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John Henry Cardinal Newman's Catholic Mariology

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JOHN HENRY NEWMAN was as intellectually dedicated to a theological and historical consideration of Mariology as he was affectively devoted to Mary. Newman's writings on the Mother of God can be divided chronologically into three groups: those written while he was a committed Anglican (c. 1823-c. 1839), those written during his transitional period (c. 1839-1845), and those written as a Catholic (1845-1890). This article focuses on the last two periods, with particular attention to important underlying points of continuity in his thought. Newman maintained a sense of devotion to the Mother of our Lord that served as a common denominator for each of these periods. His later considerations of Mary, however, are more theological than devotional insofar as their intellectual context is his understanding of the development of doctrine, and thus a broader grasp of the scope of historical theology than was operative for him prior to his period of transition.

Nearly ten years after his reception into the Catholic Church in October, 1849, much dissention arose regarding the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception by Pope Pius IX in the apostolic constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* of 1854. This definition was promulgated *ex cathedra*, an expression of papal infallibility that bound its acceptance to the consciences of all faithful Catholics. In Newman's addresses to the negative reactions of evangelical Anglicans and English protestants, he suggests that at issue was not so much the Marian dogma proclaimed as was the exercise of papal (and ecclesial) power in defining it. Newman writes in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1865), regarding his earlier life between 1841 to 1845, "Such devotional manifestations [as St. Alfonso Ligurori's *Sermons*] in honour of our Lady had been my great crux as regards Catholicism; I say frankly, I do not fully enter into them now; I trust I do not love her the less, because I cannot enter into them."¹ He observes that the circulation of such extreme pieces of Marian devotion prejudiced him regarding the Roman

Church, on account of what was commonly called Catholicism's "Mariolatry."²

Regarding his Anglican days, Newman recalls, "I had a true devotion to the Blessed Virgin, in whose College I lived, whose Altar I served, and whose Immaculate Purity I had in one of my earliest printed Sermons made much of."³ That sermon was delivered on the Feast of the Annunciation in 1835, roughly ten years before his reception into Roman Catholicism. In it, he speaks of the reverence due to the Virgin Mary as the Second Eve, as the Mother of God, and as the Chief of the undefiled followers of Christ. Newman preached:

Strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might, she "staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief;" she believed when Zacharias doubted, — with a faith like Abraham's she believed and was blessed for her belief, and had the performance of those things which were told her by the Lord. And when sorrow came upon her afterwards, it was but the blessed participation of her Son's sacred sorrows, not the sorrow of those who suffer for their sins.⁴

Even after becoming a Catholic, Newman's life of devotion was always correlated with such a deepened understanding of doctrine, leading him to distinguish between distinct national forms of popular piety, such as the Italian or English, both of which may be legitimately, albeit distinctly, rooted in the ancient Church of the Fathers.

The work that most explicitly marks the beginnings of his period of transition is a parochial sermon for the Feast of the Purification, "The Theory of Development in Christian Doctrine," offered in his

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last year at St. Mary's in 1843. In expounding on Luke 2:19, "But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart," he described Mary as the archetype of the individual and collective faith of the Christian community. In Newman's own words,

She does not think it enough to accept, she dwells upon it; not enough to possess, she uses it; not enough to assent, she develops it; not enough to submit the Reason, she reasons upon it; not indeed reasoning first, and believing afterwards, with Zacharias, yet first believing without reasoning, next from love and reference, reasoning after believing. And thus she symbolizes to us, not only the faith of the unlearned, but of the doctors of the Church also, who have to investigate, and weigh, and define, as well as to profess the Gospel; to draw the line between truth and heresy; to anticipate or remedy the various aberrations of wrong reason; to combat pride and recklessness with their own arms; and thus to triumph over the sophist and the innovator.⁵

According to Newman, the Church, like Mary, collectively "dwells upon" and "develops" its inward ideas and impressions of divine truth into articulations of Revealed Truth. But this properly Marian process in no way exhausts that Truth, which is ultimately not a proposition but Christ himself — who as one person human and divine is inexhaustible.⁶ This described process receives its fullest treatment in his *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* of 1845, in which he considers "Doctrinal Developments Viewed in Themselves" in the first part and "Doctrinal Developments Viewed Relatively to Doctrinal Corruptions" in the second. Newman writes,

the increase and expansion of the Christian Creed and Ritual, and the variations which have attended the process in the case of individual writers and Churches, are necessary attendants on any philosophy or polity which takes possession of the intellect and heart, and has any wide or extended dominion; that, from the nature of the human mind, time is necessary for the full comprehension and perfection of great ideas; and that the highest

and most wonderful truths, though communicated to the world once for all by inspired teachers, could not be comprehended all at once by the recipients, but, as being received and transmitted by minds not inspired and through media which were human, have required only the longer time and deeper thought for their full elucidation. This may be called the *Theory of Development of Doctrine*.⁷

His argument carries with it an air of reasonableness and the rhetorical gravity of the unity-in-diversity of the Christian theological tradition. Newman makes the case that Christianity exists in the public sphere of thought and discourse, and is thus subject to the natural course of human development of ideas; in his own words, "It has from the first had an objective existence, and has thrown itself upon the great concourse of men. Its home is in the world; and to know what it is, we must seek it in the world, and hear the world's witness of it."⁸

The relationship between the source of Christianity and its objective existence in the world as it is encountered and experienced is what he terms the process of development, the natural concourse of a seed into its full fruition:

This process, whether it be longer or shorter in point of time, by which the aspects of an idea are brought into consistency and form, I call its development, being the germination and maturation of some truth or apparent truth on a large mental field. . . . The development then of an idea is not like an investigation worked out on paper, in which each successive advance is a pure evolution from the foregoing, but it is carried on through and by means of communities of men and their leaders and guides; and it employs their minds as its instruments, and depends upon them, while it uses them.⁹

Newman's understanding of that which constitutes an historical "idea" is sufficiently broad that it allows the category of idea to encapsulate all things Christian. He does not make an arbitrary dichotomy between *theoria* and *praxis*, *contemplatio* and *actio*, to the effect that he reduces Christianity to its intellectual and

theoretical proclamations; rather, he allows for mutually developmental roles among *lex orandi*, *lex credendi* and *lex agendi*, under a specific category that he terms “ethical developments.” The most central idea of Christianity, its most foundational doctrine, is the Incarnation. This is the most basic idea from which all development proceeds; the incarnation is the river that flows, the complex irrigation of history that meets the hearts and minds of men and women through the ages, and yet continues to stream as it becomes further contained in little cracks and crevices, the various articulations of theology. Newman enumerates five different kinds of development which have an influence on Christianity: political, logical, historical, ethical, and metaphysical developments. Each of these orbits around the Incarnational center, the Christic Sun of Christianity’s universe, such that when considering Mary, for example, in relation to the identity of the Son, one must confess her as *Theotokos*, the Mother of God, since all theological claims must be relativized to our understanding of the Christianity’s central idea, the Incarnation.¹⁰

This is the context in which Newman addresses questions regarding the office of the Blessed Virgin and the devotion paid to her. He presents a litany of patristic citations and the writings of controversies to demonstrate that there is a mono-directional, absolute dependence, both historically and logically, of Mariology upon Christology. Viewed in the history of biblical exegesis, the inevitable consequence, Newman avers, of St. Augustine’s treatment of the question of the Old Testament theophanies as created mediums of the divine presence offers the theological (and historical) provocation for the introduction of the *cultus Sanctorum*, since “if those appearances were creatures, certainly creatures were worshipped by the Patriarchs, not indeed in themselves, but as the token of a Presence greater than themselves.”¹¹ In response to Arianism, notes Newman, Athanasius proclaimed that it was not the Word *qua* Word that was exulted and glorified, but the human nature which he, being truly God, assumed; thus, “Christ, in rising, raises His

saints with Him to the right hand of power. They become instinct with His life, of one body with His flesh, divine sons, immortal kings, gods. He is in them, because He is in human nature; and He communicates to them that nature, deified by becoming His, that them It may deify. He is in them by the Presence of His Spirit, and in them He is seen.”¹² The theological consequence of proclaiming

that the eternally-begotten Word became human flesh is a redefining of human nature, thereby eliciting the possibility of divine and exulted appellations and honorary titles for the saints, which are always (and always only) analogical correlatives of the Lord who abides and lives in them, among which Mary stands the brightest and the best.

In a later work, *A Letter to the Rev. E. B. Pusey, D.D., on His Recent Eirenicon*, written in 1866, Newman more explicitly treats questions of Mariology and more

clearly distinguishes between faith and devotion: “I fully grant that devotion toward the Blessed Virgin has increased among Catholics with the progress of the centuries; I do not allow that the doctrine concerning her has undergone a growth, for I believe that has been in substance one and the same from the beginning.”¹³ Much like Hans Urs von Balthasar would do after him, Newman seeks the fundamental Marian principle, that is, “the *prima facie* view of her person and office, the broad outline laid down of her, the aspect under which she comes to us, in the writings of the Fathers.”¹⁴ In keeping with his understanding of the development of ideas, and the centrality of the Incarnation, Newman inquires into the basis of all Marian discourse, whether intellectual or affective, in the orders of history and logic: she is the second Eve.¹⁵ For Newman this interpretation seems undeniable on account of the parallel with the Old Testament involved; but its significance rests on the fact that this parallelism is the doctrine of the Fathers, from the earliest of times. “This being established,” Newman posits, “by the position and office of Eve in our fall, we are able to determine the position and office of Mary in our restoration.”¹⁶



John Henry Newman, c. 1850

He treats two inferences that are logically and historically adduced from the “rudimental doctrine itself”: her sanctity and her greatness. The underlying parallel in the inversion of Eve’s sinfulness with Mary’s sanctity serves as the historico-logical provocation for such dogmatic proclamations as the Immaculate Conception, whereas the emphasis on her greatness contextualizes her role in the economy of Grace, eliciting the titles of *Theotokos*, *Deipara*, “Mother of God,” and the like. For Newman, the significance of such a process rests in the fact that it is not he who deduces such conclusions, but the Church of history, the Fathers of the Church. By extension, in treating the question of her intercessory role, Newman claims that it is the inevitable result of two truths, both dependent on the Incarnation of the Word in the person of Jesus Christ: first, that one should suppliantly invoke the saints and have recourse to their prayers; and second, that “the Blessed Mary is singularly dear to her Son and singularly exalted in sanctity and glory.”¹⁷ That one should or could make intercessory prayer to the Virgin Mary does not seem to be the issue at hand, but *in what manner* one should do so — given the apparent excesses in Catholic devotion from the perspective of his protestant audience. Newman’s response maintains its gaze upon the Incarnate Lord as central; yet his universe is freighted with a sacramental quality in which all things in heaven and earth, and especially the saints,



John Henry Cardinal Newman, c. 1889

symbolize and make present the one Lord in whom they participate and who dwells in them:

May God’s mercy keep me from the shadow of a thought dimming the light or blunting the keenness of that love for Him, which is our sole happiness and our sole salvation! But when He became man He brought home to us His incommunicable attributes with a distinctiveness that precludes the possibility of our lowering Him by exalting a creature. He alone has an entrance into our soul, reads our secret thoughts, speaks to our heart, applies to us spiritual pardon and strength. On Him we solely depend. He alone is our inward life; He not only regenerates us, but (to allude to a higher mystery) *semper gignit*; He is ever renewing our new birth and our heavenly sonship. In this sense He may be called, as in nature, so in grace, our real father. Mary is only our adopted mother, given us from the cross; her presence is above, not on earth; her office is external, not within us. Her name is not heard in the administration of the Sacraments. Her work is not one of ministration towards us; her power is indirect. It is her prayers that avail, and they are effectual by the *fiat* of Him who is our all in all. Nor does she hear us by any innate power, or any personal gift; but by His manifestation to her of the prayers which we make her. When Moses was on the Mount, the Almighty told him of the idolatry of his people at the foot of it, in order that he might intercede for them; and thus it is the Divine Presence which is the intermediating Power by which we reach her and she reaches us.¹⁸

This is the understanding of the nature of mediation and intercession to which Newman makes recourse in attempting to explain the most devotional (and controversial) Marian writings, such as those of St. Alphonsus de Liguori or St. Louis de Montfort.

In treating such Catholic writings, Newman makes the distinction between different nationalistic tendencies in devotion. Even in his elderly days as a Cardinal, his manner of devotion to Mary was not that of an Italian brand, though he would confess to have

no less love for her.¹⁹ Newman preached and offered discourses on Mary on many occasions, especially in his Catholic years, such as his discourses on “The Glories of Mary for the Sake of Her Son” and “On the Fitness of the Glories of Mary” in 1849. He also wrote many Meditations and Devotions, including litanies, on the Blessed Virgin, reflecting upon her Immaculate Conception, the Annunciation, her Sorrows, the Assumption, among other topics. Newman’s spirituality, even to his last, viewed Mary sacramentally — as one who makes present the Risen Lord whom she signifies:

When strangers are so unfavorably impressed with us, because they see Images of our Lady in our Churches, and crowds flocking about her, they forget that there is a Presence within the sacred walls, infinitely more awful, which claims and obtains from us a worship transcendently different from any devotion we pay to her. That devotion might indeed tend to idolatry, if it were encouraged in Protestant Churches, where there is nothing higher than it to attract the worshipper; but all the images that a Catholic Church ever contained, all the Crucifixes at its Altars brought together, do not so affect its frequenters, as the lamp which betokens the presence or absence there of the blessed sacrament.²⁰

To the end of his life, the Cardinal maintained his gaze on the Second Eve, his prayers towards the *Theotokos*, his devotion for the Immaculately Conceived; and he unfailingly saw in her face, heard in her petitions, and paid his devotions to, not the Mother in these things extolled, but the Son who made his dwelling in her.

NOTES

1. John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. by Ian Ker (London: Penguin, 1994), 179.
2. *Ibid.*, 179.
3. *Ibid.*, 155.
4. John Henry Newman, “Sermon 12. The Reverence Due to the Virgin Mary,” in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1908), 137.
5. John Henry Newman, “Sermon 15. The Theory of developments in Religious Doctrine,” in *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1909) 313-314.
6. Cf. *ibid.*, 313; 319-321.
7. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, sixth edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 29-30.
8. *Ibid.*, 3-4.
9. *Ibid.*, 38.
10. Newman would understand the term *Theotokos* to be an example of a logical development; see *ibid.*, 54. Newman treats the question of the relationship between “Our Lord’s Incarnation, and the dignity of His Mother and of all Saints,” in Chapter IV, Section 2, in which he writes, “The votaries of Mary do not exceed the true faith, unless the blasphemers of her Son came upon it. The Church of Rome is not idolatrous, unless Arianism is orthodox”; *ibid.*, 144.
11. *Ibid.*, 138.
12. *Ibid.*, 140.
13. John Henry Newman, *A Letter to the Rev. E. B. Pusey, D.D., on His Recent Eirenicon* (New York: Lawrence Kehoe, 1866), 16.
14. *Ibid.*, 18. For Hans Urs von Balthasar, the fundamental Marian principle is found in Mary’s role as *Theotokos*; see Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Marian Principle,” in *idem, Elucidations*, tr. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 101-113.
15. Newman, *Letter*, 18-28.
16. *Ibid.*, 19.
17. *Ibid.*, 37.
18. *Ibid.*, 44-45.
19. Newman, *Apologia*, 179.
20. Newman, *Letter*, 49.