

NEWMAN'S APPROACH TO THE CHURCH

THE first of the *Tracts for the Times*, published in September, 1833, and entitled *Thoughts on the Ministerial Commission respectfully addressed to the Clergy*, was devoted to the proclamation of the chief of those truths which it was the special aim of the Tracts to enforce. 'There are some,' Newman therein wrote, 'who rest their divine mission on their own unsupported assertion; others who rest it upon their temporal distinctions. This last case has, perhaps, been too much our own; I fear we have neglected the real ground on which authority is built—OUR APOSTOLIC DESCENT . . . [the many] have been deluded into a notion that present palpable usefulness, producible results, acceptableness to your flocks, that these and such like are the tests of your Divine commission. Enlighten them in this matter. Exalt our Holy Fathers, the Bishops, as the Representatives of the Apostles, and the Angels of the Churches; and magnify your office, as being ordained by them to take part in their Ministry.'

The leaders of the Tractarian Movement were not, as some seem to imagine, ardent Ritualists, if by that term we mean men enamoured of ritual for its own sake. They were on the whole distinguished by soberness in their use of ritual. What they were seeking primarily was to renew and to deepen the supernatural Christian life of the members of the Church of England. For this it was necessary to be sure of the possession of two things—the revealed truth and the ordinary means of grace, both committed to the Apostles. Hence the importance of the doctrine of the Visible Church, with its twofold office of teaching and sanctifying. On the question of the possession of the constituted means of grace the fourth Tract—not by Newman—on *Adherence to the Apostolical Succession the Safest Course*, asks: 'Why should we talk so much of an *Establishment*, and so little of an APOSTOLICAL SUCCESSION? Why should we not seriously endeavour to impress our own people with this plain truth—that by separating themselves from our communion, they separate themselves not

only from a decent, orderly, useful society, but from THE ONLY CHURCH IN THIS REALM WHICH HAS A RIGHT TO BE QUITE SURE THAT SHE HAS THE LORD'S BODY TO GIVE TO HIS PEOPLE?' And Newman himself wrote in the eleventh, 'Of course I have no wish to maintain that those who shall be saved are exactly the same company that are under the means of grace here; still I must insist on it, that Scripture makes the existence of a Visible Church a condition of the existence of the Invisible. I mean, the *Sacraments* are evidently in the hands of the Church Visible; and these, we know, are generally necessary to salvation, as the Catechism says.'

It was, however, the Church's teaching office, more than her sanctifying (or as he called it) her sacerdotal office, that was to occupy Newman's attention. A system of theology on the Anglican idea needed to be formed. The object of the movement was, as he says, to withstand the Liberalism of the day, and he found this could not be done by mere negatives. And he began with the theology of the Church. 'It was necessary for us to have a definite Church theory erected on a definite basis. This took me to the great Anglican divines; and then of course I found at once that it was impossible to form any such theory, without cutting across the teaching of the Church of Rome. Thus came in the Roman controversy.'¹ Opposition to the Church of Rome was seen to be part of the only theology on which the English Church could stand. The principle of dogma, a Visible Church with sacraments which were the channels of grace, and anti-Romanism—these, as he repeatedly tells us in the *Apologia*, were his three original points of belief and the basis of the *Via Media*.

It is important to grasp the exact point at issue in the controversy between the Roman and the Anglican Church, as he viewed it. 'At the end of 1835 or the beginning of 1836, I had the whole state of the question before me, on which, to my mind, the decision between the Churches

¹*Apologia*, p. 195 (I quote from the original edition).

depended. It is observable that the question of the position of the Pope, whether as the centre of unity, or as the source of jurisdiction, did not come into my thoughts at all; nor did it, I think I may say, to the end In my view the controversy turned upon the Faith and the Church. This was my issue of the controversy from the beginning to the end . . . and the history of my conversion is simply the process of working it out to a solution.²

To the discussion of the relations between the Faith and the Church Newman applied himself in the *Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church* published in 1837. 'Both we and Romanists,' he there says, 'hold that the Church Catholic is unerring in its declarations of faith, or saving doctrine; but we differ from each other as to what is the faith and what is the Church Catholic. They maintain that faith depends on the Church, we that the Church is built on the faith. By Church Catholic we mean the Church Universal, as descended from the Apostles; they those branches of it which are in communion with Rome Again, they understand by the Faith, whatever the Church at any time declares to be faith; we what it has actually so declared from the beginning The creed of Romanism is ever subject to increase; ours is fixed once for all.'³ By the Faith, then, he meant 'the substance or great outlines of the Gospel as taught by the Apostles,' 'those outlines of doctrine which the Apostles formally published,' and on these the Church was infallible, holding the promise that the word of truth should never depart out of her mouth. But it was to the Church as One, not to two, or three, or a dozen bodies, that the promise was made, it was the Church Catholic that was infallible. The different portions into which the Church had been broken up and which, in a sense, constituted one Universal Church throughout the world, constituted the Church Catholic precisely in so far as they were descended from

² *Ibid.* p. 205.

³ *Prophetical Office*, p. 252 (original edition).

the Apostles. It followed that the Ancient Church was to be 'our model in all matters of doctrine, till it broke up into portions and for Catholic agreement substituted peculiar and local opinions.' Antiquity was the basis of the doctrine of the *Via Media*. In a letter written shortly after his conversion he said: 'If I must specify what I mean by "Anglican principles," I should say, *e.g.*, taking *Antiquity*, not the *existing Church*, as the oracle of truth, and holding that the *Apostolical Succession* is a sufficient guarantee of Sacramental grace, without *union with the Christian Church throughout the world*. I think these still the firmest, strongest ground against Rome—that is, *if they can be held . . .* For myself, I found I *could not* hold them. I left them.'⁴

The *Via Media* as a definite theory was first undermined for him when in the Long Vacation of 1839, with no thought of Rome in his mind, he set himself to study and master the history of the Monophysites. He saw something which affected his view both of Antiquity and Catholicity.⁵ It was this: the deliberate and eventual consent of the great body of the Church ratified a doctrinal decision; a doctrine that had not been publicly recognized as a portion of the dogmatic foundation of the Church, was so recognized centuries after the time of the Apostles. Here was the Church of Antiquity, what was undoubtedly the Church Catholic, adding to the Faith. Now he could not prove that the Anglican communion was an integral part of the one Church, except on the ground that it was Apostolic or Catholic. Yet to insist on its Catholicity would be to reason in favour of Roman corruptions. At the same time the usual arguments defending separation from Rome, the arguments from her corruptions and additions, would be prejudicial to those great doctrines concerning

⁴*Apologia*, p. 268.

⁵ By Catholicity he here meant descent from, oneness with, the Church of the Apostles which gave union with other churches so descended, all together constituting the Church Catholic of the day.

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our Lord, which are the foundation of the Christian religion. 'The *Via Media* was an impossible idea.' He had now no positive Anglican theory.

Rome's conception of the relations between the Faith and the Church Catholic was seen to be the right one. But it did not follow that she was the one true Church. Certainly she had kept the principle of dogma, the Apostolical Succession and the sacramental system, but her additions to the Creed might still be corruptions, and he had still an argument for the Anglican claims in the positive and special charges he could bring against her on that score. But he was to lose this argument too. In May, 1843, he wrote in a letter: 'At present I fear, as far as I can analyze my own convictions. I consider the Roman Catholic Communion to be the Church of the Apostles, and that what grace is among us (which, through God's mercy, is not little) is extraordinary, and from the overflowings of His dispensation. I am very far more sure that England is in schism, than that the Roman additions to the Primitive Creed may not be developments, arising out of a keen and vivid realizing of the Divine Depositum of Faith.'⁶ In 1845 he began writing his Essay on Doctrinal Development, and before it was finished he had been received into the Church.

The Movement had begun as a campaign on behalf of dogmatic religion. The very idea of the *Via Media*, with its appeal to the early undivided Church, had been to assure the inviolateness of the revealed truth committed to the Apostles, and by them to the Church, and thus to enable men to give to that truth absolute submission as being the word of God Himself. The *Via Media* had been the guardian of dogma, 'but I was breaking the *Via Media* to pieces, and would not dogmatic faith altogether be broken up, in the minds of a great number, by the demolition of the *Via Media*? Oh! how unhappy this made me!'⁷ But he came to recognize two truths, namely that developments

⁶ *Apologia*, p. 335.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 330.

are to be expected, and therefore also an infallible developing authority, a living present voice. It is true that only revealed truth can be the object of faith, but 'if there are certain great truths, or duties, or observances, naturally and legitimately resulting from the doctrines originally professed, it is but reasonable to include these true results in the idea of revelation itself, to consider them parts of it, and if the revelation be not only true, but guaranteed as true, to anticipate that they, too, will come under the privilege of that guarantee The common sense of mankind feels that the very idea of revelation implies a present informant and guide, and that an infallible one; not a mere abstract declaration of Truths unknown before to man, or a record of history, or the result of an antiquarian research, but a message and a lesson speaking to this man and that A revelation is not given, if there be no authority to decide what it is that is given.'⁸

What Newman called the principle of dogma was common to all the Tractarian theologians. They all preached dogmatic faith—that is, the absolute acceptance of supernaturally revealed truth presented for acceptance in some way or other by an external authority. Stated in that way, such a conception of Faith and Revelation is the traditional Christian conception. In his recent work on *Religion and Revelation*, the Anglican Canon Lilley of Hereford assures us that the conception is no longer represented even in the most conservative forms of Anglican theology. The reason is not far to seek. Newman says it was an Anglican principle that the oracle of truth, the external authority presenting revealed truth for acceptance, was Antiquity, not the existing Church. The *raison d'être* of the principle was to guard the purity of revealed truth and the possibility of dogmatic faith. But the fact is that without a present infallible living voice the very idea of supernatural revelation loses its hold on men's minds.

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⁸ *Development of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 79, 87.