

A Neglected Principle of Christian Association

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by John Coulson

Suppose we had the revolution! and that an upheaval comparable to that of 1789 were once more to sweep away much of the existing Catholic fabric. How, in the light of the theology of post Vatican II, would we reconstruct our forms of Christian association?

The most obvious prophecy is that such associations would not be primarily or purely clerical in form. But they might well lead to a distinction between *the originating association*, which would be lay, and the *foundation* (or Congregation) which might become clerical, growing out of and serving the permanent needs of the association. An association would no longer be confined to a neighbourhood: it might be formed by lay-people living at a distance from each other, but united by a common aim and determination to develop a homogeneity of spirit. To form such an association would take many years, so that its character could not be pre-determined by simple manifestoes or rules: it would need time 'to work clear'.

When the usefulness of the association had been proved, and its character made manifest, then and then only would it be time to see how a foundation could be established which would function as the permanent nucleus or heart. Some members of the association might be called out to minister on this more permanent basis. If Catholic, the membership of the association might want its foundation or congregation to be priests, the better to associate the work with the bishop and, through him, the universal Church. On the assumption that 'the higher your building is the broader must be its base', a slow growth to personal maturity would be the qualification for such candidates. In the normal course of events we might expect them to read their theology in a university, and follow this by work in one of the professions of social service, before being presented by their association to the bishop for ordination to the diaconate. Here a period of systematic seminary study might be required and, by a man of mature years and experience, gratefully and profitably followed. With a character and vocation already attested to by others, the question of celibacy (for example) would cease to be at issue—there is nothing improper in having such a conception of priesthood when we no longer require too many successful candidates too quickly.

These permanent ministers would reside as a small congregation or foundation devoting themselves, in the first instance, to furthering the work of the association for whom they had been ordained. This work might be for immigrants or others requiring particular social care; but it could also be one devoted to scholarship of various kinds. Even here it might be more apostolic if such scholars were to combine their study of the wider issues with life together in a neighbourhood

of social need. They might keep a small house with rooms for students from a neighbouring place of higher education in a part of the city lived in by the dispossessed. A combination of ministry and study would produce a daily routine—the equivalent of the ‘rule’. It would be the observance together of such principles as that ‘our persons are not our own’, and that a community stays together when it is founded first upon a common faith and subsequently upon an active charity, which would constitute the spiritual discipline under which the congregation and its members lived.

In the long term such a body would have to develop, or it would acquire undesirable ‘institutional’ characteristics. Identity can only be perpetuated by change, and growth would be determined by the congregation’s context within the association, and by the developing characteristics of the association’s membership, in the manner in which a family grows and changes when its younger members grow up. They do not, however, cease to be members of the family. The old ones stay at home and remain the nest or family centre. They ask to be remembered; and by their prayers intercede for the family as a whole. Likewise with the congregation of the association: it would remain a family group ‘that can be counted’, and would not be dissipated ‘under pretext of increasing it’. A large family best preserves its identity when the initiative of its younger members to develop its characteristics is not hampered by too many uncles, cousins and aunts.

Most of what has been said so far is not, as might be supposed, a mere set of utopian variations on a Dutch note. It is taken, sometimes by direct quotation, from Newman’s addresses to the fellow members of his Birmingham Oratory. What is even more remarkable is that it is a reasonably accurate account of the development of the first Oratory founded around St Philip Neri and his friends in Rome during the half century from 1550. It was work which, on the death of its founder, was almost immediately to be transformed into the likeness of a Counter-Reformation clericalism; but it was Newman’s pioneering insight which enabled him to see the principles beneath the subsequent transformation.

Now, for the first time, Newman’s writing is brought together into a coherent philosophy of religious co-partnership;¹ and the editor, Dom Placid Murray, must be congratulated not only upon the depth of his scholarship but its impartiality. He lets Newman speak for himself. But the topical questions must obviously have suggested themselves. If, for example, a religious order desired to establish a settlement or association of the kind described in a university or industrial city, would it be able to act sufficiently informally or on a sufficiently small scale? Would it wish to seek the active co-partnership of lay men and women as a condition, or would an effort so to

¹*Newman the Oratorian. His unpublished Oratory papers*, edited with an introduction by Placid Murray, O.S.B., D.D., Monk of Glenstal. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, £4.

relate a lay association to a religious congregation be rejected as 'unconstitutional'?

These questions are implicit in what Newman wrote. He did not pose them directly. Had he done so, he would have received a very dusty answer. Instead he tried an alternative. Has this too proved unfruitful? To hope for effective co-partnership within the Church may still be premature. It may require further and much more far-reaching change (comparable in depth and extent to that which made necessary Philip's original Oratory), a change moreover which will need to be not merely cultural but ecumenical. On the other hand, how to relate the religious orders to the main body of the Church has, of course, always been a problem. What has now made it critical are radical changes in Catholic attitudes to secular society. Today, it is questionable whether any Church organization can hope to function effectively without establishing some form of working partnership with the laity—you cannot simply set aside the Constitution on the Church with its requirement that the laity should share in the offices of Christ as prophet, priest and king. But it is not simply a matter of calling into question the old division of the Church into two cultures—clerical and lay. This is of secondary importance compared with the adoption of views long held by many Protestants—that we can find ourselves as Christians only within and by means of our social, even political, commitments. In practice, this means seeking a foundation in the needs of contemporary society which is self-evidently useful. For the contemplative community it raises the question whether a new context must first be sought before the traditional vocation to prayer and contemplation can be effectively carried out in the circumstances of our time. This is no simple question of the kind, Is peace something in the country, or something within? Since, as pressure, noise and violence continue to build up, the need for space in which to pray and contemplate will increase rather than diminish. Yet there is an initial question which faces all religious orders: Does their constitutional (and clerical) form prevent them from having that 'mental dexterity in meeting the age, and the men and difficulties belonging to it'?

Again the words are Newman's; but he is interested neither in criticism nor reform. His intention is to consider the alternatives, especially that offered by what he calls a 'weaponless condition'. He believed that a religious congregation could be established upon those un-coerced relationships which characterize a good family. This, if it is to survive as it grows up, must strive for some kind of homogeneity of spirit, not by means of an imposed rule so much as by the exercise of the wise diplomacy of love: 'each must throw himself into the minds of the rest, and try to understand them, to consult for them, to take their hints, and to please them'. Tact not obedience to the rule is the mark of the family. It is informed by the patient spirit of an active charity. Such were the virtues of many of

the middle-class families of Victorian England: they were those of Newman's own; and he believed that a religious congregation could rest upon such foundations, in which this striving for mental similarity and sympathy could be a substitute for vows.

If this provokes knowing smiles, then it must be said that the father of a family who today tries to raise grown-up sons and daughters on any other basis is asking for a record crop of drop-outs. And when, as now, we are faced by the drop-outs, the hippies, the dead-beats, which Christian is likely to succeed? He whose look is imposing, his speech measured, his figure staid and upright, his eyes downcast or uplifted, his countenance abstracted beneath his high biretta, or he who sits in an easy chair in a lounging posture, one hand stretched on the table, with bright sparkling eyes and a merry countenance?

Once more it is Newman who is offering the contrast, but it is not an easy one, and this is where his analysis begins to bite. Father Before isn't turned into Father Afterwards by a thick sweater and a bottle of rum. The qualities demanded as the foundation for such a character are what Newman calls 'gentlemanlikeness', and he specifically says that he uses the term in a technical sense, to denote that enlargement of mind which is the result of a successful and liberal education. Such virtues are, he admits, not necessarily Christian—'but they are Christian *in* a Christian'. They enable a mind to be calm yet observant and versatile.

A religious congregation composed of such men would resemble a college within a university; and such is emphatically Newman's model:

'Take such a college, destroy the Head's house, annihilate wife and children and restore him to the body of the fellows, change the religion from Protestant to Catholic, and give the Head and Fellows missionary and pastoral work, and you have a congregation of St Philip before your eyes.'

But the most original and important characteristic of Newman's model is the distinction he draws between the Oratory, or association of lay people informally and irregularly constituted, and the congregation or permanent core of the Oratory. Here is a means whereby a religious order or community can be brought out of the sacristy and related to a context in secular and therefore lay community structure. By this means it can become 'a *native* body in a town'.

The importance of this book far transcends the light it throws upon such disputed questions as the reason for the divisions between the Birmingham and London Oratories—in revealing Newman as a philosopher of community, for example, it places Faber as a débutant. Newman's diagnosis of the Catholicism of the new industrial towns as 'irregular and shifting' still holds, as does his prescription for a Christian association attempting to produce a human and sociable community for the isolated persons who form the urban

industrial mass—that not only should it exercise influence rather than power, and dislike whatever savours of pomp or pretence, but that what such an association is ‘within among its own members’, such should it be ‘in the intercourse with those outside its walls’. Why, then, did Newman’s idea not take root? Is it ever likely to take root? Perhaps if the editor had told us more of later French and Italian experience, we might better be able to gauge the extent to which Newman’s hopes were reasonable but premature. Where, if at all, have the cultural conditions been achieved which would ensure sufficient numbers of suitably qualified people for the formation of an Oratory and its Congregation? Since the Renaissance, so high a degree of spiritual and intellectual integration, far from being encouraged, has usually been discouraged by Catholic institutions.

Pattison noticed that it was Newman’s misfortune to be surrounded by men who were not his intellectual equals; and it was probably inevitable that he should suffer disciples rather than colleagues. And certainly when he was away in Ireland, his community hardly behaved like college fellows, as witness their panic when a lay brother tried to kiss a lady visitor. Perhaps Newman was an intimidating person to be intimate with: human kind cannot bear all that much spiritual analysis—especially when it is deadly accurate. But even a superficial acquaintance with the limitations of college fellows will lead one to seek another answer to the questions. And if we look at Dublin and Newman’s relations with the laity who were his colleagues in the University, then what emerges is the shape of the Oratory that might have been. Perhaps the culture of the time was far too clerical for Newman himself to see such consequences; the convert so frequently allowed his instincts to be over-ridden by a deference to the authority of the Church he had joined. Yet as one reads in the *Letters* of his relationships with Pollen, Allies, Arnold and Butler one can see how close to the Philipian Oratory we are. And it certainly helps to explain Newman’s subsequent (and ill-fated) emphasis upon the laity as the essential and determining context of the Church’s mission.

His professor of Fine Arts, J. M. Pollen, writes of their association thus: ‘What a time it was! Reading, thinking, writing, working, walking with him in times of recreation over the pleasant fields, park and gardens of the Phoenix; listening to talk that was never didactic and never dull. . . . He shed cheerfulness as a sunbeam sheds light, even when many difficulties were pressing. . . . He encouraged you to put your conclusions into terms; to see what they looked like from various sides . . . but all this under the form of easy conversation.’¹

The more important question, however, is whether Newman’s *idea* can be generalized and applied to contemporary circumstances. Is his a model capable of development? What I believe to be of

¹Letter from J. H. Pollen, 13th May, 1855, in Fergal McGrath, *Newman’s University: Idea and reality*, 1951, p. 359.

continuing value is the notion of a Christian co-partnership composed of two necessary and complementary elements—the association (or in Philipian terms, the Oratory) and the foundation (or Congregation). Each needs the help of the other to fulfil its specific vocation, and in their co-partnership (or what, elsewhere, Newman calls their ‘conspiratio’), there is something which is in neither priest nor layman, in neither clerical nor secular culture: the whole is greater than its parts; and the whole is co-partnership *in Christ*. The further element of continuing value is to take the university as the model for this relationship and the college as that for the congregation. It is a model that has stood up to changes of social structure. Take the college, for example. Life fellowships have declined in favour of engagements for specific tasks and for a specific number of years. The colleges are centres of a large and discontinuous membership; but such discontinuities do not seem to diminish the sense of membership, as one might expect. This raises the larger question of to what extent a modern sense of community requires a daily life together in a common building, reinforced by life vows and a rule. The college model shows how membership can function discontinuously and be kept alive by regular visits, seasonal meetings, and the telephone, especially where it is aimed at or is based upon a homogeneity of spirit rather than mere conformity or unthinking loyalty.

A modern family could keep together on no other basis. Its children may be married and living as far apart as Australia or the United States; and it is the grand-parents who perform the focussing function of the Congregation; the children being the association (or Oratory).

There are many modern examples of a more deliberately institutional kind which exemplify this pattern. The old Residential settlements had a core of resident social workers, and a number of temporary residents who might be those in need of help or those wanting to learn about social conditions at first hand. It was in such settlements that many of the Labour leaders such as Attlee and Gaitskell lived after their time at the university. An even more interesting experiment was the Peckham Health Centre. Such settlements, often of Christian foundation, performed the function which Newman desired for the Oratory—they became ‘a sort of native body in a town’. Not that Catholic forms have been lacking. Any Catholic conference group which has existed for a length of time—the Downside symposium, Slant, the Latin Mass society—must have striven for and achieved a homogeneity of spirit under stress. Many chaplaincies, particularly Oxford, come very close to the Oratory in form and intention. And it is not so much the indifference to St Philip’s radicalism that needs to be explained as a more general lack of curiosity about institutions and the ability to be creative of them. Instead, Catholics have preferred to imitate what was already there—so, we have had Catholic secondary modern

schools, and now Catholic comprehensives—an approach radically different from that of the founders of the religious orders and of their immediate supporters. A Peter Claver or the more shadowy Peter Nolasco would not have wished to duplicate or compete with United Nations organizations or Amnesty International. Like all founders, they were pioneers, richly creative of social forms for needs which no bodies were willing or capable of fulfilling.

What are now the equivalent needs? Some are so obvious as hardly to be ignored; but this does not appear to be the case with Education. Although in this country the government accepts responsibility for providing primary and secondary education for all, even in religion, the real crisis comes in the field of higher education. Here, the threat to values is coming from the government itself in its panic proposals for dealing with the increased demand for places which it has underestimated. Here, there is no question of providing, in addition, opportunities for religious education. Universities, for example, can get money for projects likely to produce material benefits, but iron rations are all that can be expected for the arts, of which theology is unquestionably the Cinderella. But if the study of religion within the context of higher education is not pursued even more rigorously than it is at present, where else is the Church likely to grow to an appropriate theological maturity?

This is the one field where co-partnership between clergy and laity is immediately possible, largely unrestricted as it is, at present and for the time being only in this country, by vested interests. And it is in the provincial universities, in particular, that the establishment of small houses of study, even furnished flats, could have effects out of all proportion to their cost—a fraction of the money needed to establish one Catholic secondary-modern school. If there is one thing certain about the attitudes of most young Catholics it is that they are no longer content to live as foreigners in their own country; and a settlement, *on a suitably small and intimate scale*, which provided bed-sitting rooms for students and at most a couple of qualified tutors for the university would be a sign, not of a Catholic counter-society, but of a service supplementary of the community as a whole. This distinction—between providing a supplementary service and acting as a counter-society—is the one Newman noted as distinguishing what he called the Benedictine centuries from that later period when the Church ‘shrank in upon itself’. Then our failure to embody the encamped hordes of the industrial revolution into the divine society arose, in Newman’s opinion, from a lack of that essential ‘mental dexterity in meeting the age, and the men and difficulties belonging to it’. And, when it comes to buildings and institutions, such dexterity shows itself as a sense of scale and proportion.

It has been this lack of a sense of locality, of where we are in due time and place, which has prevented that effective co-partnership between laity and clergy such as Newman envisaged. Given existing

conditions, however, Newman's model of co-partnership in reconstructed (or revived) forms of association may be the only way in which, together, we can begin again to rediscover the reality of that native body—the local Church. This, like the first monasteries, 'has come down to us, not risen up among us, and is found rather than established'.

The Eucharist: Development or Deviation?—I¹

by Geoffrey Preston, O.P.

In the first of a series of lectures under the general heading, 'Theology—Development or Deviation', Fergus Kerr considered shifts in the way people are accustomed to think of the Church. He suggested that the central insights which have been recovered in recent years, though the beginnings of this recovery can be traced back well into the nineteenth century, are those of brotherhood and eschatology; and he further suggested that this was not just a recovery of a long lost insight into the mystery of the Church but had been a real experience, though under a somewhat different guise and under very different names, in the English Catholicism of the inter-war years, in the 'loud and draughty' singing at benediction in a northern city parish for example. These two notions of brotherhood and eschatology are likely to recur constantly in discussing whether in any theological area there has been development or deviation, and certainly when the eucharist is in question.

It is probably in the area of the eucharist more than in any other that Catholics tend to suspect that there has been not so much development as deviation. That, no doubt, is because there has been a not insignificant change in eucharistic worship over these last ten years, a change altogether unlooked for by most Catholics, unlooked for, unexpected, and therefore viewed with some suspicion.

It might well be best to approach this subject of changes in perspective in the theology of the eucharist from the standpoint of the way in which Catholics make eucharist, celebrate the mass. The law of prayer is the law of belief; the law of celebration is the law of faith, as St Hilary puts it. You can usually tell what people believe about the eucharist by watching them celebrate it. That is not

¹The substance of a lecture at Blackfriars, Oxford, 27th January, 1970. The lecture by Fergus Kerr, O.P., to which reference is made was delivered the previous week and subsequently published under the title 'Church: Brotherhood and Eschatology' in *New Blackfriars*, March 1970, pp. 144-154.