

Newman's critique of Vatican II

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In an essay on religious tolerance written for the feast of St Barnabas¹, John Henry Newman, then not yet a Catholic, made some very cogent observations concerning the Apostles and their defects; observations, which in this particular case might easily apply too to the Second Vatican Council.

Defects in Popes and Apostles

It was the late Fr Calmel OP who warned us against papolatry – a frame of mind, alas, which has blinded many to the defects not only of the longer serving conciliar and post conciliar Popes of Vatican II, but also to the fruits of their labour, the conciliar revolution, which one suspects is soon to be canonised along with both John XXIII and John Paul II.

Newman reminds us that defects were not lacking in the Apostles too. He recalls that Our Lord chose His Apostles from a cross-section of society - from the humble fisherman to the tax collector and that He worked with the metal He had at hand. Newman notes:

'The especial grace poured upon the Apostles and their associates, whether miraculous or moral, had no tendency to destroy their respective peculiarities of temper and character, to invest them with a sanctity beyond our imitation, or to preclude failings and errors which may be our warning.'

One can easily believe this in respect of Judas's failings and fatal errors, but also concerning Peter too whose thrice denial of Our Lord evokes emotions in all of us who have betrayed Our Lord in our sinful lives. But it was Peter also who was the subject of Our Lord's harshest rebuke: *'Get thou behind me, Satan'* – a reminder that the Apostle chosen by Our Lord to head His Church could stray from a correct reading of his Master's mind.

The Holy Father's recent comments regarding "triumphalism" have been taken by some traditionalists to apply to traditionalists alone, while others consider that, on the contrary they apply to progressives. In view of more recent comments, we suspect the former – a view which seems to be endorsed by progressives themselves. The initial confusion arose from the

¹ Sermon XXIII, *Newman's Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol II, pp. 274-290. Published by Rivingtons, London, Oxford and Cambridge, 1873.

word “triumphalism” which was used in the conciliar era by progressives as a nasty swearword, comparable in effect to the word *integriste*, to denigrate all that the pre-conciliar Church stood for. In the political arena it has a like term “fascist” which was a socialist swearword to attack any political opinion to the right of Marx, Lenin or Trotsky. If one uses these words today one can expect to be misunderstood. But just as the grace given to the Apostles did not preclude their failings and errors, these too are not precluded in pontiffs. One should always bear that in mind especially when a pontiff’s opinion or asides bear none of the hallmarks of pontifical authority.

Failings – A Warning

Newman advises us that these failings of the Apostles serve to provide us with a warning:

‘Moreover, the definiteness and evident truth of many of the pictures presented to us in the Gospels serve to realize to us the history, and to help our faith, while at the same time they afford us abundant instruction. Such, for instance, is the immature ardour of James and John, the sudden fall of Peter, the obstinacy of Thomas, and the cowardice of Mark. St. Barnabas furnishes us with a lesson in his own way; nor shall I be wanting in piety towards that Holy Apostle, if on this his day I hold him forth, not only in the peculiar graces of his character, but in those parts of it in which he becomes our warning, not our example.’

Warning ignored at Vatican II

It is Newman’s particular take on the failings of St Barnabas that have a resonance in the Church of today. Saint Barnabas had undoubted saintly attributes which gained him the title, “*the son of consolation*” which was given him, as it appears, to mark his character of kindness, gentleness, considerateness, warmth of heart, compassion, and munificence.’ But we will not dwell here upon his saintly attributes which we should endeavor to follow, but rather upon the parts ‘*in which he becomes our warning*’ - a warning - which we will see was ignored by John XXIII and the Council fathers.

We recall that John XXIII in his opening speech to the Council advised that ‘*the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than of severity*’ and that ‘*The Catholic Church...desires to show herself to be the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness toward the brethren who are separated from her.*’ A view which has been endorsed by Pope Francis. Conciliar documents and post-conciliar practice clearly demonstrate that this ecumenical benevolence extended beyond non-Catholic Christians to the

Jews, Muslims and other religions. We suspect that were Newman alive he would have considered such as *'indulgence towards the faults of others.'* He clearly thought so concerning St Barnabas' pandering to the judaizing Christians²:

'On the other hand, on two occasions his conduct is scarcely becoming an Apostle, as instancing somewhat of that infirmity which uninspired persons of his peculiar character frequently exhibit. Both are cases of indulgence towards the faults of others, yet in a different way; the one, an over-easiness in a matter of doctrine, the other, in a matter of conduct. With all his tenderness for the Gentiles, yet on one occasion he could not resist indulging the prejudices of some Judaizing brethren, who came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Peter first was carried away; before they came "he did eat with the Gentiles but when they were come, he withdrew, and separated himself fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; inasmuch, that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation." The other instance was his indulgent treatment of Mark, his sister's son, which occasioned the quarrel between him and St Paul...'

Charity becomes over-easiness

What exactly was that *'infirmity of his peculiar character'* which Newman sought to reveal? It is listed here among the following faults:

'He is an ensample and warning to us, not only as showing us what we ought to be, but as evidencing how the highest gifts and graces are corrupted in our sinful nature, if we are not diligent to walk step by step, according to the light of God's commandments. Be our mind as heavenly as it may be, most loving, most holy, most zealous, most energetic, most peaceful, yet if we look off from Him for a moment; and look towards ourselves, at once these excellent tempers fall into some extreme or mistake. Charity becomes over-easiness, holiness is tainted with spiritual pride, zeal degenerates into fierceness, activity eats up the spirit of prayer, hope is heightened into presumption.'

A Fashion for the time being

It was St Barnabas's charitable nature which Newman sought to highlight because *'he may be considered as the type of the better sort of men among us'*. Newman's opinion is as relevant today as it was when he made it:

² And yet when *'the Judaizing Christians troubled the Gentile converts with the Mosaic ordinances, Barnabas was sent with the same Apostle [Paul] and others from the Church of Jerusalem to relieve their perplexity.'*

'In every age it chooses some one or other peculiarity of the Gospel as the badge of its particular fashion for the time being, and sets up as objects of admiration those who eminently possess it ... certainly, this age, as far as appearance goes, may be accounted in its character not unlike Barnabas, as being considerate, delicate, courteous, and generous-minded in all that concerns the intercourse of man with man... There is a steady regard for the rights of individuals, nay, as one would fain hope in spite of misgivings, for the interest of the poorer classes, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.'

One can perhaps see in this the fashion in which the post-conciliar papacy has been cast from the benevolent "Good Pope John" to Pope Francis' concern for the poor etc. But here Newman asks the 42 billion dollar questions:

'Does not our kindness too often degenerate into weakness, and thus become not Christian Charity, but lack of Charity, as regards the objects of it? Are we sufficiently careful to do what is right and just, rather than what is pleasant? Do we clearly understand our professed principles, and do we keep to them under temptation?'

Languid and unmeaning kindness

His answer is a reproach to John XXIII's 'medicine of mercy' and to the effeminacy of post conciliar ecumenism and praxis:

'The history of St. Barnabas will help us to answer this question honestly. Now I fear we lack altogether, what he lacked in certain occurrences in it, firmness, manliness, godly severity. I fear it must be confessed, that our kindness, instead of being directed and braced by principle, too often becomes languid and unmeaning; that it is exerted on improper objects, and out of season, and thereby is uncharitable in two ways, indulging those who should be chastised, and preferring their comfort to those who are really deserving. We are over-tender in dealing with sin and sinners. We are deficient in jealous custody of the revealed Truths which Christ has left us. We allow men to speak against the Church, its ordinances, or its teaching, without remonstrating with them. We do not separate from heretics, nay, we object to the word as if uncharitable; and when such texts are brought against us as St. John's command, not to show hospitality towards them, we are not slow to answer that they do not apply to us.'

Opinions built on a contrary view

Newman too anticipated how expressions of support for firmness, manliness and godly severity would be met with in the post conciliar Church. How often are the terms judgemental and uncharitable flung at those who call for a more robust defence of our Catholic Faith. The admonitions of scripture (and previous papal teaching) against certain modern ecumenical behaviour are ignored as if they did not exist. Do these words of Newman not express this situation perfectly?

'For a long while they have forgotten that there were any such commands in Scripture [or papal teaching]; they have lived as though there were not, and not being in circumstances which immediately called for the consideration of them, they have familiarized their minds to a contrary view of the matter, and built their opinions upon it.'

Newman asks us to note how the proponents of this 'charitable' approach seek to manage these difficulties (i.e. reconciling their current lax opinion with that of previously sterner Church teaching):

'Observe how they rid themselves of it; it is by confronting it with other views of Christianity, which they consider incompatible with it: whereas the very problem which Christian duty requires us to accomplish, is the reconciling in our conduct of opposite virtues.'

Pleasing the lukewarm

But whereas Newman's article is predicated upon those who fall into that frame of mind because of their attempt to cultivate a single virtue, charity, to the neglect of others, our problem today arises not only because of that particular defect in the character of many modern Catholics but also because there are those of a Modernist disposition who actively seek to effect by design what others effect by defect in character. But no matter whether by design or defect the results are the same, as Newman, and the evidence of our own eyes demonstrates:

'Thus in the sacred province of religion, men are led on,— without any bad principle, without that utter dislike or ignorance of the Truth, or that self-conceit, which are chief instruments of Satan at this day, nor again from mere cowardice or worldliness, but from thoughtlessness, a sanguine temper, the excitement of the moment, the love of making others happy, susceptibility of flattery, and the

habit of looking only one way, [but also today by Modernist errors] —led on to give up Gospel Truths, to consent to open the Church to the various denominations of error which abound among us, or to alter our Services so as to please the scoffer, the lukewarm, or the vicious. To be kind is their one principle of action; and, when they find offence taken at the Church's creed, they begin to think how they may modify or curtail it, under the same sort of feeling as would lead them to be generous in a money transaction, or to accommodate another at the price of personal inconvenience. Not understanding that their religious privileges are a trust to be handed on to posterity, a sacred property entailed upon the Christian family, and their own in enjoyment rather than in possession, they act the spendthrift, and are lavish of the goods of others. Thus, for instance, they speak against the Anathemas of the Athanasian Creed, or of the Communion Service³, or of certain of the Psalms, and wish to rid themselves of them.'

Truly “Good” men

Such as these, as conform to the defect to which Newman refers, he regards as deficient in a due appreciation of the Christian Mysteries and he describes such characters as of this type:

'Undoubtedly, even the best specimens of these men are deficient in a due appreciation of the Christian Mysteries, and of their own responsibility in preserving and transmitting them; yet, some of them are such truly "good" men, so amiable and feeling, so benevolent to the poor, and of such repute among all classes, in short, fulfil so excellently the office of shining like lights in the world, and witnesses of Him "who went about doing good," that those who most deplore their failing, will still be most desirous of excusing them personally, while they feel it a duty to withstand them. Sometimes it may be, that these persons cannot bring themselves to think evil of others; and harbour men of heretical opinions or immoral life from the same easiness of temper which makes them fit subjects for the practices of the cunning and selfish in worldly matters. And sometimes they fasten on certain favourable points of character in the person

³ [The Encyclopedia Britannica states: 'This ceremony is derived from the custom of public penance in the early Church, when the sinner to be reconciled had to appear in the congregation clad in sackcloth and covered with ashes (cf. Tertullian, *_De Pudicitia_*, 13). At what date this use was extended to the whole congregation is not known. The phrase *_dies cinerum_* appears in the earliest extant copies of the Gregorian Sacramentary, and it is probable that the custom was already established by the 8th century. The Anglo-Saxon homilist Aelfric, in his *_Lives of the Saints_* (996 or 997), refers to it as in common use; but the earliest evidence of its authoritative prescription is a decree of the synod of Beneventum in 1091.' This reference by Newman obviously relates to the post-reformation Anglican Communion Service. Footnote added]

they should discountenance, and cannot get themselves to attend to any but these; arguing that he is certainly pious and well-meaning, and that his errors plainly do himself no harm;—whereas the question is not about their effects on this or that individual, but simply whether they are errors; and again, whether they are not certain to be injurious to the mass of men, or on the long run, as it is called.'

Barnabas contrasted to John

As if to bring home forcefully the failing of St Barnabas – an over-easiness in charity – Newman contrasts him with St John who, as Newman reminds us, abounded in the spirit of love:

'Now see in what he differed from Barnabas; in uniting charity with a firm maintenance of "the Truth as it is in Jesus." So far were his fervour and exuberance of charity from interfering with his zeal for God, that rather, the more he loved men, the more he desired to bring before them the great unchangeable Verities to which they must submit, if they would see life, and on which a weak indulgence suffers them to shut their eyes. He loved the brethren, but he "loved them in the Truth." He loved them for the Living Truth's sake which had redeemed them, for the Truth which was in them, for the Truth which was the measure of their spiritual attainments. He loved the Church so honestly, that he was stern towards those who troubled her. He loved the world so wisely, that he preached the Truth in it; yet, if men rejected it, he did not love them so inordinately as to forget the supremacy of the Truth, as the Word of Him who is above all....this is he who gives us that command about shunning heretics, which whether of force in this age or not, still certainly in any age is (what men now call) severe.'

Let everyone go his way

In summary, Newman asserts that: *'Strictness and tenderness had no "sharp contention" in the breast of the Beloved Disciple.'* The current Church's adherence to a fashion which places these in contention, which has abandoned strictness for tenderness, has led invariably to a weakening of the faith and an adoption, if not formal, at least informally of the doctrine of universal salvation in which all men will attain salvation, God having been so shaped by their concept of tenderness that He could not possibly apply that strictness of punishment, wrath etc. of which the Church once spoke. As Newman observes:

'Let it be observed then, that these ... systems, however different from each other in their principles and spirit, yet all agree in this one respect, viz., in overlooking that the Christian's God is represented in Scripture, not only as a

God of Love, but also as "a consuming fire." Rejecting the testimony of Scripture, no wonder they also reject that of conscience, which assuredly forebodes ill to the sinner, but which, as the narrow religionist maintains, is not the voice of God at all, — or is a mere benevolence, according to the disciple of Utility,— or, in the judgment of the more mystical sort, a kind of passion for the beautiful and sublime. Regarding thus "the goodness" only, and not "the severity of God," no wonder that they ungird their loins and become effeminate; no wonder that their ideal notion of a perfect Church, is a Church which lets every one go on his way, and disclaims any right to pronounce an opinion, much less inflict a censure on religious error.'

It is a return to the Faith in which strictness and tenderness are not in contention to which we must return – and a rejection of the effeminacy in which we are now ensnared. 'We must pray God', says Newman, 'thus "to revive His work in the midst of the years; " to send us a severe Discipline, the Order of St. Paul and St. John, "speaking the Truth in love," and "loving in the Truth".

The balance askew

The balance in the Church is all askew because there is a lack of proportion and of attention to the integrity of Doctrine. As a result, strictness has been strictly struck down. We need to be reminded of what that element of our faith amounts to and Newman forthrightly reminds us exactly what it is:

"knowing the terror of the Lord," fresh from the presence of Him "whose head and hairs are white like wool, as white as snow, and whose eyes are as a flame of fire, and out of His mouth a sharp sword," —a Witness not shrinking from proclaiming His wrath, as a real characteristic of His glorious nature, though expressed in human language for our sakes, proclaiming the narrowness of the way of life, the difficulty of attaining Heaven, the danger of riches, the necessity of taking up our cross, the excellence and beauty of self-denial and austerity, the hazard of disbelieving the Catholic Faith, and the duty of zealously contending for it. Thus only will the tidings of mercy come with force to the souls of men, with a constraining power and with an abiding impress, when hope and fear go together. Then only will Christians be successful in fight, "quitting themselves like men," conquering and ruling the fury of the world, and maintaining the Church in purity and power, when they condense their feelings by a severe discipline, and are loving, in the midst of firmness, strictness, and holiness.' (A S Fraser 16-09-2013)