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Newman against Progressivism and Traditionalism

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It is customary today to divide Catholics into progressives and conservatives, as if these were the two main ways of living in the Church and as if this opposition could clarify everything. Is this a correct point of view or does it imply a reduction of reality that prevents us from understanding it? And, if so, what alternative is left?

The work of St. John Henry Newman can shed light on these questions. In his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Newman analyzes whether Christian dogma admits changes with the passage of time and of what kind these changes might be. Newman accepts, on the one hand, that Christian doctrine evolves and renews itself (against a merely conservative view), but he insists that this development does not move the doctrine away from its origins, but rather anchors it more and more in them (against progressivism). Thus, he places himself outside the framework of the conservative-progressive opposition. How does he achieve this?

Before addressing Newman's proposal, let us see how the opposition we are talking about is proposed in the Church today.

Ecclesial progressivism embraces the modern belief in the continuous progress of history. In what does this modern belief consist? It holds that progress includes not only unstoppable technical progress, but also moral progress towards an ethical apex of maximum tolerance of individual opinion. This view of progress gives rise to a negative view of the past, seen as outdated and restrictive. Christian progressivism, then, advocates adapting the Church to this modern vision of history, insisting that the Church is two hundred years behind the times (the putative delay starting with the French Revolution). A favorite biblical image to support this view is that of the Spirit who blows where he wills; that is, he renews everything and does not let us cling to rigid securities. Jesus is interesting, not so much because of his doctrine or works, but above all because of his dialectical opposition to Pharisaic religion and because of his power of innovation. Today, so the argument goes, we should imitate not so much what he said or did, but the change he brought about.

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On the other hand, we find what is called “traditionalism.” This includes those who defend tradition at all costs. Tradition is understood as something immutable, fixed in the past. The terminology seems inadequate, since every Catholic, by the simple fact of being a Catholic, is called to appreciate and love tradition. Tradition, in fact, means “to give up or to hand down” and finds its paradigm in the giving up of the Son to the world, which began with the Father sending the Son, and continues in the Church, where the living Jesus is handed down through the Church from generation to generation. Tradition is, therefore, a living flow and not a static treasure. This “traditionalist” tendency should better be named “archaism” or “immobilism.”

These options already presented themselves to St. John Henry Newman in his time. Before him he had, on the one hand, liberal Protestantism that fostered free judgment. This was an adaptation of Christianity to modernity and the autonomous individual, an innovation that clearly broke with apostolic origins. As an Anglican, Newman would also have perceived the Catholic Church as progressive, for while she presented herself as being in continuity with the Apostles, she seemed to adulterate their doctrine with Roman novelties, as for example Marian devotions. Newman himself thought that Anglicanism was faithful to the original tradition, such that it enjoyed the note of “apostolicity,” that is, of accuracy in preserving the apostolic confession of faith.

Newman began to doubt this view, however, after studying the first centuries of the Church’s history. Firmly maintaining that Christianity was revealed by God and was to be preserved through time, Newman also understood that there had been a development in the first centuries, from the Bible to the great councils. Therefore, if one were to argue against the continuity of the Catholic Church with the Church of the fifth century, this same argument would deny the Church of the fifth century’s continuity with the Church of the first.

This finding broadened Newman’s horizon, which no longer started from the opposition between the past and the future, but from their interdependence: the more capacity of novelty there was in a doctrine, the more rooted in the origin it was and vice versa. Newman started from a firm conviction: every idea that inspires and takes hold of the lives of men, and in particular the Christian idea, cannot be an abstract idea, but must take shape concretely, incarnated in history; it must give form to interpersonal relationships and must interact with other ideas.

Now, as long as the idea is considered isolated from the flesh, then one can imagine an immobile idea, as if it were eternally fixed, in the manner of Platonic ideas. Or it may happen that the disembodied idea is identified with the opinion of each isolated individual, unrelated to the world and to others. In the latter case, progress will consist in privatizing ideas more and more, as in the religious liberalism that Newman fought his whole life.

What happens, however, if the idea stays united to the flesh? Then there appears what we can call an organic and personal model of development. This means that the idea can be compared to a living being. The idea’s growth over time can then be explained by looking at the

development of living beings and, especially, of personal life.

It is useful here to consider a point made by Robert Spaemann, according to whom the contemporary separation between right and left, or conservatives and progressives, comes from the loss of teleology, that is, of the specific way of experiencing time that is proper to living organisms. Indeed, in living beings, unlike in inert matter, the past, the present, and the future are not alien to each other, but are mutually intertwined. Living beings, and especially human persons, keep the past alive in their memory, as something essential to their identity; they anticipate the future, with all its novelty, in the present, so that this future springs from the past and the present as the fruit springs from the plant. Spaemann points out that once teleology is lost, we also lose the synthesis between the memory of the past and the novelty of the future. Then there is only room for a dialectic that opposes the preservation of the past to the novelty of progress. Political left and right are the result of this loss of teleology, which tears to pieces the unity of history.

As mentioned above, Newman's vision of the development of doctrine adopts a similar analogy between the development of the idea of Christianity and the growth of a living organism. Newman does not think only of the animal in this connection. He thinks rather of human beings in whom the word or reason dwells in an organic body and develops in time, along a process that begins at creation and culminates in the resurrection of the flesh. Newman applies the same analogy to a community or group of people as well.

Thus, when one accepts the division between progressivism and archaism to characterize the Church, one considers Christianity as an inert reality, formed by parts that are alien to each other and not by members of the same body. The underlying presupposition is the dualism of soul and body, which is to say a disembodied Christianity. Overcoming this dialectical paradigm involves accepting society and the Church as living realities, made up of living persons who mature in time.

From the vantage point of the analogy with the phenomenon of life, it is possible to understand the seven criteria ("tests" or "notes") used by Newman to tell the difference between a healthy development of doctrine and a corrupt one. Let us look at these seven notes in turn.

1. Permanence of Form

The first two notes deal with continuity in development. The first note is the permanence of type or form, which is the exterior appearance of the living reality. Living beings, while continually changing, can nonetheless be recognized over time as the same. Let us think of the face of a person: it alters profoundly between childhood and adulthood, and yet we are able to perceive it as the same person's face. The analogy is valid as well for a community or for a nation, such as the English or the French. We observe great transformations in the people through history, but we can recognize the same, unique identity as well. In all these examples, each element changes separately, but there is a harmony or conjunction among the parts that does not vary over time.

It is clear, then, that we must reject any kind of archaism that immobilizes Christian doctrine without allowing it to grow. If a human face remains identical, even as time goes by, it can be only an embalmed, dead face. Or let us imagine a face where the shape of the eyes and eyebrows remain exactly the same, but the lips and cheeks change: we would no longer recognize it as the same face, because the proportions among the parts would have been altered. This is why, according to Newman, certain heresies consist in remaining immobile and

not allowing any development.

2. Continuity of Principles

Whereas the form or type (first note) is the living being in its external manifestation, the principles constitute its interiority, its soul or vital principle and, in the case of a person, its name or deepest identity.

Christian principles remain constant throughout time, even before and after the coming of Christ. For Christ came to give fullness to the Creator's plan, so that there exists an analogy between creation and redemption. The law of harmonious development is even valid, then, for the passage from the Old to the New Testament. This is why Newman affirms that pagans may have the same principles as believers (if they accept faith in the Creator), while this is not possible for heretics, for heresy entails a change in Christian principles.

However, this continuity of principles does not imply a static view of them. For how principles relate to each other sets history in motion in a particular way. Take, for example, these three principles of Christianity: dogma as revealed truth, faith as human openness to this truth, and theology as the reflection of the faithful in order to deepen their understanding of the truth of dogma. When these three principles come together, there appears a dynamism: a gift is given to us (dogma), we accept it (faith), and, by accepting it, the gift opens a path of growth (theology).

This is an instance of the more general principle of the Incarnation: the Son of God has assumed human flesh in order to lead this flesh, through death and resurrection, to the fulfillment of communion with God. Thus, in Newman's view of history, the more we receive the gift, the greater is our gratitude and our collaboration with this gift and, therefore, the more abundant is its fruit. An opposition between progressivism and archaism would entail, on the contrary, that we oppose the original gift, inhibiting our capacity to receive the fruitfulness this gift contains.

3. The Power of Assimilation

In the third note, called the "power of assimilation," Newman takes into account the relationship between a living idea and the outside world. One feature of a true development, as opposed to a corruption, is the ability to interact with the environment, so that, far from the idea being assimilated by the world around it, it is the idea that assimilates the wholesome and true elements of the environment, by grafting them into the idea's own vitality.

Now, the opposition between progressivism and archaism usually happens as a reaction to a post-Christian and secularized environment. Progressivism and archaism are, in fact, two ways of situating oneself in the face of modernity and postmodernity. The problem of both ways of thinking is that they do not define Christianity by itself (as should be the case if Christianity had a strong sense of identity and vigor) but they define Christianity in opposition to or in agreement with an alien measure. According to Newman, a healthy development occurs when Christianity is measured, not from something external to it, but from Christianity itself and from its capacity to assimilate the environment. This assimilation happens, not only in a theoretical way, but also through the practices the idea promotes.

4. Logical Sequence

Newman's fourth note is called "logical sequence." Since the idea lives in human beings, who are rational animals, every healthy development of the idea, as opposed to a corruption, must follow logical coherence. True, logic does not exhaust human life, but human life contains logic, and it cannot exist without it; it is the way human thinking is structured.

A consequence of this note is that, although it is true that no doctrinal affirmation captures the whole truth, there can never be a contradiction between two affirmations in different centuries. The refusal of something under a certain aspect cannot develop, with the passage of time, into its affirmation under the same aspect. It cannot happen, for example, that an act, such as adultery or homosexuality, is a grave sin against the law of God up to the twentieth century, while becoming a virtuous act and a path to holiness in the twenty-first.

5. Memory

The last three notes explore the three dimensions of time: the past, the future, and the present. The fifth note concerns memory, since for Newman every true development of doctrine presupposes a conservative action upon its past. Thus, the more we accept the novelty of a future development, the more we need to affirm the enduring pertinence and vitality of the origin, just as a tree bears more abundant fruit the deeper its roots are.

6. Anticipation of the Future in the Past

Whereas this fifth note regards the preserved presence of the past in future ages, the sixth note is concerned with the anticipatory presence of the future in the past. That is to say, if there is a development that brings about a novelty, then we must be able to find in the past anticipatory traces or seeds of this development. Otherwise, this is not a true development, but a corruption.

7. Chronic Vigor

Newman's seventh and final note is called "chronic vigor," and it links the fifth and sixth notes, the preservation of the past and the anticipation of the future. This note refers in fact to the continuity of an idea in time without losing vitality. Newman was very impressed by St. Augustine's dictum against the Donatists, which moved him towards conversion to Catholicism: *securus iudicat orbis terrarum* ("the whole orb of the earth judges with certainty"). It allowed him to see that the same confession of faith of different regions of the world subsisted in the Catholic Church and was absent in Anglicanism. Now, we can think of a similar sentence regarding time: *securus iudicat decursus omnium temporum* ("the entire course of time judges with certainty"). For Newman understood how Catholic truth is found precisely in the coincidence of the different ages among themselves.

If this is true, then it cannot be said, as has been done by some Catholic theologians in reference to *Amoris Laetitia*, that the whole Magisterium of the Church is to be reinterpreted in the light of a recent document. We should rather say that each document illuminates the previous ones, as much as it is also illuminated by them. The Catholic interpretation of a document is the one which allows us to read the teaching of different times as a harmonic whole.

In conclusion, for both an archaist and a progressive view (*extrema se tangunt*) one thing is

utterly lost: the vision of the Church as a personal and incarnated subject, which grows in time by remaining faithful to the promise received at the beginning. Both views are blind to what Pope Francis has called “memory of the future” and the Spanish philosopher Julian Marias “fidelity to the future.”

Consequently, the key to overcoming the opposition between progressivism and so-called traditionalism is the vision of the Church as a living and incarnate subject. This vision of the Church is only possible if we consider her to be the sacramental body of Christ, born of the Eucharist to give form to the concrete, bodily life of the Christian people. Now, the doctrinal crisis that affects the Church today refers precisely to the link between the Eucharist and the order of bodily relationships lived out by the baptized. This means that this crisis does not touch only one particular point of Christian doctrine, but it affects the very possibility of conceiving the continuity of doctrine in time, and thus of overcoming the dichotomy between progressivism and archaism. When a sacrament is reduced to a sign of social belonging or to an emotional comfort, so that it ceases to reflect the concrete relationships that are lived in the flesh, then we undermine the personal structure of the Church, and we are left only with the fruitless opposition between the old and the new.

Newman attests that another option is possible, not indeed a middle way (*via media*), but what we can call a living way (cf. Heb 10:20), which infuses life into the past and the future, thus integrating them. In this regard, it is interesting to notice how Newman saw the development of the Christian idea in relationship to the development of his own life. There is a parallel, in fact, between the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* and the *Apologia pro vita sua*, which is a history of his religious opinions up to his conversion. In the latter, Newman describes his path into the Catholic Church as a harmonious development from his early religious views. It is no coincidence that Newman converted as he was about to finish his essay on development. The realization that the Church was a living subject, a realization that helped him overcome the sterile opposition between progressives and conservatives, allowed Newman to acknowledge the life that was growing within him, a life capable of uniting, in Christ, the origin of everything with its overflowing fullness.

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