

Newman's Sanctity: The Recent 'Life'

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Those of us who have heard Elgar's 'Overture to the Dream of Gerontius' will not have forgotten its awesome atmosphere of religious mystery. God is calling a Christ-dedicated soul home to complete union with himself; but first there must be a pilgrimage of purification, since only holiness can abide even the veiled presence of the All-Holy.

Already at the age of fifteen Newman had turned to God, giving him the full adhesion of intellect and will; and with this offering went the generous service of an exceptional imagination, as well as a set of emotional powers justly balanced by intellectual powers equally exceptional. Here was that vital turning to God, that interior conversion, to which Meriol Trevor gives rightful prominence in the *Pillar of the Cloud*,¹ and from which the whole of Newman's subsequent spiritual development took its origin. Having grown conscious of developing intellectual powers he knew he was in danger of becoming self-centred and of losing his hold on God; but God in his mercy touched his heart and he recovered his poise. This was no mere emotional conversion as understood by some of his Evangelical contemporaries, but a dedication of intellect and will to the unstinted service of his creator, in which of necessity his emotional life would play an essential part. It was from books read at this period that he learned some of those pithy sayings that would afterwards be so often on his lips; 'Holiness before Peace' was a constant favourite.

Before going any further, I think it would be well to consider what the Church looks for in a candidate for canonization, and how she sets about looking for it. According to the present Code of Canon Law, when the cause is that of a confessor as distinct from that of a martyr the following question is to be discussed: whether in the case under consideration there is evidence of the existence of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity (towards God and neighbour) of the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, and of the sub-

¹Reviewed in this journal March 1963.

secondary virtues *in an heroic degree*. (Canon 2104.)

What does the Church understand by 'heroic'? Let Pope Benedict XV explain: 'Sanctity (heroic virtue) properly consists in simple conformity to the Divine Will expressed in an exact and constant fulfilment of the duties of one's proper state.' (AAS, 1922, p. 23.)

The operative terms here are 'exact', 'constant' and 'proper'; and I will now consider each one in turn, beginning with the last, and then attempt to estimate how far Meriol Trevor may have succeeded in showing that these qualities were characteristic of Newman's life.

It will be appreciated that the use of the term 'proper' in this definition is meant to ensure that the virtues of a Servant of God will always be considered in the concrete; and the fact that Pope Benedict was the first to introduce this more precise concept of heroic sanctity seems to imply that in earlier times a more abstract approach held the field. However this may be, it is a fact that no two individuals are ever exactly alike, either in their actual circumstances or in their reaction to them. Social and economic background, talents, education, temperament, work, obstacles, walk of life, all these vary from one individual to another; and therefore the degree of a person's holiness must always be estimated with reference to this total background.

This clarification pointed the way to a direct, historical consideration of the lives of Servants of God taken as a whole; and to facilitate this Pope Pius XI, in 1930, added to the Congregation of Rites an historical commission consisting of twenty consultors who must all be specialists in historical discipline. As a result of this more realistic approach, the testimony of witnesses is no longer to be split up, as was formerly done, under the headings of various virtues, but now must be given whole and entire, so that 'the Consultor can more easily obtain a total impression of the life of the Servant of God and of the mentality of the witness'.²

Now these are the lines on which Meriol Trevor, herself a member of the Historical Commission for Newman's cause, has written her monumental life of Newman. She could, had she so wished, have followed Wilfrid Ward's method of presentation by episode, but instead she has preferred the chronological approach, which seems more serviceable than the other in that it enables the reader to watch Newman's life unfolding from its earliest beginnings, and to look on as it develops in all its manifold variety and richness as he reacts, now to this major experience, now to that, and always—and this I would stress as being the special literary and historical merit of her work—against the most real, concrete

²*Conflict and Light* (London 1952) p. 157 footnote 1.

background of his ordinary daily life, first as Fellow of Oriel and Vicar of St Mary's, and afterwards as a priest of the Birmingham Oratory. Read Wilfrid Ward's chapter on life at the Oratory and you might imagine that all Newman's time was devoted to writing and study. True, some of it was, and at times a great deal; yet all the while there was the daily round of ordinary priestly duty; and it is Meriol Trevor, not Wilfrid Ward, who describes this with the requisite detail. While Newman was busy with the Irish University scheme, he at the same time had to deal, first with the Achilli trial, after that with domestic troubles between the two Oratories, as well as with the troublesome consequences of the mistake he made in moving Dalgairns back from London to Birmingham. Miss Trevor has had the wisdom to keep all these happenings simultaneously before our mind's eye as on a television screen, with Newman all the time meeting these crises in the midst of his daily Oratorian priestly routine. Ward deliberately chose to present Newman not as a man of action but as a man of letters, and the result was distortion; Miss Trevor, taking her stand mainly on the letters, so rich in evidence of naturalness, humour and practicality, has, with greater accuracy and in truer proportion, shown him to us precisely as a man of action all through, his various enterprises and frustrations being seen all the time against this stable background. That he was also a man of the study and of letters cannot be denied; nor that, given the encouragement he had a right to expect, his literary publications, as distinct from output, would have been more numerous; yet it must always be borne in mind that he never wrote for writing's sake but always with some practical object in view which, as a rule, was provided by others, so that even in scholarly pursuits he should be seen as a man of action. The only exception to this was the *Grammar of Assent*, which was written in response to the call of conscience.

Thus the original portrait, distorted by Ward—unconsciously, I am sure, and always with honest intentions—has been restored by Meriol Trevor; but in correcting the balance she had perforce to highlight all the features previously left in the shade or even left out. It was inevitable that less should be made of the blemishes, those faults and mistakes which the greatest saints have never been altogether without; yet they are faithfully recorded; and whatever they are, with her profound psychological insight and intimate acquaintance with the facts, she enables us to see them in due proportion and puts us on our guard against the more facile explanation, often superficial or even untrue, which up till the recent past has commonly been taken for granted.

Returning now to the definition of sanctity, of the two key terms still awaiting examination, 'constant' and 'exact', 'exact' is sufficiently clear and need not detain us; so we will pass on at once to consider what the Church understands by constancy in fulfilling the duties of one's proper state.

Of all the qualities required for heroic sanctity, constancy is without doubt the hardest to encompass. We all know that human nature, left to itself, is inconstant and subject to variations, chiefly because of clashes between conflicting passions. We can hear St Paul bemoaning his own weakness when he cries out in one of his letters 'I do not the things that I would'; and there is not one of us who could not corroborate this testimony from his own experience. A flash in the pan effort can often be managed; but when it comes to turning the exceptional into the normal, our fallen human nature cannot rise to it, seeing that even sacramental help is inadequate. To carry out perfectly and with full generosity everything that God's will asks of us day by day, without differentiating between an order and a simple invitation is, St Thomas thinks, quite beyond us unless the personal intervention of the Holy Spirit can bring this within our reach.³

Why is such a direct intervention of the Holy Spirit necessary? I think it is because we cannot hope to hit a target unless we first see it; and our target is eternal life. Now the knowledge we ordinarily have of our final end is not of a kind to bring home to us what we mean by eternal life. What do we mean? It is surely an encounter, a personal encounter, in light and love, with the three persons of the Trinity. The difficulty of course is to bring this idea home to our minds in so telling a way that it will completely dominate our lives. Meditation should help, it is true; but as there is so little here for the imagination to work on, neither the sure grasp nor the determined aim needed for perseverance would be forthcoming. And so, in a state of happy powerlessness, as St Thomas has expressed it,⁴ we can only wait upon God until he choose to come and take us by the hand and give us those injections of his Spirit without which we should be just beating the air.

Now, when the soul reaches the stage where it is moved habitually and solely by the will of God and there is no longer anything in it to the contrary, you have what St John of the Cross calls transforming union,⁵ which imparts to the soul perfect spiritual maturity or equi-

³S.T. 1^a. 2^{ae}. 68. 1 and 2.

⁴cf. *Conflict and Light* p. 162.

⁵*Ascent of Mount Carmel* I. XI, § 2.

librium; and where this is the case, you would expect also to find psychological or emotional equilibrium which would offer, as it were, a supplementary proof of holiness. Nevertheless, God does sometimes allow struggle and repugnance to remain in the sensitive or emotional part of the soul even after the state of transforming union has been reached;⁶ and it may be useful to remember this in connection with John Henry Newman.

How far has Meriol Trevor succeeded in showing that constancy, thus understood, was characteristic of Fr Newman's life? I think it no exaggeration to say that both volumes bear eloquent testimony to this quality. It is not merely that he keeps on plugging away at one enterprise after another despite frustration and failure, but that all the time he is applying himself unceasingly to the ordinary daily round, whether as Fellow and Tutor of Oriel, as Vicar of St Mary's or as Superior of the Birmingham Oratory. There may, however, be a lingering suspicion that his acutely sensitive temperament may still have been influencing his conduct now and then, to a degree sufficient to warrant the inference that his motives were not always unmingled with self-love; and if this were the case, it would be difficult to believe that he ever reached heroic sanctity.

Here is the old objection of over-sensitivity or touchiness that all must have heard; it has been familiar to me ever since I became a Catholic. The clergy used to take it for granted, and those who read Wilfrid Ward's *Life of Newman* were only too likely to be confirmed in it. I have already tried to explain why Miss Trevor's approach makes for sounder historical treatment than Ward's; and when she deals with a problem like this she takes care to let you see it in relation to the whole of his life, to the principles on which he professed to act as well as to the actions themselves, a method which cannot but earn for her the reader's gratitude. And since this objection goes to the very heart of what may be called the mystery of Newman, Meriol Trevor's pioneer effort to tackle it cannot fail to be interesting. Let us see how she does it.

First, she traces this widespread impression of touchiness to the Catholics of London, and then shows how London Catholics, including great prelates like Wiseman and Manning, and even officials in Rome like Barnabo, got this influence from Faber and the Fathers of the London Oratory. Most of the Catholics in England lived in the North and caused Newman no difficulty; any difficulties he ever had with fellow-

⁶Stanza XXVIII *Spiritual Canticle* (B).

Catholics in England, as Christopher Hollis confirms,⁷ were almost entirely with London Catholics. I was very struck by this observation as it corroborates Miss Trevor's analysis and led me to see that by thus drawing a circle round the area of anti-Newman gossip which was London, she has made it easier also to see that it must have emanated from Brompton and only from Brompton; there was nowhere else it could have come from. Faber and his brethren talked; and the inevitable result of defending their side of the dispute to people outside the family circle was to disparage Newman whose attitude they persistently ascribed to wounded feelings.

Now here we are at the source of this false tradition. No one ever doubted that Newman was a man of acute sensibilities or that he was deeply hurt by the refusal of the London house (of which, after all, he was the founder) to make it clear to the Roman Curia that Birmingham and London were to be kept distinct; it would indeed have been strange if otherwise; yet the distinction between feelings and conduct influenced by feelings is, to be sure, an elementary one; and their failure to take note of it in passing judgment on his conduct is, to my mind, consonant with their evident determination to act in complete independence of him. It looks as if the wish had been father to the thought.

Now if Newman's conduct was motivated by hurt feelings the 'touchiness' explanation must be acknowledged as true, and I think it is just here that Meriol Trevor has rendered valiant service by providing a complete and fully documented account of the whole episode which was in fact central to the rest of Newman's life as a Catholic. From this it appears that for Newman the quarrel was one of principle. There was the question of the Rule being changed: a Rule, moreover, which had been specially adapted for England by himself; and since both Oratories were so near to each other geographically, any alteration or interpretation affecting one could not but affect the other, whatever the intentions of the parties concerned.

Here was Newman's position and to this he stuck; and although he was aware of the injurious gossip, he made no attempt to justify himself for fear of disparaging Faber and his brethren. So he held his tongue and bade his community at Edgbaston do likewise. Not even later, as a Cardinal, would he take advantage of the opportunity, provided by the opening of the new church at Brompton, to explain to the Duke of Norfolk why he could not accept his invitation. Faber was long since dead; yet he felt that acceptance might even now lend colour to the

⁷*Wiseman Review*: Spring 1963.

suspicion that he had wished to act as Superior of both Oratories; and although the background to the dispute was unknown to the present duke, and Newman knew he would not understand and might think him touchy, still he refrained from explaining for fear of lowering Faber in his esteem. Sensitive? No doubt; but sensitiveness kept under the control of a reason illumined by faith, hope and love, so that it took on the hues of heroic charity. Newman's action was deliberate; and the mental agony that went with it was the price he had to pay for that rare gem of intellectual integrity which it seems to have been his vocation to bring before us, not only in his writings, but in the details of his everyday life.

The essential question, then, is this: did Newman use his temperament for God's honour and glory, loving God and his neighbour with heroic constancy; or did he allow it to lead him into sin and away from God?

Literature and Theology: A Discussion with L. C. Knights

Professor L. C. Knights, Winterstoke professor of English at Bristol University, recently gave a paper on the relation between literature and theology at a symposium held at Downside in April 1963. The paper itself, together with the other papers of the symposium, will be published in April 1964 by Darton, Longman & Todd under the title, *Theology and the University*. After the paper, Professor Knights, in a recorded discussion with two theologians, went on to develop certain ideas which are valuable and worth publishing independently. The original language of dialogue has been slightly edited to help continuity. The other paper alluded to, which in dealing with the teaching of literature to children held common ground with Professor Knights, will also appear in the published book.

THEOLOGIAN: It seemed to me, while listening to Professor Knights showing us how to look at a text of poetry, that at the back of my mind all the time I was thinking of the way in which a theologian ought to be