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+ Philip Boyce

Tokens of Holiness
in Blessed John
Henry Newman

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There has been a continuous ebb and flow of interest in Newman down through the last hundred years. During his lifetime many people silently revered him for his holy life, his undoubted sincerity and his persuasive preaching of the word of God. They also admired him for sacrificing his most treasured possessions in order to follow his own conscience and the voice of truth.

In fact, it was not simply the intellectual genius of the man nor was it his fascinating use of words that gave him the influence he wielded. It was the moral qualities of the writer himself and the persuasive power of the truth he spoke that enlightened and encouraged countless people. People felt that what he said and wrote came to them from the heart, with the force of the utter conviction with which it was delivered and that it led them to a deeper faith and a clearer conscience. Indeed, at the time of his elevation to the Cardinalate in 1879, the English speakers of Rome in a congratulatory address claimed that all English-speaking Catholics had long looked up to him “as their spiritual father and their guide in the paths of holiness.”¹

Then, following his death on the evening of Monday, 11th August 1890, there was an outburst of praise and affirmation of his holy life published in obituaries and sermons. There was scarcely a newspaper or magazine in Britain or Ireland that did not comment on the life and actions of a man whom most people had learned to respect, even though many would not have applauded all his decisions. These obituaries spoke of his saintly and unblemished life, his absolute sincerity, his humble piety and unworldly outlook. Even non-Catholic publications reported that he died in the odour of sanctity and spoke of peace for ‘a saint at rest.’

There are many indications of holiness in the life and writings of Blessed John Henry Newman. One can think of his adherence to revealed truth, his absolute submission to the will of God, his

¹ *Addresses to Cardinal Newman with his Replies. 1879-81.* London, Longmans, Green, and Co. 1905, p.72.

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obedience to conscience and truth, his love and service of the Church, his awareness of an unseen world and of a divine presence in which he lived, his trust in the designs of providence and the value he placed on the ordinary, the simple routine of the daily round, his priestly ministry, his life of prayer, and so on. They all contribute to the holiness of the man. We mention just a few.

THE PURSUIT OF HOLINESS AS SUBMISSION TO GOD'S WILL.

The idea of holiness of life as something that is an obligation for a Christian is a recurring theme in the writings of John Henry Newman. As an early teenager he toyed with the thought that ethical integrity rather than religious submission to God might suffice for Christian holiness.

The spiritual shock and awakening that resulted from his first conversion at the age of fifteen diverted him from the course of self-confident and intellectual independence. He emphasized the intellectual nature of this event of grace: "a great change of thought."² However, the effects were not simply of a purely intellectual order: they bore upon his spiritual life, changing his outlook in religious matters, intensifying his vision of faith, and creating a thirst for holiness and union with God that proved to be lasting.

From then onwards holiness was, in one form or another, a dominant theme, almost a leit-motif of his life and writings. Not that he was tormented with the specific urge to become a saint. As in the case of all who strive for a holy life, he learned that saintliness would be the outcome of self-emptying and devotedness to the cause of Christ. However, Newman did contemplate and was captured by the ideal and the challenge it offered. He strove for holiness in so far as it was submission to God's will in faith, submission to the voice of conscience and truth no matter what the price he had to pay. He saw it as a Christian duty for every baptized person, as a flowering of baptismal justification and, in his own case, as a priestly obligation. The Almighty who gave us the gift of free will is honoured most of all when we use this gift to obey and submit to him of our own accord.

It may seem strange that a man of such intellectual talent as Newman should make so much of submission as a means of arriving at the purpose and goal of life. Great minds are not easily harnessed, genius normally needs a lot of free play. Yet we find this man of unique ability spending his life in the cause of an idea of holiness that he considered to be the inescapable purpose of human life, especially of Christian life, an idea which had its precise

2 *Apologia pro Vita sua*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1908, p. 4.

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demands of submission: submission to conscience, to revealed doctrine, to a Church, to an infallible authority, to the divine will, ultimately to Truth.

If we could have Newman in our midst for a moment and question him on this point, he might well answer in the words which he once delivered to Mixed Congregations:

“If there was one among the sons of men, who might allowably have taken His pleasure, and have done His will here below, surely it was He who came down on earth from the bosom of the Father, and who was so pure and spotless in that human nature which he put on Him, that He could have no human purpose or aim inconsistent with the will of His Father. Yet, He, the Son of God, the Eternal Word, came, not to do His own will, but His who sent Him, as you know very well is told us again and again in Scripture.”³

The example of submission given by the God-Man is unexceptionable. In this light, the fulfilment of God’s will appears as the accomplishment of the mission given to us by our Creator, the completion of the work we have to do on earth. Newman was a firm believer in a peculiar mission or work given to each individual: it was a point closely linked to the idea of Providence on which he insisted so much: “every one who breathes, high and low, educated and ignorant, young and old, man and woman, has a mission, has a work. We are not sent into this world for nothing; we are not born at random ... God sees every one of us; He creates every soul, he lodges it in the body, one by one, for a purpose ... As Christ has His work, we too have ours.”⁴

In this context we gain a valuable insight into Newman’s own journey to holiness of life, and we can grasp the biographical content of some of his preaching in which his own inner struggle is portrayed. Among his first sermons as a Catholic in England we have one dedicated to the theme: “God’s Will the End of Life”.⁵ It is in retrospect an explanation and justification of the step he had taken in the venture of his conversion to Roman Catholicism. At the outset of that enterprise, shortly after fateful words of St Augustine, *Securus judicat orbis terrarum*, had pulverized the theory of the *Via Media*, Newman had written another sermon that traced in advance the course he would follow. He had entitled it: “Divine Calls.” He preached to himself at that moment as much as to his hearers: “the one thing which lies before us is to please God. ... What gain is it to be applauded, admired, courted, followed, compared with this one aim, of not being disobedient to a heavenly vision?”⁶ Similarly, his last words as an Anglican

3 *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations*, London 1909, pp. 108-109.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 104-123.

6 *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, London 1908, Vol. VIII, p. 32. Cf. pp. 17-32.

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preacher formulated the request to pray for him “that in all things he may know God’s will, and at all times he may be ready to fulfil it.”⁷ Throughout his life he continued to pray for “a most absolute and simple submission to the will of Father and Son.”

OBEDIENCE TO THE VOICE OF CONSCIENCE AND TO TRUTH.

This submission to God’s will becomes equivalent to obedience to the voice of conscience. Whatever the situation of a given person may be, however removed from the light of revealed truth he may stand, he still “has within his breast a certain commanding dictate, not a mere sentiment, not a mere opinion, or impression, or view of things but a law, an authoritative voice, bidding him do certain things and avoid others.”⁸ This inner voice is not man’s own creation: it comes from Another, from a “Sovereign Lawgiver and Judge.” He may try to distort or silence it, he may disobey it, yet that voice remains.

Conscience however is not always crystal clear in its commands. It can be influenced by human reason or by the passions of pride and self-will. At times a person may not find it easy to determine what comes from the voice of conscience and what is insinuated by selfish desires and motives. In the development of conscience, it becomes clear that a subjective conscience has not undisputed control over a person’s conduct at all times. Until one has found an objective guide that teaches with authority, it is to be followed unequivocally. Thereafter, one must take into account this external authority. It is not a matter of substituting the voice of conscience at a given moment in spiritual growth for an external law, but rather allowing the inner light of conscience to be more surely guided by Truth itself, through the mediation of a divinely-willed and objective authority.

In the matter of conscience, Newman’s fidelity was put to the test pre-eminently in the interior struggle that preceded his reception into the Catholic Church. The Fathers of the Church had been his guide. He came to realise that “were St. Athanasius and St. Ambrose now to come to Oxford, they would go to Mass in St. Clement’s” (that is, the Roman Catholic Church).⁹

The principles which Newman had followed in leading the Oxford Movement placed him before a stark choice. The whole affair became for him a question of conscience. In the early months of 1845, the call of duty and the light of conscience become dominant themes. If he did follow what conscience was dictating,

7 *Sermons bearing on Subjects of the Day*, London 1909, p. 409.

8 *Sermons preached on Various Occasions*, London 1908, p. 64

9 *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*. London, Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd, 1961, Vol. XI, p. 110.

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he had so very much to lose. But then, if he refused, he must have known he had everything to lose.

For a while Newman kept asking himself if he was being driven by his reason or by his conscience: "I cannot make out, if I am impelled by what seems clear, or by a sense of duty." But soon the inner conviction prevailed that he was being called to join the Church of Rome, and that to resist would mean sinning against the light of his conscience. Those who really knew him understood his motives. Pusey, for example, in a letter to an unnamed friend, published on October 16 1845, writes: "he has gone as a simple act of duty with no view to himself, placing himself entirely in God's hands. And such are they whom God employs."¹⁰

No wonder then that Papal documents of the last century, when dealing with the theme of conscience, make frequent reference to the writings of John Henry Newman. Suffice to mention but one of them: In his Encyclical Letter, *Veritatis Splendor*, of 1993, regarding certain fundamental questions of the Church's moral teaching, Pope John Paul II when explaining the relation between conscience, individual freedom and the duty to adhere to objective truth as soon as it is discovered, quotes Newman and calls him "an outstanding defender of the rights of conscience" (No. 34).

CONCLUSION

Despite his greatness, Newman was universally considered as a person of notable self-effacement and withdrawal. The obvious sincerity of his motives made his humble ways so genuine. At the time of his death, *The Times* of London declared that Newman "may be said to have lived no other life than the religious life, the life in constant and conscious communication with the Unseen... Of one thing we may be sure, that the memory of his pure and noble life, untouched by worldliness, unsoured by any trace of fanaticism, will endure, and that whether Rome canonizes him or not, he will be canonized in the thoughts of pious people of many creeds in England. The saint and the poet in him will survive"¹¹

These affirmations of holiness were echoed in Cofton Park at his Beatification on 19th September 2010, this time by the highest Church authority. The cloud that hung over his life for certain periods was lifted again. Now Rome has decided to canonise him on 13th October 2019 and with that we shall have the final and definitive lifting of the cloud, which will be replaced with a halo. Newman took truth for his friend. In the end, truth prevailed.

¹⁰ Henry P. Liddon. *Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey*. London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1893, Vol. II, p. 461.

¹¹ *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Oxford University Press, 2008, Vol. XXXII, p. 635.