

Why Pastors Should Care about Saint John Henry Newman

As a means of reflecting on why a future pastor should care about Saint John Henry Newman, one may utilize sections from the *Grammar of Assent* to analyze meaningful aspects of his thought in relation to the four dimensions of priestly formation. In doing so, the presence of *inference* is presumed to thread throughout all categories, for the capacity to logically and concretely reason in all “the realities of life” (Newman 1989, 105) is fundamental to being taken seriously in any profession. As a direct analysis however, one may further reflect upon the *human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral* dimensions, and how they respectively align with *conscience, assent, certitude, and the illative sense*. In the spirit of Newman, where truths are integral to and inseparable from one another, these assents are given in a procession of naturally ascending significance. This order derives from the necessity of building upon human and spiritual development, which can then lead into thoroughly developed intellectual and pastoral capacities. This model intends the formation of excellent priests, at whose hands the laity has every right to be served.

Beginning with the *human* dimension, it is understood that to be truly *human* is to have a *conscience*. This is where Newman locates how God is encountered: in the “sense of moral obligation” (Newman 1989, 69-70). Any associations that are made with God through the various phenomena in human life are not possible without being grounded in conscience. This faculty provides a pleasant feeling of being at ease and hopeful when acting according to the moral law, or “compunction and fear” if actions take one in a questionable direction (Newman 1989, 70). Conscience provides a moral compass and a

“sense of duty; a judgment of the reason and a magisterial dictate” (Newman 1989, 70-71). This entails not only a capacity to discern right and wrong, but also a baseline understanding of socially appropriate conduct.¹ To have a conscience interiorized as such informs and guides priests to be good people who are good to be around. Pastoral relevance is contingent on maintaining this attribute, for priests are human before anything else. Without it, there is no spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral foundation to build upon in the first place.

Human and conscience naturally ascend into *spiritual* and *assent*; these capacities go hand in hand, for all priests must give assent to everything that the church teaches. For Newman, there are two modes of assent: *religious* pertaining to objects of faith, and *theological* pertaining to dogma (Newman 1989, 261-262). From these modes one gains “an image of God” and gives “a real assent to the proposition that He exists” (Newman 1989, 70), conforming to magisterial teaching as “objectively true as well as subjectively” (Newman 1989, 79). Then “the assent may be called a *perception*, the conviction a *certitude*, the proposition or truth a *certainty*” or a “matter of *knowledge*, and to assent to it is to *know*” (Newman 1989, 79).

This holy realism where one simply knows what one knows (Newman 1989, 80) includes understanding the efficacy of prayer, and assent is accordingly given to the Father several times a day whenever *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven* is proclaimed in mass and the liturgy of the hours.² Assent is also given to the Holy Spirit

¹ There are many examples to choose from here: the need to show up at mass without looking like an unmade bed, the need to observe basic hygiene, the need to be able to comfortably socialize with members of the opposite sex, and the need to observe some sort of physical health free from destructive habits immediately spring to mind.

² Prayer in this context can be considered an *Act of Inference*, in which a pastor concludes that the reasoning and evidence for being spiritually justified in praying to a God that listens and responds contains “both the antecedents of assent before assenting” in offering prayer, “and its usual concomitants after

as encountered in theological tradition made incarnate from the philosophical canon, and especially in scripture, which is subject to historical-critical analysis so that informed assent may be categorically inclusive. Assent is likewise given to the bishops and magisterium, trusting that the hierarchical church is divinely animated from top to bottom, rendering it and all baptized members in union with God as the bride of Christ. All of these things are done with confidence, for “he who inquires has not found; he is in doubt where the truth lies, and wishes his present profession either proved or disproved...(one) cannot without absurdity” simultaneously consider oneself a believer and inquirer (Newman 1989, 76-77).

Having juxtaposed *spiritual* and *assent* fittingly proceeds into the next stage of *intellectual* and *certitude*, rendering appropriate some reflection on how clergy are public persons to whom laypeople constantly look for answers. The incredibly broad variety of questions they ask cannot be exaggerated. Sometimes they are about scripture, theology, or homilies (be they recent or forgotten in the priest’s mind). Sometimes they are family or career related and parishioners will want advice about whether they should buy a new house or car, and at times they veer into the shockingly personal, where they ask how to be better at intimately pleasing their spouses. In other words, pastors have to be prepared to speak about virtually any topic whatsoever at any given time, and it is crucial to be as intellectually precise as possible when interacting with the laity, even if the nature of their questions demands further reflection before responding.

Yet even in such situations, not knowing all the facts of an individual case is not necessarily detrimental to certitude, for “certitude is a deliberate assent given expressly

assenting” by following through on consequent actions flowing from prayers as they are answered, be it immediately or over a period time (Newman 1989, 76).

after reasoning” (Newman 1989, 84). Sometimes reasoning reveals that excessive rumination on individual facts may obscure the greater truths to which intellectual assent is given, and in pastoral ministry, it can be superior to rely on outcomes that arise from “an *accumulation* of various probabilities...that from probabilities (one) may construct legitimate proof, sufficient for certitude” (Newman 1989, 118). While particular facts are obviously important to consider, they exist in the context of an entire interrelated system of a “rite, a creed, a philosophy,” and “a rule of duty” (Newman 1989, 87). Because of this, when discernment reveals that one truly knows something, it is appropriate to “sum up the whole series of reflex judgments which...successively exercise a critical function towards those...which precede it” (Newman 1989, 93) and make a decision, for “certitudes indeed do not change” (Newman 1989, 88).

Though certitude itself is changeless, priestly intellects ought to be fortified through exercises such as contemplative prayer, and scriptural and theological studies that develop alongside awareness of contemporary developments in society. Even then, however, it is admittedly impossible to be utterly prepared for every single eventuality. Yet one can at least be informed by a guiding principle of *certitude* that informs all interactions, be they private or public. Namely, that it “follows on investigation and proof,” is “accompanied by a specific sense of intellectual satisfaction and repose,” and is “irreversible” (Newman 1989, 94). In other words, *intellectual* assertions must be based in rationality, have a “sense of finality” with the answers provided, and trust that the Holy Spirit is informing answers with a lasting, permanent value (Newman 1989, 94).³

³ It is a given that sometimes people just need to have prayerful conversations and feel heard, and the types of answers alluded to above will not always be the best use of intellectual certitude. If properly utilized however, intellectual certitude can also inform priests when to simply listen and take a more passive role, until a mature discernment can arise that helps parishioners reach their own solutions; be it with the help of

Departing from comparing the dimensions of *intellectual* and *certitude* brings this reflection to its closing discussion of what it means to be *pastoral*, in the context of possessing the *illative sense*. To be *pastoral* is to be well equipped with the *illative sense*, which is the “power of judging and concluding” in “its perfection” (Newman 1989, 113). This means that one logically reasons with language and thought in the definite subject matters about which decisions are made, and methodically arrive at reasonable and trustworthy conclusions (Newman 1989, 115-116). To seek this perfect judgment faculty does not mean becoming perfectionistic in judgments or addicted to being right. Rather it means that by accumulating “various probabilities,” one may “construct legitimate proof” that is “sufficient for certitude” (Newman 1989, 118).

For pastors, the *illative sense* represents a capstone capacity that prayerfully integrates the aforementioned dimensions, for a spiritually assenting and informed conscience naturally flows into intellectual certitude in God. As a pastor Newman understood this, and after decades of initial and ongoing formation, the author shares this understanding. The *illative sense* is more than judgment, for it is the facultative condition for the possibility of true judgment, emanating from the contemplative interiority of those who consciously discern throughout their entire lives. This is how priests are to live, and with the help of God and the intercession of Blessed John Henry Newman, this one will do no less.

His incredible relevance that maintains practical applicability for all clergy even now is why he should be cared about, and for all the priests who will soon graduate and

God alone, the priest, or someone else. Priests are not the only people who are capable of intellectual certitude, and part of responsibly using those faculties is helping others to develop them and take ownership of their questions and answers, though pastors always ought to remain available to walk with them and help.

be released into the world, he “earnestly pray(s) for this whole company, with a hope against hope,” that everyone who as seminarians “were so united, and so happy in...union, may even now be brought at length, by the Power of the Divine Will, into One Fold and under One Shepherd” as the best pastors that can be formed (Newman 2004, 250-251).

Reference List

Newman, John Henry. 2004. *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. Edited by Ian Ker. London: Penguin Books.

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