

CATHOLIC DEVOTION TO THE MOTHER OF GOD

Lessons from Newman's Letter to Pusey (1866)

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Where our natural language would be, 'God will do this or that,' there it seems equally natural to Roman Catholics to say, 'Mary will do it.' At least, where we expect beforehand, in the unfinished sentence, to find 'God,' or 'Jesus,' we find 'Mary.'

So wrote the nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholic luminary, Edward Bouverie Pusey, to his former Tractarian ally, John Henry Newman in 1865, part of a work—the *Eirenicon*—designed to propose the terms of reunion for the Anglican and Roman Churches. Newman had only recently been reunited with Pusey and John Keble, the nucleus of the Oxford Movement that had so shaken the Church of England in the 1830s. Their meeting at Keble's rectory at Hursley, Hampshire, on 12 September 1865 after decades of separation following Newman's conversion in 1866 was an emotional experience, yet it did not deter Newman's desire months later to answer Pusey's Anglo-Catholic critique of the cult of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism.²

Pusey's appraisal of Mariology—a polemic containing a mixture of historical, theological and anecdotal evidence—was, on the whole, untrue and mostly a caricature; yet as Newman would be forced to admit in his formal published reply to Pusey in 1866, the *Letter to Pusey*, there was partial veracity to his claim that at times Mariology, in some of its devotional outpourings, had obscured devotion to God, especially God's loving mediation brought to humanity through the incarnation.³ By occasionally placing Mary in a role that was akin to the one scripture so clearly proclaimed to be our Lord's, the

legitimate question of whether the incarnation was even necessary raises itself.⁴ As some overly zealous apologists for our Lady have argued at various times: if God-including Christ-is too holy for sinful humanity to directly approach, then surely mortal men need a fellow human to advocate on their behalf. As Bernard of Clairvaux put it in the twelfth century, 'we need a mediator in order to reach Christ our mediator, and we can find none better than our Lady'⁵.

Partly because of the theological contribution of Newman, Vatican II and its ecumenical heritage has rightly steered Catholics back to remembering that devotion to the Mother of God must always compliment God's love for humanity as shown in the incarnation.⁶ Nonetheless, one still finds Catholic devotions than lean in an unorthodox direction. For instance, versions of Louis de Montfort's early eighteenth-century manual of Marian piety, *A Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, a work that reasserts St Bernard's claim for the need of Mary's intercession in light of Christ's divinity, remain popular, especially within Traditionalist circles—as do non-Catholic objections similar to Pusey's within Evangelicalism.⁷

One of the great contributions Newman gave to nineteenth-century Catholic theology was a genuine and honest awareness of the Catholic faith as a body of thought that exists in human space and time. Catholics are humans; they live, grow and die within a world that is equally as temporal and transient. This may at first seem a facile observation, but the nineteenth century—an age where Charles

Darwin shattered some of the certainties of Christians in a natural world—made Catholicism's more honest exponents confront the fact that some of the older approaches simply no longer worked, nor were convincing. Where Mariology was concerned, myth and legend—at the very least—had to be tempered with an honesty concerning the manner in which the pious (including the learned) made their love of the Virgin known. '[H]ere below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often',⁸ Newman wrote famously in 1845. But part of this sentiment meant that change might involve the revision of certain expressions of Catholic piety—revision in light of the doctrines of the faith as they develop and become part of the Christian deposit.

In the *Letter to Pusey* Newman responded to his old friend's extensive quotations from contemporary writers whom Pusey regarded as promoting Marian devotions that either took away from Christ's salvific work or mediation. The foundation of this reply was a founding principle that asserted the distinction between faith and devotion. The faith of Mariology—its doctrines—could, in Newman's view, be defended on their own ground, especially in reference to the works of the Fathers, whose founding role in Catholic theology he regarded as indispensable. Devotion, on the other hand, was different—a transient phenomenon that grew and changed over time. It could develop into something worthy of genuine piety, or be corrupted. It was utopian to think that devotions could ever be kept free of error.⁹ Moreover, making use of the affections, they had to be understood not only in terms of the historical and cultural context in which they were being enunciated, but as the outpourings of devotional piety, which is very different from rational theology:

What is abstractedly extravagant, may in particular persons be becoming and beautiful, and only fall under blame when it is found in others who imitate them. When it is formalized



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into meditations or exercises, it is as repulsive as love-letters in a police report. Moreover, even holy minds readily adopt and become familiar with language which they would never have originated themselves, when it proceeds from a writer who has the same objects of devotion as they have; and, if they find a stranger ridicule or reprobate supplication or praise which has come to them so recommended, they feel it as keenly as if a direct insult were offered to those to whom that homage is addressed.¹⁰

Given that the Virgin Mary 'bore, suckled, and handled the Eternal in the form of a child', 'the rush and flood of thoughts which such a doctrine involves' naturally could involve the enunciation of doctrinal error.¹¹ Like lovers who are besotted with one another, doctrinal soundness could never be guaranteed. If this were true of canonized saints, it was even truer of the laity:

[T]he religion of the multitude is ever vulgar and abnormal; it ever will be tinged with fanaticism and superstition, while men are what they are. A people's religion is ever a corrupt religion, in spite of the provisions of Holy Church.¹²

As this writer has written elsewhere in a more detailed treatment of the *Letter to Pusey*, 'Instead of this being a sign that there is something inherently wrong with such devotions, the presence of errors and abuses is, in fact, a sign of their underlying vitality.'¹³ As Newman explained:

That in times and places it [Mariology] has fallen into abuse, that it has even become a superstition, I do not care to deny; for, as I have said above, the same process which brings

to maturity carries on to decay, and things that do not admit of abuse have very little life in them. This of course does not excuse such excesses, or justify us in making light of them, when they occur. I have no intention of doing so as regards the particular instances which you bring against us.¹⁴

The *Letter to Pusey*, however, was much more than simply a refutation of an old friend who continued to hold religious beliefs that Newman had long ago abandoned, coupled with a defence of Marian piety, it was additionally a commentary on the type of Catholicism then in vogue in England in the nineteenth century. It was significant to Newman that the only English writer Pusey had cited was F.W. Faber—an Anglican convert who, along with Cardinal Henry Edward Manning (also a convert), had become zealous apologists for the ultramontane school.¹⁵ Faber had been the first English writer to translate de Montfort's *True Devotion* in 1863—a work that in 1865 Newman admitted he had not heard of.¹⁶ *True Devotion* had been one of Pusey's chief bodies of evidence against Marian piety. As has been mentioned, it contained a repetition of Bernard of Clairvaux's claims regarding humanity's need for a second—more human and approachable—mediator: namely, the mother of our Lord. This questionable Christology—one which Yves Congar rightly characterized in the twentieth century as monophysite (that is, as an implicit denial of an omnibenevolent human *and* divine Christ as the salvific means of human redemption)—had rightly led Pusey to think that some Catholics obscured Christ through their extravagant Marian theologies. For Newman Pusey had, to an extent, been given an unrepresentative view of English Catholicism by the zealous preaching of Faber. Faber had adopted a cultural style that was unintelligible to English men and women, whose approach to theology was far more literal and sober than the exuberance of continental piety.¹⁷ Pusey had not only confused doctrine with devotion, he had

misunderstood the nature of English Catholicism.

I suppose we owe it to the national good sense, that English Catholics have been protected from the extravagances which are elsewhere to be found. And we owe it also to the wisdom and moderation of the Holy See, which, in giving us the pattern for our devotion, as well as the rule of our faith, has never indulged in those curiosities of thought which are both so attractive to undisciplined imaginations and so dangerous to grovelling hearts. In the case of our own common people I think such a forced style of devotion would be simply unintelligible; as to the educated, I doubt whether it can have more than an occasional or temporary influence. If the Catholic faith spreads in England, these peculiarities will not spread with it.¹⁸

Faber had himself complained of the English approach to Mariology in the preface to his translation of de Montfort. Frightened of Protestants, they had devalued Mary's rightful place in Catholic faith and piety.

Here in England Mary is not half enough preached. Devotion to her is low and thin and poor. It is frightened out of its wits by the sneers of heresy. It is always invoking human respect and carnal prudence wishing to make Mary so little of a Mary that Protestants may feel at ease about her. Its ignorance of theology makes it unsubstantial and unworthy. It is not the prominent characteristic of our religion which it ought to be.¹⁹

Other historians have confirmed this restrained English approach to the place of our Lady in Catholic theology and piety. Inspired by centuries of Recusant piety—which had frequently been the subject of persecution, English Mariology had 'kept its head low'.²⁰ If Faber was critical of this phenomenon, however, Newman was not. Even if Catholic emancipation had, for the most part, freed Catholic piety from its second-class status, 'the English style' was born not out of persecution, but good sense and a solid commitment to orthodox Catholic tradition. It was a required attribute for English sensibilities.

There is a healthy devotion to the Blessed Mary, and there is an artificial; it is possible to love her as a Mother, to honour her as a Virgin, to seek her as a Patron, and to exalt her as a Queen, without any injury to solid piety and Christian good sense—I cannot help calling this the English style. I wonder whether you find anything to displease you in the *Garden of the Soul*, the *Key of Heaven*, the *Vade Mecum*, the *Golden Manual*, or the *Crown of Jesus*. These are the books to which Anglicans ought to appeal, who would be fair to us in this matter. I do not observe anything in them which goes beyond the teaching of the Fathers, except so far as devotion goes beyond doctrine.²¹

But Newman went further than simply arguing that all aspects of Marian devotion could be either accepted or rejected on the basis of cultural applicability. The truth was that in his view some Catholic writers had been promoting a Mariology that was, in truth, heretical. The classic example, already discussed, was the notion—as Newman put it—'that His [Christ's] present disposition towards sinners, as well as His Father's, is to reject them' and that 'Mary takes His place as an Advocate with Father and Son'.²² In light of this it may be asked: what is the point of the incarnation in such a theological scheme? How does such an idea relate to biblical passages such as Hebrews 10:19-23—especially when we approach the altar to receive the body and blood of Christ?²³ A century earlier Newman was equally as critical:

Sentiments such as these I freely surrender to your animadversion; I never knew of them till I read your book, nor, as I think, do the vast majority of English Catholics know them. They seem to me like a bad dream. I could not have

conceived them to be said. I know not to what authority to go for them, to Scripture, or to the Fathers, or to the decrees of Councils, or to the consent of schools, or to the tradition of the faithful, or to the Holy See, or to Reason. They defy all the *loci theologici*. There is nothing of them in the Missal, in the Roman Catechism, in the Roman *Raccolta*, in the *Imitation of Christ*, in Gother, Challoner, Milner or Wiseman, as far as I am aware. They do but scare and confuse me. . . . [A]s spoken by man to man, in England, in the nineteenth century, I consider them calculated to prejudice inquirers, to frighten the unlearned, to unsettle consciences, to provoke blasphemy, and to work the loss of souls.²⁴

Though Catholics have every right to defend Mariology as being not only biblical but in conformity with good sense and Catholic tradition, they also need to remember the admonition of *Lumen Gentium* to 'assiduously keep away from whatever, either by word or deed, could lead separated brethren or any other into error regarding the true doctrine of the Church'.²⁵ Though some Evangelicals fear it, our Lady is not another redeemer who replaces a distant and wrathful Christ.²⁶ She is the 'handmaid of the Lord' (Luke 1:38); a human being who said 'yes' to God. As Newman put it when he was still an Anglican, she is 'our pattern of faith'²⁷—a notion he would later elucidate after he became a Catholic. Like her we are also invited to say 'yes' to God. Our devotions to her need to reflect the Catholic idea of a loving God who, because of the gracious and salvific work of Christ, also desires us to love him and duly venerate the woman who brought him into this world.

NOTES

1. Edward B. Pusey, *The Church of England a Portion of Christ's One Holy Catholic Church, and a Means of Restoring Visible Unity. An Eirenicon In a Letter to the Author of 'The Christian Year'*, London: Rivingtons, 1865, 143 (emphasis in original).
2. Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography*,

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, 577-578.

3. Though published separately in 1866, the text is found within John Henry Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, vol.2, London: Longmans Green & Co., 1920.

4. Yves M-J. Congar OP, *Christ, Our Lady and the*

- Church, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1957, 71.
5. Congar OP, *Christ, Our Lady and the Church*, 72.
6. See 'Lumen Gentium' in Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1975, 421-422; Donald Bolen and Gregory Cameron, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ. The Seattle Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission*, London: Continuum, 2006.
7. Dwight Longenecker and David Gustafson, *Mary: A Catholic-Evangelical Debate*, Leominster: Gracewing, 2003, 213-214.
8. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, London: Longmans Green & Co., 1890, 40.
9. Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, 78-79.
10. Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, 80.
11. Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, 83.
12. Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, 81.
13. Robert M. Andrews, 'Does devotion to Our Lady ever go too far? Newman on Marian piety in the *Letter to Pusey* (1866)', *The Downside Review*, vol.130, no.460, 2012, 51.
14. Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, 89.
15. Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, 98-99.
16. John Henry Newman to John Keble, 8 October 1865 in Charles Stephen Dessain (ed.), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol.22, London: Thomas Nelson, 1972, 68.
17. Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, 115.
18. Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, 99-100.
19. F. W. Faber, 'Preface' in Louie-Marie Grignon de Montfort, *A Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, London: Burns & Lambert, 1863, ix.
20. Edmund Campion, *John Henry Newman: Friends, Allies, Bishops, Catholics*, Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1980, 4, 7; Henry St. John OP, 'Introduction' in Congar OP, *Christ, Our Lady and the Church*, xiv.
21. Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, 100.
22. Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, 113.
23. 'Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.' (Hebrews 10:19-23; New Revised Standard Version).
24. Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, 114-115.
25. 'Lumen Gentium' in Flannery (ed.), 421-422.
26. See for example, James R. White, *Mary—Another Redeemer?*, Bloomington: Bethany House, 1998.
27. John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between AD 1826 and AD 1843*, London: Rivingtons, 1880, 313-314.

Fundamentalists are sometimes horrified when the Virgin Mary is referred to as the Mother of God. However, their reaction often rests upon a misapprehension of not only what this particular title of Mary signifies but also who Jesus was, and what their own theological forebears, the Protestant Reformers, had to say regarding this doctrine.

—'Mary, Mother of God'. Catholic Answers