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Doing the Ordinary in an Extraordinary Way

Lawrence S. Cunningham

The author is a faculty member in the University of Notre Dame theology department. He gave this address at the 1990 annual meeting of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds.

What can a systematic theologian, interested in the rather timeless tradition of the Catholic theological tradition, say to men and women who serve on the frontlines of human joy and misery in a way in which I am, at best, a spectator? That is the problem which confronts me as I attempt to speak to a meeting of physicians whose interests orient themselves toward questions of virtue and ethics.

The best that I can hope for is to follow the dictum taught me many years ago by my Jesuit professors at the Gregorian University in Rome: *age quod agis*: do what you are supposed to do.

What I have been doing for a large part of this year is reading the works of John Henry Newman whose centennial is celebrated in 1990, for it was a hundred years ago that this great churchman — surely the greatest doctor of the modern Church — died. He is a fitting person to consider at this meeting because a good case could be made to argue that John Henry Newman was a spiritual ancestor of those great English humanists like John Colet and Thomas More who enriched both the language and religious thought of English Catholicism. Among the numbers of those great humanists was, of course, Thomas Linacre, under whose patronage this association defines itself.

Newman's life spanned the entire course of the 19th century. Born in 1801, he died 89 years later in 1890. To put that into a medical context: he was born when doctors were largely self-trained and were still called, in the countryside, leeches; when amputations were done without anesthesia; when the pharmacopia was still not understood in a rigorously empirical way; and when vaccinations were still forbidden in many places (including the papal states) as *contra naturam*. By the time he died, the causes of childbed fever were understood, anesthetics had been developed, and the need for antiseptics was clear. Newman was a contemporary of Pasteur. Within a decade of his death, Freud would write *The Interpretation of Dreams* and Einstein would publish his general theory of relativity.

Newman lived, in short, from the early Napoleonic times to the eventide of the Victorian period.

Momentous Events

His own lifetime was one of incredible labors and of momentous events in the religious history of England. He was a key figure in the Oxford Movement in the late 1830s — a movement which would change the face of Anglicanism and later, as a Catholic, he would be its leading controversialist in England, and, after decades of disappointments and abortive projects, would receive the red hat at the hands of Pope Leo XIII. A profoundly gifted scholar and an acknowledged master of English prose, Newman was a prophetic figure whose theological insights, contested in his own age, would be a shaping force in the 20th century. Indeed, many consider him the father figure behind the achievements of the Second Vatican Council. That is a judgment which I would endorse. When one reads Newman's writings about the events which swirled around the First Vatican Council in 1869/1870, one sees Newman putting his finger on the issues which would become the flashpoints of debate in our own time: the role of the papacy; the relationship of bishops to pope; the role of the laity; the relationship of the Church to the culture of the world.

What has always fascinated me about Newman was his incredible capacity for work. When he was writing the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, he stayed at his desk, at times, for 15 hours at a stretch. One must also remember that in his most active years as a Catholic — the period, say, from the 1850s through the 1870s — he poured out an enormous amount of writing and original research while pastoring a church in Birmingham, founding a school, and serving as superior of the Oratory. It is touching to remember that the last public thing he did, a week before his death, was to give out the school prizes and receive each of the young men who had won them to chat with them and give them his blessing. And the correspondence! The published letters easily fill a couple of yards on a library bookshelf with still others to be found and catalogued. This was all done, of course, amid the many public works with which he was engaged: the founding of the ill-fated Catholic University in Ireland; the Kingsley controversy which ended with the *Apologia*; the aborted plan for a fresh translation of the Bible; and the many public exchanges over matters theological and social.

Kept Up Incredible Pace

Nonetheless — and this is the real point which I hope to underscore — Newman kept up this incredible pace while leading an intensely contemplative spiritual life. Yet the most interesting thing about his spirituality is how ordinary it was. Newman had a horror of extravagant devotionalism of the sort which tempted his fellow English converts. Not

for him the saccharine Marian devotions and the rococo pieties which Frederick Faber and others were importing from the continent. Nor was he given to excessive discipline, mystical flights, and other manifestations of overly heated piety.

His spirituality was anchored in the deepest bedrock of the Catholic tradition: the absorption of the Word of God through study, preaching, and concrete imitation and a deep sense of the meaning of the Eucharist as a bond which unites all believers to each other and, finally, to God.

But there was something else and it is that something else that I would like to underscore even though it might seem, at first glance, a commonplace. It has to do with Newman's notion of sanctity.

In 1859, Newman preached a funeral sermon for Henry Weedall who had been president of Oscott College. He eulogized the sanctity of Weedall in these terms: Weedall was, in Newman's view, a saint because he did routine duties exceedingly well; sanctity consisted in doing a person's work *for that day* and "not the work of any other day which is *not* his, as a stepping stone on which we, who come next, are to raise our own work."¹

The point is clear. For Newman, authentic spirituality begins in the recognition that God calls each of us to a particular place in a particular time with a particular vocation in life. Our task is to be courageous enough to recognize this fact and act upon it. Perfection, in short, consists in doing the ordinary in an extraordinary fashion. As Newman loved to say, the hallmark of the saint is *consistency* of life.

Let me reinforce this point by citing some words which Newman once preached to his own community at the Birmingham Oratory:

We must bear in mind what is meant by perfection. It does not mean any extraordinary service, anything out of the way or especially heroic — not all have the opportunity of heroic acts or of sufferings — but it means what the word perfection ordinarily means. By perfect we mean that which has no flaw within it, that which is complete, that which is consistent, that which is sound — we mean the opposite of imperfect

He, then, is perfect who does the work of the day perfectly, and we need not go beyond that to seek for perfection. You need not go out of the round of the day.²

Newman ended that conference, by the way, by telling his brethren that getting to bed on time already led one on the way of perfection!

Newman's insistence on this seemingly guileless path to perfection is, of course, the same one preached by his near contemporary, Saint Therese of Lisieux, who wrote of the "Little Way." The "Little Way" was simplicity itself: do what you are called to do in the circumstances in which you find yourself. Do what you are supposed to do with an intensity that is engined by a sense of vocation under the gaze of God.

The doctrine is true because empirical evidence teaches it to be true. A heroic figure like Mother Teresa of Calcutta is saintly, not because she once picked up the dying from the alleys of Calcutta, but because she does it day in and day out, when the television cameras are not present. What distinguishes her from the "do-gooder" or the "philanthropist" is the fact

of fidelity. Saints do not burn out. Saints love and act with great specificity. They do not act in generalities or love in the abstract.

Observations About Temptation

Newman has some trenchant observations about this temptation to abstraction. In a sermon he once noted that it is not sufficient to have “certain benevolent feelings towards the world” since “This is not to love men but to talk about love.” Newman then goes on to insist that “The real love of men must depend on practice, and, therefore, must begin by exercising itself on our friends around us, otherwise it will have no existence.”³

It does not take an enormous leap of the imagination to get the moral of Newman’s spiritual doctrine. Because it is so simple, we tend to resist it. What he says, in essence, is something like this:

If we are Christians we accept the fact that God is implicated in our world, both as Creator and through the Incarnation. We recognize that fact by sensing the divine in the world in which we live, through the people we meet, and in seeing the face of Christ in those encounters. This rootedness in God’s world, redeemed by Christ, is not an abstraction. It is a tangible and specific reality. That is the whole meaning of the Incarnation.

To hold on to a sense of that rootedness is a daily chore from which we are never exempt if we are seriously convicted of being a Christian. Let me give a homely example of what I mean. The first wound we suture might be a challenge. The fiftieth might cause us to be pleased at our skill. The five hundredth, however, might become a bore. It is at that moment that we need to recall Newman’s words. To the degree that we are able to look on each patient with fresh eyes as a person in need rather than a source for reimbursement or a problem to irritate us, we are following the path of perfection. Or, to turn the tables on myself: when faced with yet another stack of examination booklets and really read them (how many thousands have I read over 20 some years of teaching?) is an incremental step toward that perfection which Newman holds out as the goal of each life.

Think Big?

Still, it might be objected, don’t we want to think big? Can we not dream of saving, not just this little corner of our life, but the whole world? Does not the gospel imperative invite us to think in such a way?

It surely does, but — and this must never be forgotten — Christianity began with small groups of believers meeting in houses in the cities around the Mediterranean, re-calling the saving words and deeds of Jesus Who was the Christ. Contrary to what we imagine, Christianity grew by small incremental steps as the practice of Christianity drew people who found it a way of life which compelled their attention and triggered in them an act of faith.

Christians, as someone once wisely noted, must have a local home and a local name. In this regard, I would suggest we appropriate the slogan, coined by the late Rene Dubos, for the ecological movement: act locally but think globally.

What Dubos meant was that every incremental good act adds to the well-being of the planet. Every gesture helps and every gesture makes us think in larger terms. If we heal well in this or that particular place, we will inevitably ask ourselves how do we heal better in general? If I learn to teach well here at Notre Dame, I am led, inevitably, to think about the act of teaching in general.

The tension between the local and the universal is at the heart of what the word *catholic* means. The ancient fathers meant, by the word *catholic*, the apostolic faith handed down through the generations. It also meant the sum totla of all the believing communities who held to that tradition. Each individual church was a *catholic* church to the degree that it was in union with others who held the same faith.

Being a Catholic

To be a Catholic, then, is to act locally but to think globally. That is what Newman thought of as being a Catholic. When he entered the church of Rome he did so because he wanted to be a part of the great unbroken witness to the truth of Christ which had been testified to through the ages in the Catholic Church. His church was in Birmingham, but it was organically connected to all the churches of the world which gave witness to a common faith. The best way he could serve that church and bear witness to its truth was to be the best Oratorian priest he could be, given his gifts and charisms, in the place where he found himself. His life teaches us, in short, that one can act locally but end up serving universally if only one seeks for perfection in the daily round of life.

So, then, that is what I have learned from my reading of Cardinal Newman during this, his centennial year. It is what I want to share with you. It is a simple doctrine that can be found in the writings of all the great spiritual masters and mistresses of the Catholic tradition. It is what the great Saint Teresa meant when she said that she would go to recreation at an hour when the world would come to an end because that was what she was supposed to do. That is what the Jesuit tradition meant with its motto of doing all for the glory of God. It was what the Little Flower meant by her doctrine of the Little Way. It was what Newman meant when he told his community that perfection meant getting to bed when one ought to retire. It can be summed up for our lives with a simple formula: do what we are called to do by God but do it extraordinarily well. For such is the kingdom of heaven.

References

1. Quoted in Ian Ker's *John Henry Newman* (New York: Oxford, 1988), p. 487.
2. Quoted in *The Essential Newman*, edited by Vincent Ferrer Blehl, S.J. (New York: Menor-Omega, 1963), p. 338.
3. Cited in Ian Ker's *The Achievement of John Henry Newman* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). p. 81.