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John Henry Newman

Compiled by Ryan Marr

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Newman

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*To Dr. Kenneth Parker,
who has taught me most of what I know about Newman,
and whose scholarship in service to the Church
is an example to many.*

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Introduction

When John Henry Newman (1801–1890) was made a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church in 1879, he took as his motto the phrase *Cor ad cor loquitur*—which translated means, “Heart speaks to heart.” As someone who has spent many hours poring over Newman’s writings, this phrase has always meant a great deal to me. I’ve been reading Newman for over a decade now, but my fascination with his work has never been a matter of merely historical interest. Newman’s voice, as many recognized during his lifetime, was destined to endure long after his death. As with the works of other saintly theologians, there is something perpetually alive, and life-giving, about the essays and sermons that Newman left us. In this respect, I concur with Muriel Spark who once remarked that, “[Newman] is far less dead, to me, than many of my contemporaries.”¹ Among the many friends in my life, Newman is near the top of the list in terms of

having shaped the way that I view God, and it was largely through his influence that I was led into the Catholic Church.

I first encountered Newman's work while wrapping up graduate studies at Duke Divinity School, where I was preparing to become a Protestant minister. During my final semester at Duke, I was doing some side-reading as a break from my normal course of studies, when an article by Rusty Reno in the journal *First Things* ("Out of the Ruins") inspired me to look more closely at Newman's conversion from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. What I found in Newman's writings did in fact speak to my heart and, frankly, shook me to the core. While Newman could be incredibly nuanced in his treatment of a given theological topic, he also had a profound gift for cutting right to the heart of a matter. Imagine being on the verge of entering Protestant ministry and reading Newman's blunt observation that, "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant."² Needless to say, upon reading this I had to investigate the claim for myself. I knew that I could not remain a dispassionate handler of Newman's theological heritage; this was a writer who demanded a response from his readers.

Newman's writings possess this quality, I believe, because of the way that he understood his vocation as a theologian. There is a venerable Christian maxim that says, "The theologian is one who prays. And if you pray truly, you will be a

theologian.” Unfortunately, in our own day, there are far too many academic theologians who are indifferent to this idea and who go about teaching theology without necessarily being grounded in a life of prayer. This kind of approach would have been completely foreign to Newman. One of his personal mottos was, “Life is for action,”³ and on more than one occasion he warned others that there was a real danger in being inspired by an idea or work of art but then failing to translate that inspiration into action. As applied to theology, this statement reminds us that the study of God can never be a merely intellectual endeavor. Prayer, as Newman recognized, is the lifeblood of authentic theology. To study the truths of the faith without regularly turning to prayer is not only empty but perilous. “Our God is a consuming fire”⁴ and has to be approached with due reverence if we are to avoid idolatrous understandings of the Divine.

Newman’s conviction about the nature of the theological vocation—that it must be rooted in prayer and oriented to action/conversion—had a noticeable impact on how he went about composing his own books. His *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, for instance, is a carefully crafted, thickly woven essay—and can prove difficult for beginning students to work through—but in no way did Newman intend the piece as an abstract intellectual exercise. Addressing his readers directly in the conclusion to that essay, Newman reminds them, “Time is short, eternity is

long.” In light of this fact, they should be careful not to dismiss what they have read as a “mere matter of present controversy” nor to delay a decision by wrapping themselves “round in the associations of years past.”⁵ The first several chapters in the essay lay out abundant evidence in support of the Roman Communion’s claim to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. This is either true or it’s not. If true, Newman insists, it demands conversion on the part of those who remain outside her fold.

As I slowly worked my way through his various writings, I came to believe that Newman was right on this point and, therefore, that I must cease to be Protestant. This emerging conviction came as news to my wife, Rachel, who for some time had been preparing for life as a pastor’s spouse, which in some Protestant circles can take on a vocational shape of its own. Outside of that specific issue, the prospect of entering the Catholic Church was intimidating for both of us for several reasons. High on the list was the disappointment that such a decision would bring to relatives and friends. A number of our closest loved ones were—and remain—committed Evangelical Protestants. Some of them harbor deep-seated suspicion of all things Roman Catholic, and at the time we wondered what becoming Catholic might mean for these relationships—including with our parents. Not surprisingly, there were career concerns as well. Entering the Catholic fold would significantly limit the kinds of ministry

opportunities available to me, and Rachel justifiably wondered what the purpose of seven years of theological education had been if I was going to have to pursue a totally unrelated career path.

To be honest, at the time I didn't have good answers to those concerns, and for a while things became even more difficult. Rachel took instruction in the faith with me during the 2006–2007 academic year, but as Easter approached she decided that she could not in good conscience enter the Catholic Church. So for a few years (she became Catholic in 2010), there was a division within our marriage at the level of our most deeply held convictions. In this area of my life as well, though, Newman's voice lifted my spirit during difficult times. As is the case with most of us, Newman had to pass through various trials and tribulations during his adult life, but through it all he demonstrated remarkable trust in God. Whenever I felt discouraged, then, I turned to Newman's example for consolation. One prayer that became particularly meaningful for me was a brief reflection that Newman composed about God having a plan for his life:

God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission—I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next . . . I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His

work . . . [God] does nothing in vain . . . He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me—still He knows what He is about.⁶

Newman wrote this prayer in his own search for comfort amid desolation, but it displays an enduring relevance and startling universality. Suffering, disappointment, and grief eventually find all of us, but they do not have to be the final word on our lives. The one source of hope that will never fail us is the Creator and Lord of the universe. Newman knew this truth experientially. When he wrote about God's sustaining love for him, the words flowed from his heart and into the hearts of others. They still do to this day.



Newman's voice from the grave echoes loudly in our era, in which the default position for most is skepticism rather than belief and where the relentless pursuit of wealth and pleasure has usurped the longing for eternal realities. In our day, we could use more preachers like Newman. While he never lost sight of God's abundant mercies, he was also unafraid to challenge the unrepentant and refused to mitigate the harsh demands of the Gospel for the sake of social approval or out of a fear not to offend. In his preaching, Newman consistently brought conversations about the

Christian life back to the urgency of holiness. “Be you content,” he wrote, “with nothing short of perfection.”⁷ Aiming lower than perfection, in his view, does not demonstrate humility but is quite simply settling for less than what God has intended for us. Our lives now, Newman wrote elsewhere, should look like the great saints whom we read about in the pages of the New Testament. As those who “dwell in the full light of the Gospel,” he said, and who have access to “the full grace of the Sacraments . . . there is no reason except our own willful corruption” that we are not already “walking in the steps of [the Apostles].”⁸

It is passages like this one that continue to call me back to repentance. One thing I greatly admire in Newman is his impatience for half measures. From his perspective, God is not asking us to tweak our behavior here and there but to be totally transformed into the image of Christ. When we resist the movement of God’s grace, we are living contrary to our own nature because Christ shows us what it means to be truly human. Sometimes what holds us back, though, are not dramatic sins but spiritual apathy—an embarrassing tendency to give up at the first sign of difficulty. For myself, I long for God’s peace but recoil from the burning flame of his love when it shines a light on an area of my life where I still insist that “my will be done.” Or, even more damning perhaps, I’m simply too lazy to cooperate with the grace that is being extended to me. To read Newman’s reflections on the

gravity of sin, and to take them seriously, is a potent antidote to any lingering temptation to downplay what is at stake in the call to obedience.

In appealing to Newman in this manner, I do not mean to suggest that his life had no rough edges, or that he somehow transcended all personality conflicts. Anyone who has read Newman's personal correspondence knows that he could be curt with interlocutors, and in his famous quarrels with other Catholic leaders (e.g., with William George Ward and Cardinal Manning) blame arguably fell as much on Newman as it did on his opponents. These facets of Newman's life shouldn't overly disturb us though. Theologically speaking, Catholics confess that the Blessed Virgin Mary was kept free from the stain of original sin, and tradition holds that John the Baptist was sanctified while still in the womb. All the rest of us, Newman included, stumble toward perfection. But Newman's extraordinary sanctity was no less remarkable for not being immediate, and because we have such an extensive written record of those times that Newman struggled with doubt and failure, he represents a saint that many modern persons can look to as a reminder that God has a plan for our lives no matter what struggles are presently weighing us down.

To put the matter somewhat colloquially, Newman was a very human saint. When one reads his letters and diaries, there is no mistaking that in Newman we have a fully flesh

and blood human person, someone who faced all of the attendant struggles that normally confront an individual on the path toward holiness. Against the backdrop of Newman's meticulous journaling of his spiritual journey, God's grace stands out all the more. In light of the work that God accomplished in and through Newman—even, or perhaps especially, when things looked particularly bleak in his life—those of us with a devotion to this saint are able to find encouragement to persevere in the face of our own difficulties.

Regardless of where you are in the journey of life, Newman's voice has the potential to speak grace and truth into your experience. One theme that recurs throughout his writings is the importance of developing an abiding trust in God's loving providence. So often, like Peter on the Sea of Galilee, we feel overwhelmed by the storms raging around us. Newman recognized this kind of fear as one of the most common factors that knocked Christians off the right path, so he returned again and again both in his preaching and in his personal correspondence to the core issue of trust in God. Whenever I feel alone or anxious, I take solace in the words of Newman, knowing that they flowed out of a profound experience of God's care amid troubles that at times must have seemed insurmountable. Like Newman, I'm comforted by the reminder that "God has created me to do Him some definite service"—that He "has committed some work to me

which He has not committed to another.”⁹ My hope for you as you pick up this volume is that, through familiarizing yourself with Newman’s words, you too can come to know the same confidence that he had in God’s loving care, so that together we might pray: “May [God] support us all the day long, till the shades lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done! Then in His mercy may He give us safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last!”¹⁰



Newman’s life spanned nearly the entire nineteenth century, and it’s amazing to consider just how much changed for him between the circumstances of his youth and his final years as a Catholic priest and theologian. Newman was raised in a conventional Anglican home, and later in life he described the nature of his religious upbringing as one centered on Bible reading. As a child Newman knew well the content of his faith, but these beliefs did not become real for him until a conversion experience at the age of fifteen. Newman described the transformation in his outlook this way: “When I was fifteen (in the autumn of 1816), a great change of thought took place in me. I fell under the influences of a definite Creed, and received into my intellect impressions of dogma, which, through God’s mercy, have never been effaced or obscured.”¹¹For the next half-decade or

so, Newman lived his Christianity in the manner of a devout evangelical, but over time he adopted the stance of a high church Anglican. He began studies at Trinity College, Oxford, in 1817, taking his degree there three years later. In April of 1822 he was awarded a fellowship at Oriel College, another college within the University of Oxford, which eventually became the epicenter of Tractarianism, also known as the Oxford Movement. Through a series of pamphlets, or *Tracts for the Times*, Newman and a circle of likeminded intellectuals sought to return the Church of England to its Catholic roots.

Newman served as the *de facto* leader of the Oxford Movement from 1833—the year that John Keble gave his sermon on “National Apostasy”—until 1841, when Newman published Tract 90, which argued that the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England could be interpreted in line with official Roman Catholic doctrine. Although Newman anticipated that some members of his communion would find this claim troubling, he was not prepared for what happened next. Harsh criticism rained down upon Newman’s Tract, not only from the heads of colleges at Oxford, who thought that he had betrayed the mission of their university, but also from two dozen bishops—including his own ordinary, who sternly ordered him to desist from publishing any further tracts. In the wake of this controversy, Newman stepped away from his responsibilities at Oxford

and withdrew to a quasi-monastic arrangement at Littlemore, where his newfound doubts regarding the apostolicity of Anglicanism continued to grow. A few years later, on October 9, 1845, Newman was officially received into the Catholic Church by an Italian Passionist priest by the name of Dominic Barberi (who was beatified by Pope Paul VI in 1963).¹²

Newman's four-and-a-half decades as a Roman Catholic were marked by great personal trials but also by significant milestones, including several notable publications (e.g., his *Apologia*, *The Grammar of Assent*, and *A Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, among others). Newman occasionally aroused suspicion on the part of ecclesiastical authorities, as for instance when he published an essay arguing that in deliberations on doctrinal questions the pastors of the Church should take the time to consult the lay faithful. Some ultramontane Catholics—that is, those who placed a strong emphasis on the authority of the pope—were particularly wary of Newman, for they worried that in becoming Catholic he had not become “Roman enough,” believing that he harbored notions of church governance and the role of the faithful that were still essentially Protestant. Newman's reputation was eventually vindicated, however, not only in his lifetime when Pope Leo XIII made him a cardinal, but also in the following century, when his viewpoints on doctrinal development, the sense of the faithful, and papal infallibility were

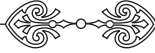
officially affirmed at the Second Vatican Council. Throughout the various twists and turns of his life as a Catholic, Newman remained firmly committed to the communion that he had joined himself to, and he compassionately counseled others not to allow scandals or abuses of power to weaken their sense that God was ultimately in charge and would preserve the Church from ever falling into error. Newman died from pneumonia on August 11, 1890. Per his request, he was laid to rest in the same burial plot as his good friend and fellow Oratorian, Ambrose St. John. On his memorial stone was engraved a Latin phrase, *Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*—“Out of shadows and illusions into truth.”

Newman’s life story as presented above highlights mostly his intellectual accomplishments and experience of church affairs. But these elements of his life do not capture the full scope of Newman’s significance. He was also a man of deep personal piety, with an impressive prayer life, and from all accounts a very holy priest. In an address from 1963, Pope Paul VI gave a particularly memorable encapsulation of Newman’s courage, describing him as someone who “guided solely by love of the truth and fidelity to Christ, traced an itinerary, the most toilsome, but also the greatest, the most meaningful, the most conclusive, that human thought ever travelled during the [nineteenth] century, indeed one might say during the modern era, to arrive at the fullness of wisdom

and of peace.”¹³ If I could leave you with a lasting impression to take away from learning about Newman’s life, it would be what Paul VI talks about here. Supported by divine grace, may we, like Newman, seek the truth no matter the cost, so that one day we might arrive at the fullness of wisdom and of peace—blessed to hear the words that we trust have already been spoken over Newman: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”¹⁴

Note from the Compiler

One final word: Newman’s Victorian rhetoric can sometimes sound foreign to our ears, and the density of his prose means that it can prove difficult to wade through.¹⁵ Nevertheless, persevere dear reader! I firmly believe that any effort you put forth to understand and internalize Newman’s insights will be abundantly rewarded. The path ahead is strenuous, but the end result for your spiritual life will be great indeed.



FAITH

True faith teaches us to do numberless disagreeable things for Christ's sake, to bear petty annoyances, which we find written down in no book. In most books Christian conduct is made grand, elevated, and splendid, so that any one, who only knows of true religion from books, and not from actual endeavours to be religious, is sure to be offended at religion when he actually comes upon it, from the roughness and humbleness of his duties, and his necessary deficiencies in doing them. It is beautiful in a picture to wash the disciples' feet; but the sands of the real desert have no lustre in them to compensate for the servile nature of the occupation.

*Parochial and Plain Sermons,
Vol. 2, Sermon 30, 374*

Faith, a Gift of God

Faith is the gift of God, and not a mere act of our own, which we are free to exert when we will. It is quite distinct from an exercise of reason, though it follows upon it. I may feel the force of the argument for the Divine origin of the Church; I may see that I ought to believe; and yet I may be unable to believe. This is no imaginary case; there is many a man who has ground enough to believe, who wishes to believe, but who cannot believe. It is always indeed his own fault, for God gives grace to all who ask for it, and use it, but still such is the fact that conviction is not faith. Take the parallel case of obedience; many a man knows he ought to obey God, and does not and cannot—through his own fault, indeed, but still he cannot; for through grace only can he

obey. Now, faith is not a mere conviction in reason; it is a firm assent, it is a clear certainty greater than any other certainty; and this is wrought in the mind by the grace of God, and by it alone.

Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations, 224

The Church, the Oracle of God

No one can be a Catholic without a simple faith, that what the Church declares in God's name is God's word, and therefore true. A man must simply believe that the Church is the oracle of God; he must be as certain of her mission as he is of the mission of the Apostles. Now, would any one ever call him certain that the Apostles came from God, if, after professing his certainty, he added, that perhaps he might have reason to doubt one day about their mission? Such an anticipation would be a real, though latent, doubt, betraying that he was not certain of it at present. A person who says, "I believe just at this moment, but perhaps I am excited without knowing it, and I cannot answer for myself, that I shall believe tomorrow," does not believe now. A man

who says, "Perhaps I am in a kind of delusion, which will one day pass away from me, and leave me as I was before"; or "I believe as far as I can tell, but there may be arguments in the background which will change my view," such a man has not faith at all . . . [T]o make provision for future doubt is to doubt at present. It proves I am not in a fit state to become a Catholic now. I may love by halves, I may obey by halves; I cannot believe by halves: either I have faith, or I have it not.

Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations, 215–217

Assent

Now, in the first place, what is faith? it is assenting to a doctrine as true, which we do not see, which we cannot prove, because God says it is true, who cannot lie. And further than this, since God says it is true, not with His own voice, but by the voice of His messengers, it is assenting to what man says, not simply viewed as a man, but to what he is commissioned to declare as a messenger, prophet, or ambassador from God.

Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations, 194–195



Looking to God, Our Source of Comfort

We are in the dark about ourselves. When we act, we are groping in the dark, and may meet with a fall any moment . . . The management of our hearts is quite above us. Under these circumstances it becomes our comfort to look up to God. “Thou, God, seest me!” Such was the consolation of the forlorn Hagar in the wilderness. He knoweth whereof we are made, and He alone can uphold us. He sees with most appalling distinctness all our sins, all the windings and recesses of evil within us; yet it is our only comfort to know this and to trust Him for help against ourselves. To those who have a right notion of their weakness, the thought of their Almighty Sanctifier and Guide is continually present.

They believe in the necessity of a spiritual influence to change and strengthen them, not as a mere abstract doctrine, but as a practical and most consolatory truth, daily to be fulfilled in their warfare with sin and Satan.

Parochial and Plain Sermons, Vol. 1, 173–174