protection of Angels, the smile of the Blessed Virgin, the gifts of grace, the interpositions of miracle, the intercommunion of merits” (Mix 94).

People of this kind aspire to high ideals. At times they may not be able to enact the good, true and just, but they know what is true: “they know what to think and how to judge. They have a standard for their principles of conduct, and it is the image of Saints which forms it for them” (Mix 94-95). Obviously, saints do not fall ready-formed from the heavens; they know the temptations of this world, but they fight the good fight with faith, live in the grace of God and overcome evil. The saints “show to the multitude what God can do, and what man can be” (Mix 99-



100). Saints may be found in all the social classes, in every walk of life and performing all the varied tasks and functions of both the Church and the world.

Saints differ widely among themselves and often they have received very specific gifts. We may not be bound to follow the example of every saint. Nevertheless, “they are always our standard of right and good; they are raised up to be monuments and lessons, they remind us of God, they introduce us into the unseen world, they teach us what Christ loves, they track out for us the way which leads

heavenward. They are to us who see them, what wealth, notoriety, rank, and name are to the multitude of men who live in darkness,—objects of our veneration and of our homage” (Mix 102). The saints, in whom shines the light of God, are a sure point of reference for our consciences. They enable us to distinguish the just from the unjust, good from evil and the Spirit of God from the spirit of this world. Moreover, the saints urge us, with God’s help, to do what is good.



Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical on Christian hope underlined the importance of the saints. He writes: “The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They are lights of hope. Certainly, Jesus Christ is the true light, the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history. But to reach him we also need lights close by—people who shine with

his light and so guide us along our way” (n. 49). If our conscience is uncertain and we do not know how best to conduct ourselves in a particular set of circumstances, we should try to think of a holy person. If we manage to stir up in ourselves such a thought, we will almost always receive the light and the strength to take the next step on our journey of pilgrimage towards God and eternal life, that true life in the communion of the saints.

### [3. The Trust in the Church](#)

On the occasion of the opening of the Oratory in London (1849) Newman tackled the theme of the *Prospects of the Catholic Missioner* and returned to the issues already touched upon in his earlier discourses. How should missionaries undertake their apostolate, what can Christians do in a world that follows its own principles and venerates the idols or wealth, intelligence and good reputation? Are not those faithful who follow the Saints, to some extent, foreigners in this world? Newman responds to these questions with the simple affirmation that there is nothing new in the opposition between the Church and the world. From the very beginning the Church has been a wanderer upon earth and her condition has always been a perpetual warfare (cfr. Mix 241).

The whole of history shows the truth of this affirmation: St. Peter came as a wanderer to Rome, a city that venerated so many idols, and there preached faith in

the Lord Jesus; the Fathers of the Church fought against enemies both internal and external to the Church; Ignatius and his companions dedicated themselves at a time when many were convinced the end of the Church was imminent and took the faith to all the continents. Newman feels himself to be in profound communion with all these witnesses to the faith. “We are confident, zealous, and unyielding, because we are the heirs of St. Peter, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. Gregory Pope, and all other holy and faithful men, who, in their day, by word, deed, or prayer, have furthered the Catholic cause. We share in their merits and intercessions, and we speak with their voice” (Mix 244).

Newman is convinced that Christians of every time, place and environment have a great mission. They always have “a work to do” (Mix 246). The Church, in fact, can offer “a universal remedy for a universal disease. The disease is sin; all men have sinned; all men need a recovery in Christ; to all must that recovery be preached and dispensed. If then there be a preacher and dispenser of recovery, sent from God, that messenger must speak, not to one, but to all; he must be suited to all, he must have a mission to the whole race of Adam” (Mix 246).



Because the Church is not a work of man, but of God, she will not fall into ruin. Christ works in the Church—in every time and place. This is the firm trust of Catholics. “If He did His wonders in the days of old, He does His wonders now; if in former days the feeble and unworthy were made His instruments of good, so are they now. While we trust in Him, while we are true to His Church, we know that He intends to use us; how, we know not; who are to be the objects of His mercy, we know not; we know not to whom we are sent; but we know that tens of thousands cry out for us, and that of a surety we shall be sent to His chosen” (Mix 254). And Newman concludes with a very personal testimony: “I have followed His guidance, and He has not disappointed me; I have put myself into His hands, and He has given me what I sought; and as He has been with me hitherto, so may He, and His Blessed Mother, and all good Angels and Saints, be with me unto the end” (Mix 259).

Many faithful, and also many pastors, are today in danger of losing their courage because the wind prevailing against them seems so strong. They lapse often into pessimism and can begin to feel sorry for themselves. In this context Pope Francis

has spoken of the “goddess of complaining”, which helps no one and which saps our energy and joy. Sometimes we forget that in the history of the Church difficulties and trials have never been lacking. And we also forget, for all the importance of our cooperation, the Church is built up, purified and made holy by God Himself. Pope Francis writes in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, quoting his predecessor in the chair of Peter: “The Church grows not by proselytism, but by attraction” (n. 15): She grows not by purely human initiatives or ingenious pastoral strategies, but above all by the force of the Holy Spirit who attracts men and women to the heart of Jesus and His Church, inspiring in them a holy zeal for the testimony of the truth and the love of God.



Via Appia Antica, Rome

“Such a zeal”, writes Newman, “poor and feeble though it be in us, has been the very life of the Church, and the breath of her preachers and missionaries in all ages. It was a fire such as this which brought our Lord from heaven, and which He desired, which He travailed, to communicate to all around Him. ‘I am come to send fire on the earth,’ He says,

‘and what will I, but that it be kindled?’ Such, too, was the feeling of the great Apostle to whom his Lord appeared in order to impart to him this fire. ‘I send thee to the Gentiles,’ He had said to him on his conversion, ‘to open their eyes, that they may be converted from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God.’ And, accordingly, he at once began to preach to them, that they should do penance, and turn to God with worthy fruits of penance, ‘for,’ as he says, ‘the charity of Christ constrained him,’ and he was ‘made all things to all that he might save all,’ and he ‘bore all for the elect's sake, that they might obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus, with heavenly glory.’ Such, too, was the fire of zeal which burned within those preachers, to whom we English owe our Christianity. What brought them from Rome to this distant isle and to a barbarous people, amid many fears, and with much suffering, but the sovereign uncontrollable desire to save the perishing, and to knit the members and slaves of Satan into the body of Christ? This has been the secret of the propagation of the Church from the very first, and will be to the end; this is why the Church, under the grace of God, to the surprise of the world, converts the nations, and why no sect can do the like; this is why Catholic



missionaries throw themselves so generously among the fiercest savages, and risk the most cruel torments, as knowing the worth of the soul, as realising the world to come, as loving their brethren dearly, though they never saw them, as shuddering at the thought of the eternal woe, and as desiring to increase the fruit of their Lord's passion, and the triumphs of His grace” (Mix 19-20).

## Conclusion

What can strengthen true, lasting, Christian hope? Newman mentions, in first place fixing our eyes on God, who in Christ has revealed to us His true face and open his heart, which is burning with love, to us. He alone can give to our lives meaning and an openness to eternity. In second place, the light of the saints strengthens us; it raises our horizons and helps us to live, not in the cave of this world, but in the presence of God, it offers us the true criteria enabling us to judge between good and evil, the spirit of God and of the world. Finally Newman, makes reference to trust in the Church, the great family of God, which embraces heaven and earth, which for two thousand years has shown forth the power of grace, which will conquer anew and which is the universal remedy for the universal disease of sin. In the Church the path to eternal life is opened for us. The Church is, therefore, in Christ the community which believes, loves, and hopes. “Let us refuse to be robbed of hope” (Encyclical *Lumen fidei*, n. 57).

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