

NEGLECTED NEWMAN

Some weeks ago while endeavouring to effect a compromise between the spring flights of a Romeo's fancies and the sterner demands of Philosophy, I chanced to pick up Cardinal Newman's "The Present Position of the Catholics in England."

Compromises as a rule, fail in their purpose; but it must be confessed that this Utopian Isle upon which I chanced more than dispelled my wanton thoughts and soothed caressingly any possible scruples consequent to my philosophical divorce.

It is true that I had read of Newman before, but of his works I had read nothing. I had always been of the attitude that whoever retired with him into a shady nook, or in slippered ease reclined in the latest sitting-room rocker, was possessed with the hardihood of a Viking and no small amount of chivalry. Valiant indeed would he be, mused I, the erstwhile outcast of his literary coterie, and the antithesis of recreant heart and caitiff knight, who would or could conjure up sufficient courage to enter where angels fear to tread. Suffice it to say that my experience has more than exemplified the truth of the old adage "Those who came to scoff remained to pray."

It is a lamentable fact, but none the less true, that Newman, the greatest exponent of pure and dignified prose, is little read, especially by those college students who should have his works well thumb-marked.

How often have we been told by fond parents or enthusiastic teachers that the Bible or Shakespeare well read would constitute an excellent course in English forces! If I may be permitted to add a third, Newman would be my unhesitating choice. To hold the master's sceptre, and yet to remain unread by so many Catholic college men has for some time been the fate of this master of style. In fact it sometimes seems that our Non-Catholic critics outdo us in their praise while we either indifferently go our way or else damn with faint praise not through any malice or envy, I admit, but because Newman's works are to us treasures buried and hidden by an Aetna of carelessness or forgetfulness.

To give a detailed account of Newman's life or to evaluate his works is beyond the scope of this article. My sole purpose is to reproduce some passages from his

most representative works, with the hope that their careful and studious perusal will be an incentive for others to go to the author and read for themselves. Of what use is it to have read all the critics and commentators of any poet or prose genius if his works, the children of his genius, remain unread? Better not to have read a single critic. We do not appreciate the epic greatness of the blind Homer by reading about him. How can we appreciate the manly courage of Hector or the love of Achilles for his friend unless we read Homer himself? We do not learn to treasure the beauty and splendor of Virgil's Aeneid by knowing whether some commentator agrees with his mythology. What we are concerned with is the fulfilment of Aeneas's mission to which he was called by the gods; the capture of Troy by the ruse of the wooden horse; the rescue of old Anchises; and the poignant grief of Queen Dido of Carthage when her lover sails away. It is scenes like these that grip us, live in our memory, and impart that "touch that makes the whole world kin."

Therefore, lest I be justly accused of digression, I shall immediately give four selections illustrative of Newman's style and thought. The first is his well known definition of a gentleman. Surely we as Catholic young men, whose constant aim it should be to become Catholic gentlemen with Catholic culture, should profit by these lines.

*The True Gentleman

"Hence it is that it is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain. This description is both refined and, as far as it goes, accurate. He is mainly occupied in merely removing the obstacles which hinder the free and unembarrassed actions of those about him; and he concurs with their movements rather than take the initiative himself. His benefits may be considered as parallel to what are called comforts or conveniences in arrangements of a personal nature: like an easy chair or a good fire, which do their part in dispelling cold and fatigue though nature provides both means of rest and animal heat without them. The true gentleman, in like manner carefully avoids whatever may cause a jar or a jolt in the minds of those with whom he is cast: all clashing of opinion or collision of feeling, all restraint, or suspicion, or gloom, or resentment; his great concern being to make everyone at their ease and at home. He has his eyes on all the company; he is tender towards the bashful, gentle towards the

*Idea of a University Discourse VIII part 10.

istant, and merciful towards the absurd; he can recollect to whom he is speaking; he guards against unreasonable allusions, or topics which may irritate; he is seldom prominent in conversation and never wearisome. He makes light of favours while he does them, and seems to be receiving when he is conferring. He never speaks of himself except when compelled, never defends himself by a mere retort, he has no ears for slander or gossip, is scrupulous in imputing motives to those who interfere with him, and interprets everything for the best. He is never mean or little in his disputes, never takes unfair advantage, never mistakes personalities or sharp sayings for arguments, or insinuates evil which he dare not say out. For a long-sighted prudence he observes the maxim of the ancient sage that we should ever conduct ourselves towards our enemy as if he were one day to be our friend. He has too much good sense to be affronted by insults, he is too well employed to remember injuries, and too indolent to bear malice. He is patient, for-bearing and resigned on philosophical principles; he submits to pain because it is inevitable, to bereavement, because it is irreparable and to death, because it is his destiny. If he engages in controversy of any kind his disciplined intellect preserves him from the blundering discourtesy of better, perhaps, but less educated minds, who like blunt weapons, tear and hack, instead of cutting clean, who mistake the point in argument, waste their strength on trifles, misconceive their adversary, and leave the question more involved than they find it. He may be right or wrong in his opinion, but he is too clear-headed to be unjust; he is as simple as he is forcible and as brief as he is decisive. Now—where shall we find greater candour, consideration, indulgence; he throws himself into the minds of his opponents, he accounts for their mistakes. He knows the weakness of human reason as well as its strength, its province, and its limits. If he be an unbeliever he will be too profound and large-minded to ridicule a religion or to act against it; he is too wise to be a dogmatist or fanatic in his infidelity. He respects piety and devotion; he even supports institutions as venerable, beautiful, or useful, to which he does not assent; he honours the ministers of religion, and it contents him to decline its mysteries without assailing or denouncing them. He is a friend of religious toleration and that, not only because his philosophy has taught him to look on all faiths with an impartial eye, but also from the gentleness and effeminacy of feeling, which is the attendant on civilization."

This description, graceful, winning and complete as it is, postulates the further life giving principle of Sanctity; for Sanctity is the necessary concomitant, the interior embellishment, without which good breeding and etiquette become but a veneer and camouflage. "A man may smile

and smile and be a villain" says Shakespeare in Hamlet. It is also true that a man may possess all the "savoir faire" in the world and all the ease of a gentleman, and yet lack the sanctity requisite for a Catholic cultured gentleman. "All fair without, but within rottenness and dead men's bones."

My next two selections shall give Newman's piercing and practical thoughts on "Confession and on the Sacrifice of the Mass."

*Confession

"How many are the souls in distress, anxiety or loneliness whose one need is to find a being to whom they can pour out their feelings unheard by the world? Tell them out they must: they cannot tell them out to those whom they see every hour. They want to tell them and not to tell them: and they want to tell them out yet be as if they be not told: they wish to tell them to one who is strong enough to bear them, yet not too strong to despise them: they wish to tell them to one who can at once advise and sympathize with them: they wish to relieve themselves of a load, to gain a solace, to receive the assurance that there is one who thinks of them, and one to whom in thought they can recur, to whom they can betake themselves if necessary from time to time while they are in the world. How many a Protestant's heart would leap at the news of such a benefit putting aside all ideas of a sacramental ordinance, or a grant of a pardon and the conveyance of grace. If there is a heavenly idea in the Catholic Church, looking at it simply as an idea, surely next after the Blessed Sacrament, Confession is such. And such is it ever found in fact—the very act of kneeling, the low and contrite voice, the sign of the Cross hanging, so to say, over the head bowed low, and the words of peace and blessing. Oh, what a soothing charm is there, which the world can neither give nor take away. Oh, what piercing, heart-subduing tranquility, provoking tears of joy, is poured, almost substantially and physically upon the soul, the oil of gladness, as Scripture calls it, when the penitent at length rises, his God reconciled to him, his sins rolled away for ever."

*Present Position of the Catholics in England—lecture 8.

*The Mass

"To me nothing is so consoling, so piercing, so thrilling so over-coming as the Mass said as it is amongst us. I could attend Masses for ever and not be tired. It is not a mere form of words—it is a great action, the greatest action that can be on earth. It is not the invocation merely, but, if I dare to use the word, the evocation of the Eternal. He becomes present on the altar in flesh and blood, before Whom

angels bow and devils tremble. This is that awful event which is the scope, and is the interpretation of every part of the solemnity. Words are necessary, but as means, not as ends; they are not mere addresses to the throne of grace, they are instruments of what is far higher, of Consecration, of Sacrifice. They hurry on as if impatient to fulfil their mission. Quickly they go, for they are awful words of Sacrifice, they are a work too great to delay upon: as it was said in the beginning "What thou doest, do quickly." Quickly they pass, for the Lord Jesus goes with them as He passed along the lake in the days of His flesh, quickly calling first one, then another. Quickly they pass because as the lightning which shineth from one part of the heaven unto the other, so is the coming of the Son of Man. Quickly they pass for they are as the words of Moses, when the Lord came down in the cloud, calling on the name of the Lord as He passed by "the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth". And as Moses on the mount, so we too make haste and bow our heads to the earth and adore. So we, all around, each in his place look out for the great Advent, waiting for the pouring of the water. Each in his own place with his own heart, with his own wants, with his own thoughts, with his own intentions, with his own prayers. Separate but concordant, watching what is going on, watching its progress, uniting in its consummation; not painfully and hopelessly following a hard form of prayer from beginning to end, but, like a concert of musical instruments, each different, but concurring in a sweet harmony. We take our part with God's priest, supporting him, yet guided by him. There are little children there, and old men, and simple labourers, and students in seminaries, priests preparing for mass, priests making their thanksgiving: there are innocent maidens there and penitent sinners, but out of these many minds rises one Eucharistic hymn, and the Great Action is the measure and scope of it."

*"Loss and Gain."

To give some slight notion of Newman's undoubted literary grace of form, I shall quote the onomatopoeic description of how

"Spontaneously the bells of the steeples begin to sound. Not by an act of volition, but by a part of mechanical impulse, bishop and dean, archdeacon and canon, rector and curate, one after another, each to his high tower, off they set. Swinging and booming, tolling and chiming, with nervous intenseness, and thickening emotion, and deepening volume, the old ding-dong which has scared town and country this weary time; tolling and chiming away, jingling and clamorous and ringing the changes on their poor half-dozen notes, all

about "the Popish aggression," "insolent and insidious," "insidious and insolent," "insolent and atrocious," "atrocious and insolent," "atrocious, insolent and ungrateful," "ungrateful, insolent and atrocious," "foul and offensive," "pestilent and horrid," "subtle and unholy," "audacious and revolting," "contemptible and shameless," "malignant," "frightful," "mad," "meretricious," bobs (I think the ringers call them) bobs and bobs-royal and triple bob-majors, and grandsires to the extent of their compass and full ring of their metal, in honor of Queen Bess, and to the confusion of the Holy Father and the Princes of the Church."

This is really a marvellous selection. Every line can be scanned like poetry, and every word or group of words sound like bells dinging and donging. Just read it over aloud and notice how you unconsciously adopt the tone of chimes, now slow, now quickened. For sheer beauty we can only seek its like either in the "Dream Fugue" of the laudanum De Quincey or in the Kubla-Khan-like weirdness of Poe's immortal "Raven."

I realize quite keenly that many better things could have been said on this subject, but as I have restricted myself in this paper to a rather general discussion and survey, the only plea I could advance would be that nothing would ever be done if we waited until such time as no one could find fault.

If, then, this presentation of a few selections from a great writer will, with their siren-like appeal, but wrest from you the desire to read his works, my effort shall not have been in vain.

Since Newman can be studied under so many aspects, I may possibly at some future date present an appreciation of his principles of Education as embodied in his idea of a University, or his poetry (for who has not heard of the "Dream of Gerontius" and "Lead Kindly Light") or his ability as a Catholic apologist so well portrayed in "The Present Position of the Catholics in England" and "Apologia pro Vita Sua."

Therefore when you are tempted to bury yourself in the latest work of fiction, or when Morpheus would fain lull you to sleep in his embrace why not instead reach for your copy of Newman? But since Newman is nothing if not thought producing, I would warn you not to read him as you are reclining in your easy chair, for a comfortable posture and concentration on Newman are diametrically opposed.

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