TO ROME THROUGH PETER

3ª Exposición de la Mesa Redonda del IX EFCSM 2014

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TO ROME THROUGH PETER

Newman was born in February 1801, and converted to serious Christian belief during an illness in 1816. He called this his "first conversion", a conversion to Evangelical Christianity. Only a year later he went to Oxford, in 1822 was elected a Fellow of Oriel College, and became an Anglican priest in 1825. Increasing amounts of his time and energy were spent on his pastoral work as Vicar of St. Mary's (the University Church), a parish that extended some distance outside Oxford to the village of Littlemore. In these years, Newman was setting down deep roots and building strong friendships in the Church of England, and shared in all the common suspicions that Anglicans still held towards Roman Catholicism. Balthasar quotes from his early work The Prophetic Office of the Church in order to illustrate the anti-Roman complex at its most eloquent (The Office of Peter, pp. 17-18). At that time, of course, he saw the Anglican tradition as being in substantial continuity with the undivided Church of the Apostles and the early Councils. It was a view he was later to repudiate, but it meant that he could see himself as a "Catholic" even while being separated from the Roman Catholic communion. The Oxford Movement began with a sermon preached in 1833 by his friend at Oriel College in Oxford, John Keble, "On National Apostasy." This called for a renewal and purification of the established Anglican Church. Over the next few years a small but influential group at the heart of the Movement issued a series of anonymous "Tracts for the Times" calling for an end to the State's dominance over the Church, for a vigorous reaffirmation of the Apostolic Faith in the Church of England, and for an intensified sense of sacrament and liturgy – in effect, while rejecting the authority of Rome, they wanted a re-Catholicization of the Anglican Church. The Oxford Movement was highly controversial, and in 1841 the publication by Newman of Tract 90 brought it to a point of crisis. In it Newman argued that the "39 Articles" of Anglican faith could be interpreted in a sense compatible with Roman Catholicism, and even with the teachings of the Council of Trent. For many or most intellectuals of the Church of England (even his friends in the Movement) this was a step too far. Consequently the University authorities condemned the Tract, Newman admitted his authorship, the London newspapers denounced him as a closet Papist, and he resigned his living at St. Mary's. Newman's last Anglican sermon was preached at the little church he had built for his parishioners in Littlemore. It marked a parting from many of his own closest friends, and a break with the comfortable world he had known. Now he retired to some property he owned in Littlemore, determined to lead a monastic existence and reflect on his position. A small group of young men joined him, while he prepared his book An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine to help him decide, once and for all, where the true Church lay. His researches proved, to his own satisfaction, the Roman Catholic Church to be the authentic heir to the primitive church of the Fathers. Immediately upon completion of the book, on 8 October 1845, after severing a last link with his old life by officially resigning the Fellowship at Oriel, he was received into full communion with the Church of Rome, which he now regarded as "the One Church of the Redeemer". Newman then moved to Birmingham, taking with him his vast library of patristics, and went for a year of training in the Roman seminary, after which he was ordained a Catholic priest. Having joined the Oratory of St. Philip Neri, he founded an Oratorian house in Birmingham. He never returned to Oxford. Despite his impressive contributions to Catholic philosophy, Newman's life as a Roman Catholic was dominated by his pastoral work, and by a series of controversies, another of which (with Charles Kingsley) led to the writing of his autobiographical bestseller, Apologia Pro Vita Sua, in 1864. His personality, however, transcended the controversies in which he was engaged. People on both sides of the religious debate could respect him as a man of integrity and a brilliant scholar. When Newman died in 1890, he was respected by both Anglicans and Catholics alike.

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Newman's conversion and reception into the Catholic Church had great significance. He was just one man, but he represented the flowering of English civilization – a man of letters, a master of English prose and poetry, a philosopher and theologian who knew the patristic writers intimately. He was a gentleman in the Victorian sense, raised to a supernatural level by the infusion of the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He was also an educationalist who gave now life to the ancient concept of the Liberal Arts and the idea of a Catholic University. He anticipated and embodied the early 20th-century ressourcement in which Catholic theology was refreshed by a return to the Fathers and to Holy Scripture. He has been called the "father of Vatican II" with reference to his appreciation of the role of the laity, not to mention his attempts to accommodate the insights of science and modern thinking into his own philosophy.

Through Newman, the best of English culture, previously cut off from Rome by the Reformation, began to flow back into the veins of the Church. He had seen the Church and the Pope with Anglican eyes, but he had grown into a love of the Church. His initial opposition to the definition of papal infallibility in 1870 was not motivated by a hatred of the papacy as such, but was part of a delicate negotiation of the turbulent waters between cisalpine and ultramontane Catholics, and the contention with Modernism – rocks on which the Catholic Church in England might well have come to grief, given the potential for misunderstanding and abuse. (Balthasar discusses this controversy on pp. 212-22, raising at the end the question of whether the word "infallible" might indeed be a somewhat confusing one, and not necessarily the best to have chosen.)

Newman saw clearly what Balthasar explains so beautifully, that the Church is collegial by its very nature, if by this we understand that she is a communion, a communio, or even a "coinherence" of the many in one, organic body. Such a body needs an authority to speak, when needs be, on behalf of the whole. Appealing to the first five Councils of the early Church is not enough. The Holy Spirit lives in the Church, and while he speaks through the faithful, he also speaks through the bishops, and sometimes through one bishop alone, as in the Arian crisis. At such times the Pope's endorsement is necessary, if the tradition is to be secured in its right course. Solovyev saw this just as clearly, and for that reason among others is known as the "Russian Newman".

Newman's greatest insights include his appreciation of the vital importance of the native human conscience, as the voice of God within us. Conscience and Church cannot, ultimately, disagree, and if they appear to do so it is our task to seek out the reason for this and resolve it. For Newman the proof of God begins with the experience of conscience, in which he finds the presence of God the sovereign lawgiver as certain as that of his own existence. He then sees this divine presence reflected both in the inspired scriptures and in the teaching authority of the Church. Conscience, Bible, Church form an organic and coherent whole, subsisting fully in the Roman Catholic Church alone. This is what was revealed to him as he worked on the Development of Christian Doctrine, and it corresponds to the similarly organic view presented by Hans Urs von Balthasar a century later – though there were many differences, and areas where Newman we might say "fell short" of the fuller vision we find in the flowering of the ressourcement. Newman has, or as a Catholic soon develops, a Mariology based on the conception of our Lady as the Second Eve, but he does not place her at the heart of the Church and centre of the constellation of apostles as Balthasar does. He draws inspiration from Catholic devotions and from the Eucharist, but he does not see the entire Church as a liturgical sacrament, participating in the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.

It was Newman's "Second Spring" sermon preached in 1852, on the occasion of the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales, that partly inspired Leonie and myself to begin our work in Oxford, including a journal of that name. What attracted us was the prophetic note struck by Newman in that sermon. He saw on the horizon the terrible dawn of liberalism or what we would call relativism, and the collapse of Christian society that we have been living through. At the same time he noted the almost inevitable rise of a counter-movement in the seasons amounting to a new springtime

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of faith – the same phrase used by Pope John Paul II in his writings on the new evangelization. This is the vision and the hope that lay behind our work, our conferences and publications, pilgrimages, exhibitions and concerts.

Newman laid the foundations for England's ressourcement, its patristic revival. In the decades following his death, the Catholic impetus he gave to our culture drew many Anglican converts into his wake and created a Catholic literary revival, dominated by other towering figures such as G.K. Chesterton and Christopher Dawson. The revival faltered after the Second World War, but on the Continent the nouvelle theologie flourished right up to the present, and it is from there that we in Oxford hoped to draw inspiration for an English revival capable of turning springtime to summer. Blondel, de Lubac, Danielou, Bouyer, Balthasar and others had supplied what was needed. The only problem was that theological and religious writing in England had taken a different course, and no one was reading these people – no one was drinking from this fountain, and we could not force them to do so. That remains our problem.

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