

"ALMOST A DOGMA:"

J.H.NEWMAN'S THEOLOGY OF CORRUPTION IN THE CHURCH.

Is it possible in our day to speak credibly of the Church as holy? In this article I will propose that sinfulness or corruption is as much a mark of the Church as apostolicity or holiness. Never more than a community of forgiven sinners, the Church is never holy in the sense of being sinless. In fact concocting illusions of sinlessness, makes asking for forgiveness impossible, ensures heavier layers of dissimulation, pretence and hypocrisy in its institutions, and creates conditions for the tsunami of recrimination and hostility which has it reeling today. Until we accept our personal, group and institutional propensity towards corruption in so many forms, we can never truly desire to be delivered from it. The holiness of the Church does not consist in being free from the corruption that is found more or less everywhere else. It consists in accepting that it too is corrupt, in not denying it and pretending that it does not exist, that it is the invention of hostile groups seeking only its downfall; in facing up to that corruption, in combating it at whatever cost, in seeking forgiveness for it and though the being forgiven, acquire the capacity to mediate forgiveness. By forgiveness, I do not mean a shortcut to reintegration that leaps over repentance, restitution and humility, but receiving the endless love of God despite the fact that we do not deserve it.

Corruption, it seems, is as much a mark of the contemporary Church as of the medieval Church or that of the Dark ages, and if one age differs in appearances more than essentials from any other, then corruption is a permanent mark of the Church. Few minds have grappled with these issues as honestly and faithfully as did John Henry Newman's.^[1] He has much to teach us.

PERVERSION OF THE BEST

Writing to his mother from Malta in January 1833, Newman spoke of how the Roman Catholic Church was "a beautiful flower run to seed." He found it "fearful to have before one's eyes the perversion of all the best, the holiest, the most exalted feelings of human nature"^[2]. Rome was one "of the four beasts" and Catholicism "as a system of corrupt religion (and it is very corrupt) must receive severe inflictions"^[3].

The celebration of the feast of the annunciation in *S. Maria sopra Minerva* gave him the opportunity to see the Pope's foot being kissed: an "unedifying dumbshow," causing him to write: "How shall I name thee, Light of the wide west or heinous error-seat"?^[4] He noted that: "there are grave and far-spreading scandals among the Italian priesthood and there is mummery in abundance"."As to the individual members of this cruel Church: "who can but love and feel for them?"^[5]

At this stage, still Anglican and suspicious of Rome, the undeniable corruption evokes ambivalence rather than condemnation: "the lamentable mixture of truth and error which Rome exhibits - the corruption of the highest...principles...with malignant poisons"^[6]. His dilemma is part of a greater one for despite the good influences of Christian religion: "the great multitude of men have to all appearances, remained in a spiritual point of view, no better than before"^[7].

He writes to friend Froude in January 1835: "there is that in Romanism which makes it a duty to keep aloof from it, there is a mixture of corruption, which, when seen, is a duty to protest against".^[8] Faced with criticism of Anglicanism on the part of Wiseman, his answer to "Roman objections" would be: "you have corrupted, we have only omitted"^[9].

The concluding part of 'Via Media,' the central literary achievement of this period in his life, contains the reflection that the whole course of Christianity: "is but one series of troubles and disorders. Every century is like every other, and to those who live in it, seems worse than all times before it. The Church is ever ailing..." All he can turn to is the conviction that God will be there: "snatching them from the surge of evil, even when the waters rage most furiously."^[10]

NO MARKS OF SANCITY

In 1837 Newman reviewed writings of Lamennais (1782-1854). To Newman's thinking, Lamennais found the See of Peter: "removed from the rock on which it was originally built and based upon the low and marshy ground which lies beside it". Newman finds himself ambivalent in the face of this and writes of: "the Papal power as an evil, yet not a pure evil, as in itself human, yet, relative to the world, divine"^[11].

When at his most Anglo-catholic he still feels that: "Rome must change first of all her spirit. I must see more sanctity in her than I do at present. Alas! I see no marks of sanctity - or if any, they are chiefly confined to converts from us..."^[12] Historians may debate if what is implied here is a position he ever changed: union for Anglicans, meant they becoming more "Catholic" and the Catholics becoming more "Christian". This see-saw comparison often recurs: the Church of England has "certain imperfections" that of Rome "certain corruptions"; the English Church: "glories in what looks so very like schism," yet the Roman: "practises what looks so very like idolatry". At this stage however, the "quasi-idolatry" is almost a "note" to discourage: "a man of Catholic feelings from her communion"^[13].

In 1841 just after the famous episode as recounted in *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, when he "saw clearly" the parallelism between his present situation and that of the Arian controversy - with the Anglicans in the position of the semi-Arians - he wrote to Wiseman stating his satisfaction that Wiseman: "could admit that there was 'corruption and scandal in his Church;' " adding; "I do not know why so great a Communion should not feel itself at liberty to confess many things of itself". Often Catholics gave answers that appeared to be "shuffles:" being "candid" would gain the favour of their interlocutors.^[14]

He wished the Roman Church would take a: "truer more manly, more sensible more Christian line, removing scandals and unlearning bigotry". Catholics he described, as being in a "deplorably low ethical state."^[15] Two years later, writing to Keble, he bemoans the "atrocious lies" being circulated about him and for the first time, wonders if the same might be true of Catholicism, stating that it has always been a note of the Church to be "under odium and in disgrace"^[16].

DISTINGUISHING 'CORRUPTION' FROM 'EXPANSION'

Still an Anglican, writing the *Development of Doctrine*, his wondering if the development of doctrine that has taken place in the (Catholic) Church is not "expansion" but "corruption," leads him to work out criteria for distinguishing these. "There is no corruption if it retains one and the same type, the same principles, the same organization; if its beginnings anticipate its subsequent phases and its later phenomenon protect and subserve its earlier; if it has the power of assimilation and revival, and a vigorous action from first to last"^[17].

He develops the first of these notes in a rhetorical passage on; "the religious communion claiming a divine commission"; "it is intolerant and engrossing, and tends to a new modelling of society; it breaks laws, it divides families. It is a gross superstition; it is charged with the foulest crimes; it is despised by the intellect of the day; it is frightful to the imagination of the many". The reader might almost forget that by this stage (August 1845) he is speaking in favour of the Catholic Church and seeing corruption as an indication of its reality and truth.^[18]

After his conversion to Catholicism (October 1846), in a minor controversy which arose with Faber and Ullathorne in regard to hagiography emphasising the supernatural and the scandalous, Newman wrote that he had not been converted by evasions of Catholic scandals.^[19]

While discussing the unity of the Catholic Church in the context of a critique of Anglo-Catholicism, he argued that it was no more compromised by the Jansenist heresy which had lasted two hundred years, than the early Church was by the Monophysite heresy, which had lasted twice as long. From this he argues that corruptions of the truth are as much to be expected as rejections.^[20]

In 1864, he noted "the tendency of devotion to increase Church lands and property," leading to corruption and secularization." He admitted that: "history supplies us with instances in the Church, where legitimate power has been harshly used."^[21] He modifies this somewhat by the observation that high authorities act through instruments and: "we know how such instruments claim for themselves the name of their principals who thus get the credit of faults which are not really theirs". He goes to say: "many a man desires a reformation of an abuse...but forgets to ask himself whether the right time for it is come."^[22]

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

Since: "religion acts on the affections; who is to hinder these, when once roused, from gathering in their strength and running wild?" He develops this: "the religion of the multitude is ever vulgar and abnormal; it ever will be tintured 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... if you make use of religion to improve them, they will make use of religion to corrupt it."^[23] The Church: "may find it quite impossible to root out the tares without rooting out the wheat with them."^[24]

As his ecclesiology develops, corruption is seen as inseparable from the life of the Church: "things that do not admit of abuse have very little life in them." The argument becomes almost incongruous: "I grant that a Protestant world cannot

commit that sin which a Catholic world can." There was never a time when: "the greatest scandals did not exist in the Church and act as impediments to the success of its mission". Scandal in the Church, he reminds us, was predicted by Christ himself who spoke of it: "as in its very constitution made up of good and bad" It has existed since Judas and is bound up with the very constitution of the Church. His position reaches its apogee: the corruption of the Church was: "*almost a dogma*"^[25].

MACHINATIONS

Probably alluding to the machinations against him of Cardinal Barnabo who had inserted a secret clause in a letter to Ullathorne, that although Newman's name was to be used to establish a Catholic foundation at Oxford, Newman himself was not to be allowed to go there - presumably because thereby Catholics might attend a non-Catholic university. Newman described the secret clause as being: "as imbecile as it is crooked and cruel." What remained 'intolerable' was that: 'we should be placed at the mercy of a secret tribunal, which dares to speak in the name of the Pope, and would institute, if it could, a regime of espionage, denunciation and terrorism' (1867).^[26] He added that among Italian ecclesiastics "double-dealing" was a "tradition"; and over there, "every man has his price". He clearly saw the opposition to him as more than personal: "a reign of terror has begun, a reign of denunciation, secret tribunals and moral assassination"^[27].

Despite reservations as to the advisability of defining papal infallibility, he wrote that: "as to the scandalous lives of Popes, this did not stop them, any more than Balaaam or Caiaphas, from speaking religious truth."^[28]

At the same time he wrote that: "we are not ripe yet for the Pope's infallibility"^[29]. To force the dogma on the Church in a surreptitious way was "crooked". "A great dogmatic question was being treated merely as a move in ecclesiastical politics." To Bishop Moriarty of Kerry he stated that although the Council would be protected by the Holy Spirit from teaching error, it was not divinely prevented from acting inopportunistly. History showed Councils had two characteristics: "a great deal of violence and intrigue on the part of the actors in them, and a great resistance to their definitions on the part of portions of Christendom"^[30].

ABUSE OF POWER

Faced with the declaration of the dogma, he immediately and unreservedly accepted it - and was relieved at its moderate and restricted scope. The bright side of the Papacy was at least: "as prominent as the dark". But: "where you have power, you will have the abuse of power - and the more absolute, the stronger, the more sacred the power, the greater and more certain will be its abuse"^[31].

While he: "always inclined to the notion that a General Council was the magisterial exponent of the Creed", still a: "General Council may be hampered and hindered by the action of infidel Governments upon a weak or time-serving episcopate"^[32]. The proceedings had been scandalous, but it was not the first scandal at a Council and good would come out of it. Viewed in the light of Vatican 11, his conclusion was prophetic: "let us be patient, let us have faith and a new Pope, and a re-assembled Council may trim the boat"^[33].

Almost paradoxically, even as the conviction grew and deepened as to the truth of the "Roman communion" as the true church, he could not blind his eyes to its corruptions and scandals.^[34] Returning to his historical research on the Fathers, he offers his predictably balanced view of the Council of Ephesus: "As to the dogmatic authority of the doctrine which was defined at the Council, it is not at all affected by the scandals...that truth is wrought out by the indirect operation of error and sin, and that the supernatural gifts of the Gospel are held in earthen vessels and do not guarantee moral perfection in their possessors"^[35].

INFALLIBILITY A NEGATIVE GIFT

To media assertion that infallibility would now prevent a Pope from ever disowning an event such as the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, Newman wrote: "No Pope can make evil good...If any Pope has, with his eyes open, approved of cruelty or treachery, let those defend that Pope who can."^[36] Yet with characteristic balance and insight, he added that infallibility was not the same as impeccability.

Correspondence with his nephew in 1874 makes for some plainer speaking: "the great question to me is, not what evil is left in the Church, but what good has energised in it and been practically exercised in it, and has left its mark there for all posterity". Undeniably terrible things had been done in the name of the Church but: "A large society, such as the Church, is necessarily a political society, and to touch politics is to touch pitch." "It has not always been possible for the Church to do upon the spot that which is abstractly best"^[37].

He has no intention of saying: "that Popes are never in the wrong and are never to be resisted."^[38] To Mivart, a famous, convert biologist he writes: "Those who would not allow Galileo to reason 300 years ago, will not allow anyone else now. The past is no lesson for them for the present and the future: and their notion of stability in faith is ever to be repeating errors and then repeating retractions of them."^[39] He was never satisfied with the easy answer: "the Church is in the world and the world is in the Church." It's difficult to say if one age is better or worse than another: "Man abused supernatural truths in the medieval time, as well as used them; and now man uses natural truths, as well as abuses them". "One should not be surprised if Catholics seemed worse than Protestants, if only on the principle that corruption of the best, is the worst." ^[40]

DIFFERENT PRINCIPLES LIABLE TO DIFFERENT CORRUPTIONS

Again in 1876 he considered: "the difference which at first sight presents itself between its (the Church's) formal teaching and its popular and political manifestation".^[41] His difficulties with the issue had increased since his conversion to Catholicism. He considers the triple office of the Mystical body as prophet, priest and king. Based on different principles, they are liable to different corruptions. The "guiding principles" are respectively "truth", "devotion" and "expedience". But: "in man as he is, reasoning tends to rationalism; devotion to superstition and enthusiasm, and power to ambition and tyranny". And he asks: "What line of conduct except on the long, the very long run, is at once edifying, expedient and true?" It is precisely the

difficulty of so doing that: "supplies the staple of those energetic charges and vivid pictures of the inconsistency, double-dealing and deceit of the Church of Rome".^[42]

CORRUPTIONS POLITICAL, NOT THEOLOGICAL

There is a development here: corruptions in the Church are not denied but are no longer attributed to Catholic theology, as earlier they were in 'Prophetical Office'; the corruptions: "bear on their face the marks of having a popular or political origin". He suggests that: "Truth and error in religion may be so intimately connected as not to admit of separation" and refers again to the parable of the wheat and the cockle^[43]. An early example of this was Peter stopping his association with converts because of the Judaizers and earning Paul's rebuke; yet Paul on the principle of "accommodation", was when necessary, willing to conform himself to Jewish customs.^[44] (707).

Returning to an earlier theme; the theological, pastoral and political offices of the Church may find themselves in opposition and thus a theology may: "be determined on its expediency relative to the Church's Catholicity" by: "the logic of facts which at times overrides all positive laws and prerogatives." He gives the example of Pope Stephen's judgement (254-257) - against seemingly decisive, theological arguments - that heretical baptisms were valid. His conclusion is that: "whatever is great refuses to be reduced to human rule, and to be made consistent in its many aspects with itself." The Church is an instance: "presenting to us an admirable consistency and unity in word and deed as her general characteristic but crossed and discredited now and then by apparent anomalies". His vision of the Church is wholeness and unity within variety; held by creative tension. He was not worried about the survival of religion: "the outburst of Saints in 1500-1600 after the monstrous corruption" is: "one of the great arguments for Christianity".^[45]

FORGIVENESS, HONESTY, SIMPLICITY

Newman examines the undeniable perversion of all that is best, holiest, and exalted and declares it a duty to protest against this. He decries responses that appear to be "shuffles:" being "candid" makes for realistic engagement; he had not been converted by evasions of Catholic scandals.

There is honesty here: a refusal to prevaricate or pretend. This honesty is rooted in a profound sense of God's providential accompaniment, but implicitly, of the unending sweep of God's forgiveness to those who honestly ask for it and consequently in a deep sense of the permanent reformability of the Church. These issues pertain not only to the history of theology but are disturbingly pertinent today. The attentive reader will immediately realize that these reflections do not only refer to a former situation in another time and place but refer equally to our own situation in the here-and-now. Much has been written elsewhere about the incontestable need for transparency and accountability. What is at issue is the absence of an ecclesiology that would see that as obvious and insist on making it constant and indeed doing so precisely as a characteristic of the true Church. At root of the problem is our desire to be successful and powerful, to be significant players in an *imperium* more that of Caesar than Christ, even if called Church. And all this in the service of a false God whom we imagine can be manipulated, and appeased.

This false God's reign in our hearts, our relationships and our institutions, leaves little place for the God of endless forgiveness who can be approached only when we know deeply that we are loved precisely as repentant sinners. We struggle so hard to be righteous and approved, to be paradigms of faultlessness rather than instruments of forgiveness who know each day their own need for forgiveness. We seek a righteousness of our own making rather than one gifted by a compassionate God. And so we pretend rather than witness.

There is less need to pretend when we experience that we are forgiven. An honest Church rejoices in being a community redeemed and blessed rather than a putatively perfect society. Such a Church becomes more credible and more visibly a sign and celebration of what it proclaims. For it is here above all that the holiness of the Church may be experientially lived and observed: in the daily and never-ending gift of divine forgiveness that while acknowledging limitations, set-backs and moral failures, is the motor of lives of service, honest endeavour, solidarity with victims and purposeful action for life-enhancing transformation.

^[1] The works of Newman are accessible at www.newmanreader.org I have also drawn on Ian Ker, 'John Henry Newman,' (OUP, 1990).

^[2] C.S.Dessain et al. (ed.s), 'The letters and diaries of John Henry Newman,' [hereinafter JHN] vols. 1-6, (Oxford 1978-'84), vols. 7-12, (London, 1961-'72), vols. 13-31, (Oxford, 1973-1977):[hereinafter LDN], vol. 3 pp.204-206.

^[3] LDN, 3, 265.

^[4] LDN, 3, 268.

^[5] LDN, 3, 277.

^[6] LDN, 3, 279.

^[7] JHN, 'Parochial and Plain Sermons,'[hereinafter PPS], 8 vols, vol. 4, 154.

^[8] LDN, 4, 367.

^[9] LDN, 5, 291.

^[10] JHN, 'The Via Media', [hereinafter VM], 2 vols., vol. 1, 355.

^[11] JHN 'Essays Historical and Critical' [hereinafter EHC], 2 vols., vol. 1.

^[12] Letter to T. Mozely, 22/2/1841.

^[13] JHN 'Essays Critical and Historical, [hereinafter] ECH, 2 vols., vol.2, 370.

^[14] Letter to Cardinal Wiseman, 4/10/1841.

^[15] Letter to S.Pope, 4/9/1842.

^[16] Letter to Mrs. J. Mozely, 2/12/1844.

^[17] JHN, 'An Essay on the Development of Doctrine', [hereinafter DD], p.171.

^[18] DD, 208.

^[19] LDN 12, 319.

^[20] JHN, 'Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching,' [hereinafter CDFA], 2 vols, vol. 1, 365.

^[21] JHN, 'Apologia pro Vita Sua,'[hereinafter AVS], p.226.

^[22] LDN 19, 179.

^[23] CDFA, vol. 2, p. 81.

^[24] LDN, 20, 471.

^[25] LDN 20, 465.

^[26] LDN 23, 193.

^[27] LDN 23, 187.

^[28] LDN 24, 330.

^[29] LDN 25, 95.

- [\[30\]](#) LDN 26, 281.
- [\[31\]](#) LDN 25, 204.
- [\[32\]](#) LDN 25, 259.
- [\[33\]](#) LDN 25, 310.
- [\[34\]](#) LDN 25, 341.
- [\[35\]](#) JHN, 'Historical Sketches', [hereinafter HS] 2, 213.
- [\[36\]](#) LDN 26, 164.
- [\[37\]](#) LDN 27,283.
- [\[38\]](#) CDFA, vol. 2, p. 216.
- [\[39\]](#) LDN 28, 72.
- [\[40\]](#) LDN 28,223.
- [\[41\]](#) VM² Vol. 1, xxviii.
- [\[42\]](#) VM² Vol 1, xliii.
- [\[43\]](#) VM² Vol 1, lxiv.
- [\[44\]](#) VM² Vol 1, lxxvi.
- [\[45\]](#) LDN 30, 264.