

THE LETTERS AND DIARIES OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, edited by Charles Stephen Dessain and Vincent Ferrer Blehl, S.J., *Nelson*. Vol. XIV Papal aggression: July 1850 to December 1851 70s; Vol. XV The Achilli Trial: January 1852 to December 1853 84s.

In three years, five volumes of Newman's letters and diaries have already been published at the rate of two a year. In all, twenty volumes will be required to give us the material from Newman's conversion in 1845 until his death in 1890. In any other field but the neglected one of Newman studies this would be hailed as a major achievement: Americans have built factories upon the campus for projects much less worthy. But what is there here for the general reader?

The answer is simple. If we look at the correspondence columns of the newspapers we can see how, for most Catholics in this country, the Second Vatican Council has come not only as a surprise, but as a shock; and inasmuch as Pepys and Boswell provide us with that intimate grasp of the past that cannot be gained in any other way, so in these letters and diaries of Newman we come at last to what it really felt like to be a Catholic and a convert in the England of the first Vatican Council. To understand the need for the present Council, the greatness of Pope John, and the policies of his successor we must know much more than we do about the *true* history of the Church during the past hundred years. The general reader who uses the volumes of Newman's letters for this purpose, will find that he could not have chosen a better starting point.

Like all great diarists, Newman begins by understanding himself: 'I am kept in my circle by my moral tether, which pulls me up abruptly . . . I am like an instrument which cannot be played on except in a certain way'. Although, in one sense, this is a limitation of which Newman is fully aware, it does account for that firmness and clarity of grasp which is so marked a characteristic of his style as a writer and controversialist. He

speaks of undervaluing 'cut and dried arguments' in favour of his rule – 'to tell people my *feelings* about events which happen to me. I think people are perplexed till a key is given them, and then at once they thankfully accept it and use it'. Not only does this anticipate the method of the *Apologia*, it also explains Newman's unpopularity with those who preferred everything to be wrapped up in the tinsel of pseudo-spirituality.

It is this transparent honesty which enables Newman so effectively to diagnose the troubles of the Catholic Church at this time; and this was also why the converts used him as their leader and adviser. 'It is *cruel* that so many able men are doing *nothing*', he wrote in March 1851; and he felt that the policy of restoring the hierarchy and making Wiseman a Cardinal was the worst possible one in the circumstances: 'We want seminaries far more than sees. We want education, *view*, combination, organization'.

Instead of a formal, frontal assault in full papal panoply, Newman favoured a flexible, missionary, guerilla strategy . . . 'a great organization, going round the towns, giving lectures or making speeches . . . starting a paper, a review, etc. The great difficulty to this plan would be the Cardinal's status, would it not?'

But this would have involved making use of laymen, especially the convert laymen; and here there were not only ecclesiastical barriers – Newman notes Bishop Ullathorne's 'horror of laymen' – but social ones, which were probably the most fundamental. In important letters of advice to converts (which some reviewers have mis-interpreted) Newman attempts to account for 'the after-dinner conversations of priests and the recreations of nuns. They are to be cheerful

and they have nothing to be cheerful upon. So they are boisterous or silly'.

These are not the reflections of a superior person, but of one who wants to help his co-religionists manifest the strength that was within them. When they rallied to him as the Achilli trial reached its climax, and he faced the likelihood of a prison sentence, he speaks time and time again that in thus gaining 'the prayers of Catholics, I gain what is *inestimable*'. How different was his sense of isolation when, some seven years later, he was ostracized for advocating lay consultation.

All this provides us with fascinating clues to an explanation of why Newman allowed himself to be drawn into the setting up of the Catholic university in Dublin. From the start it is clear he doubted whether those who asked for it knew what they were intending. If they believed that the object of a Catholic university was to make men good Catholics, then what they were asking for was a college and not a university ('a university is not *ipso facto* a Church Institution . . . Men are Catholics *before* they are students of a university'). The crucial difference is whether, in speaking of a Catholic university, your stress

falls on *Catholic* or *university*: Newman stressed the latter, Cullen and his supporters the former. Thus arose a celebrated misunderstanding, when Newman was asked for stones to fling at the advocates of mixed education in a divided country, and offered in return the bread of a liberal and theological education.

The Letters provide us with much hitherto unpublished documentation (the instructions by Cardinal Cullen to Newman on the scope of his projected discourses, and Newman's frequently reiterated belief that 'the holy Father has spoken, and a sufficient blessing will follow his word'), but they do more: they set this fateful and fatal decision within its context of 'one who realizes that he can no longer separate his own salvation from the endeavour to save others, of one who strives constantly to put the message of which he is the custodian into the mainstream of human discourse . . . We are not civilization, but we promote it'.

Although these are not Newman's words, they stand for him. I have taken them from a work which, nowadays, no-one would care to delate to Rome – the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*.

John Coulson

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