Newman’s Assent of Faith

John Henry Newman, Oxford scholar and famous English convert to Catholicism (1801-1890), is acknowledged by most for his English prose, his lofty ideas on university education and the doctrine of the development of Christian doctrine. Yet what does he say to the average person striving to live a Christian life in a secular world? Newman advised to walk by faith and to win one’s salvation with “fear and trembling.” In other words, if you want the prize you must fight for it, and this calls for a humble faith in God.

On one level Newman is easier to understand than some of his longer texts may lead to think. His parochial sermons were addressed to his parishioners and students. One of the major themes in these sermons was faith and obedience to God. These sermons urge the reader on to childlike simplicity and trust in God. These dispositions enable children to listen with awe to descriptions or tales. Children distinguish between right from wrong and are free from a proud spirit of independence. Newman comments on how a child’s mind gives us a striking pattern “of what may be called a church temper. Christ has so willed it, that we should get at the Truth, not by ingenious speculations, reasonings, or investigations of our own, but by teaching.”1 Children are ready to learn from others; they don’t set themselves as the measure of truths.

Although as we will point out faith begins with a personal experience of God through one’s moral conscience, most truths of faith are learnt from others. Faith is the assent of the mind to what God reveals through the Bible and is taught by the Church. Newman points out, however, that many truths are received implicitly. Often people cannot explain what they know to be true and yet this does not diminish the truth of their claims. An Englishman may never have traveled to the shore, but he is absolutely certain that England is an island.2

Newman countered the Enlightenment’s understanding of reason, a reduced notion of reason, which sets itself as the judge of all truth and demands scientific evidence. He argued that faith in God is possible without formal evidence, and he did not give weight to “paper arguments” about God’s existence. As he would write “Many a man will live and die upon a dogma: no man will be a martyr for a conclusion,”3 the result of a logical syllogism. He insists, “No one, I say, will die for his calculations: he dies for realities.”4

As a young clergyman, and even earlier, Newman gave a lot of thought to the question of faith. His dealings with Charles, one of his brothers, and others made him think a lot about faith in relation to revelation, Tradition and the Church. It was, however, in correspondence with William Froude, a younger brother of one of his best friends

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3 Ibid, p. 89.
4 Ibid.
Richard Hurrell Froude, that Newman developed his understanding of faith. The correspondence over many years became the foundation for one of Newman’s major works, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870). The first part of this book is on how man comes to believe or to give religious assent.

And here is where Newman explained that for a child, God is a real being. A child perceives the existence of God as a Sovereign Law Giver and Judge, someone outside of himself. God is not a notion or a conclusion. In chapter five of the *Grammar* Newman lays out this argument for the existence of God based on the moral conscience. By means of his moral conscience a child has an image of God, which although it is basic and must grow, and can be dimmed or obliterated is real. “It is an image of the good God, good in Himself, good relatively to the child, with whatever incompleteness; an image, before it has been reflected on, and before it is recognized as a notion. Thought he cannot explain or define the word “God,” when told to use it, his acts show that to him it is far more than a word.”

Something similar can be said for many adults: they cannot explain religious truths, but they know them because they have a moral conscience that speaks to them of right and wrong, and of a Law Giver and Judge.

In the same way, all men can have this real knowledge of God – have faith – in God and in that he creates, provides, judges, rewards and punishes. The question of the certainty of this faith soon arises. Over the years Newman and William Froude discussed the subject of certainty and certitude. Froude claimed the right to skepticism of any truth: “Our doubts in fact, appear to me as sacred, and I think deserve to be cherished as sacredly as our beliefs.” In a reply to Froude, Newman distinguished between religion and science: “Much lies in the meaning of the words certainty and doubt – much again in our duties to a person, as e.g. a friend – Religion is not merely a science, but a devotion.”

Nicholas Lash, emeritus professor of Divinity at Cambridge University, explains that Newman made an important distinction between “personal” and “scientific” forms of inquire into truth. Unlike in science, evidence is not the foundation for faith. Newman defended the rationality of “simple faith.” Still Newman tried to find an adequate answer to the problem of the certitude of the assent of faith, and he dedicated part two of the *Grammar of Assent* to explain how a person reaches certitude. He called this the illative faculty or sense. This is a natural mode of reasoning which in unconscious and implicit; it goes from concrete thing to other things, not from propositions to propositions as formal inference or logic.

For Newman, a man reaches certitude through this illative sense. A skeptic might reply that this is tantamount to a leap of faith, but there is no such leap because the assent of faith has a cumulative and pain staking dimension. It has something of a process and we

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8 Nicholas Lash, Introduction to *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, p. 5.
grow into a conviction, rather than leap into it. Newman used the example of a polygon inscribed in a circle. As its sides become smaller it tends to become the circle. It never becomes the circle but the mind closes the gap.

Faith is a personal act (not a subjective one) by which a person apprehends religious truths from others. As noted Newman, humility, a child-like spirit, is a necessary condition for belief. Without humility one is incapable of believing in God; a person establishes his own universe and close him or herself to any supernatural reality. Pride closes a person in a limited sphere of rationality.

At times belief in the indissolubility of marriage, the Pope’s authority, the Real Presence, or other doctrines are difficult to explain; and some Catholics don’t know how to explain them. Obedience of faith still holds claim of the believer’s mind, which subjects itself to God who reveals himself and speaks through the Church. Unlike theological propositions, faith is not a logical conclusion. It is a higher knowledge, which is not contrary to reason, but which admits of an order higher than that of science.

When God reveals himself man must act on God’s terms. Man must accept with humility what God reveals. The celebrated poem “Lead Kindly Light” suggests that Newman did this. At the age of 32, returning to England after a long Mediterranean journey and a life-threatening illness in Sicily, Newman humbly asks God to lead him on. Although once “pride ruled my will,” he prays, “Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see/ The distant scene - one step enough for me.”


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