

THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT
**THE CENTENARY CONFERENCE AT
BEAUMONT**

By

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Some of us were there because we were interested in Newman, and some because we were going to read papers on him, and some because we looked forward to that sort of holiday. And there were Press peoples and the representatives of various institutions. But I think that the greater part of the crowd that swarmed through those corridors and covered those lawns consisted of people who were there, in the first place, because they were Catholics, and secondly because they could afford it. This is not so cynical as it sounds. I mean that, as I saw the great gathering, it seemed to be thoroughly united before it ever got to Beaumont; and to have come together, not in order to reach any further unity, not to strive for agreement about anything definite, but simply to be together in one place as it was already together in one Faith. And Newman? Oh, he was the lecturers' business. We were quite willing to go to the lectures; we were interested in them while they lasted; but for the most part we were not seeking in them or in the subsequent discussions for any further point of union. We had not come to Beaumont to make up our minds about anything definite, not even about Newman.

Our agreement was so taken for granted, it was so powerfully in possession from the start, that there seemed little need of answering more particular questions, of closing gaps, of finding more particular bases of accord. An argument implies movement towards new definitions of agreement or disagreement. But here at Beaumont we began with no definite problem or division of views. Hence there was little definite argument and little agreement, at the end, about particular issues. I say "little" because there were indeed two discussions, at least, which may prove fruitful. The question of a Catholic University for Britain became, one morning, almost a burning question. Two students, one evening, spoke out bravely about conditions in Catholic "Redbrick". A quarterly historical Review was planned; and other developments, no doubt, went forward in other particular directions. And there were plenty of pleasant arguments in the Bar. Yet on the whole the week went by without controversy. Its focus, really, was the Chapel, and the evening Benediction, and the Host.

Cheerfulness came easily, everyone seemed to enjoy himself or herself, the more so of course as the days went by. The Atom-bomb was already part of history, but you would hardly have thought so had you listened in to our table-talk. If this seems frivolous remember that we were celebrating something, not holding a Council of War. And perhaps, like Hamlet, we were

“but mad north-north-west”; we knew that when the wind changed, when in fact we returned to our various jobs, we should feel the draught that blows from the non-Christian world around us and from the *mundi rectores tenebrarum*. This we had not forgotten, we had but put it aside.

The lectures were meant to throw light on the person and work of Newman from a variety of angles; and thus they achieved. But, with due modesty, two criticisms may be offered. First, the light thrown upon various aspects of Newman did not reveal what underlay these aspects. Perhaps no such revelation was intended. Only a paper on the religion of Newman could have dealt *ex officio* with the soul of Newman. There was no such paper. Near the end of the week Canon Dessain told us that he regretted there had been no lecture on “The Prayer of Newman”; a paper on his religion might have taken in his prayer and at the same time have led us towards the centre of him—by way, perhaps, of his conception of the Conscience. “Myself and my Creator”; Newman essentially was “a religious”; in terms of the Gifts he is the type as it were of Fear and Piety. Not a “God-intoxicated man”, but very definitely and radically a God-fearing man. And from this root, fed by a fine sensitivity and reason, arose all the controversial theology, all the *ideas* of which we heard so much from the lecturers; they were Newman’s defences, his Apologia. All his work is an Apologia. It was a pity, I think, that the lecturers did not examine this religious root; as a result their lectures seemed to lack cohesion. Implicitly, of course, they were focussed on one point; but this point did not sufficiently appear. Had it been more explicit it must have made more intelligible the various themes which the lectures actually developed. As it was, not even Fr. Hughes’s exciting Introduction—still less Mgr. Knox’s dispassionate and intensely interesting summing-up—really gave us a central focus. They implied that centre, but they moved on the circumference.

Secondly, I hope that even the “little Dominican opposition” may decently, and without too much apparent naivety, suggest that what some of the lectures needed to make them at once better starting-points for discussion and more instructive in themselves, was rather more clarity in definition. In the discussions much time was thrown away because the terms had not been defined to start with. Some of the lectures themselves might well have been shorter. But chiefly, I think, we all suffered from a scarcity of definitions; we often lacked anything really definite to argue about, and then how one longed for sharp thinking in blunt Saxon! Nor did it help us to be told—as we were—that the syllogism never really proved anything, and that reason—this at least was the impression given by much that was said—was after all a pretty incompetent instrument in religious

matters. It would be easy here to blunder into a stupid "rationalism" as well as into unfairness towards certain valuable efforts to interpret Newman's thought. But it is also easy to disparage logic. It was thrilling to note the keenness of the audience and especially the desire for definite knowledge shown by the few young men who spoke up. And seeing this one could not help reflecting that the rest of us had still a little to learn from Aristotle.

I doubt, however, whether Mgr. Ryan has much to learn from Aristotle: his paper on the "Grammar of Assent" was admirably clear as well as weighty with thought. Dr. Davis too, expounding the "Development", seemed to hold the laity's attention perfectly. Nay, even the lecture which to me seemed the most merciless—quite over-charged with thunder and paradox—won the highest praise from a young northerner of evident sincerity and intelligence. He said it was great, and I think he was right; but I think, too, that it missed its mark, the mind of the average listener. Of Fr. D'Arcy's lecture I simply dare not speak; I will say only that he was in very good form.

For the rest, we all owe a great debt to the Newman Association for organising the meeting and to the Jesuit Fathers for giving us the run of Beaumont. Newman's memory has been worthily honoured by the English Catholics of 1945; not to mention the deputies from abroad who added so much to the vitality of the gathering and whose contributions to the programme were so rich in human interest and intrinsic worth. It is shameful, really, to pass them by with no more comment than this; but time presses and space is short.