

St. John Henry Newman (1801 – 1890)

Selections from Three Sermons representative of his Priestly Ministry

Truth Hidden when not Sought After

Parish of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford

October 17, 1830

They shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.

2 Timothy 4:4

From these words of the blessed Apostle, written shortly before he suffered martyrdom, we learn, that there is such a thing as religious truth, and therefore there is such a thing as religious error. We learn that religious truth is one – and therefore that all views of religion but one are wrong. And we learn, moreover, that so it was to be (for his words are a prophecy) that professed Christians, forgetting this, should turn away their ears from the one Truth, and should be turned, not to one, but to many fables. All this is fulfilled before our eyes; our religious creeds and professions at this day are many; but Truth is one: therefore they cannot all be right, or rather almost all of them must be wrong. . . .

. . . Now it should not surprise us when men of acute and powerful understandings more or less reject the Gospel, for this reason, that the Christian revelation addresses itself to our hearts, to our love of truth and goodness, our fear of sinning, and our desire to gain God's favour; and quickness, sagacity, depth of thought, strength of mind, power of comprehension, perception of the beautiful, power of language, and the like, though they are excellent gifts, are clearly quite of a different kind from these spiritual excellences – a man may have the one without having the other. This, then, is the plain reason why able, or again why learned men are so often defective Christians, because there is no necessary connexion between faith and ability; because faith is one thing and ability is another; because ability of mind is a gift, and faith is a grace. . . .

That Truth, which St. Paul preached, addresses itself to our spiritual nature: it will be rightly understood, valued, accepted, by none but lovers of truth, virtue, purity, humility, and peace. Wisdom will be justified of her children. Those, indeed, who are thus endowed may and will go on to use their powers of mind, whatever they are, in the service of religion; none but they can use

them aright. Those who reject revealed truth wilfully, are such as do not love moral and religious truth. It is bad men, proud men, men of hard hearts, and unhumbled tempers, and immoral lives, these are they who reject the Gospel. These are they of whom St. Paul speaks in another Epistle, "If our Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost, in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not." With this agree the instances of turning the ears from the truth which the New Testament affords us. Who were they who were the enemies of Christ and His Apostles? The infidel Sadducees, the immoral, hard-hearted, yet hypocritical Pharisees, Herod, who married his brother Philip's wife [Matt 14:3], and Felix, who trembled when St. Paul reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come [Acts 24:25]. On the other hand, men of holy and consistent lives, as Cornelius the Centurion, and those who were frequenters of religious ordinances, as Simeon and Anna, these became Christians. So it is now. If men turn unto fables of their own will, they do it on account of their pride, or their love of indolence and self-indulgence.

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Now let me explain what I have said by a further remark. Is it not plain that earnestness is necessary for gaining religious truth? On the other hand, is it not a natural effect of ability to save us trouble, and even to tempt us to dispense with it, and to lead us to be indolent? Do not we see this even in the case of children – the more clever are the more idle, because they rely on their own quickness and power of apprehension? Is indolence the way to gain knowledge from God? Yet this surely is continually forgotten in the world. . . .

Nothing is more common than to think that we shall gain religious knowledge as a thing of course, without express trouble on our part. Though there is no art or business of this world which is learned without time and exertion, yet it is commonly conceived that the knowledge of God and our duty will come as if by accident or by a natural process. Men go by their feelings and likings; they take up what is popular, or what comes first to hand. They think it much if they now and then have serious thoughts, if they now and then open the Bible; and their minds recur with satisfaction to such seasons, as if they had done some very great thing, never remembering that to seek and gain religious truth is a long and systematic work. And others think that education will do everything for them, and that if they learn to read, and use religious words, they understand religion itself. And others again go so far as to maintain that exertion is not necessary for discovering the truth. They say that religious truth is simple and easily acquired; that Scripture, being intended for all, is at once open to all, and that if it had difficulties, that very circumstance would be an objection to it. And others, again, maintain that there are difficulties in religion, and that this shows that it is an indifferent matter whether they seek or not as to those matters which are difficult.

In these and other ways do men deceive themselves into a carelessness about religious truth. And is not all this varied negligence sufficient to account for the varieties of religious opinion which we see all around us? Do not these two facts just illustrate each other; the discordance of our

religious opinions needing some explanation; and our actual indolence and negligence in seeking the truth accounting for it?

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But this melancholy diversity is sometimes explained, as I just now hinted, in another way. Some men will tell us that this difference of opinion in religious matters which exists, is a proof, not that the Truth is withheld from us on account of our negligence in seeking it, but that religious truth is not worth seeking at all, or that it is not given us. The present confused and perplexed state of things, which is really a proof of God's anger at our negligence, these men say is a proof that religious truth cannot be obtained . . . To all such arguments against religious truth, it is sufficient to reply, that no one who does not seek the truth with all his heart and strength, can tell what is of importance and what is not; that to attempt carelessly to decide on points of faith or morals is a matter of serious presumption; that no one knows whither he will be carried if he seeks the Truth perseveringly, and therefore, that since he cannot see at first starting the course into which his inquiries will be divinely directed, he cannot possibly say beforehand whether they may not lead him on to certainty as to things which at present he thinks trifling or extravagant or irrational.

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This is a subject which cannot too strongly be insisted on. Act up to your light, though in the midst of difficulties, and you will be carried on, you do not know how far. Abraham obeyed the call and journeyed, not knowing whither he went; so we, if we follow the voice of God, shall be brought on step by step into a new world, of which before we had no idea. This is His gracious way with us: He gives, not all at once, but by measure and season, wisely. To him that hath, more shall be given. But we must begin at the beginning. Each truth has its own order; we cannot join the way of life at any point of the course we please; we cannot learn advanced truths before we have learned primary ones.

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Seek truth in the way of obedience; try to act up to your conscience, and let your opinions be the result, not of mere chance reasoning or fancy, but of an improved heart. This way, I say, carries with it an evidence to ourselves of its being the right way, if any way be right; and that there is a right and a wrong way conscience also tells us. God surely will listen to none but those who strive to obey Him. Those who thus proceed, watching, praying, taking all means given them of gaining the truth, studying the Scriptures, and doing their duty; in short, those who seek religious truth by principle and habit, as the main business of their lives, humbly not arrogantly, peaceably not contentiously, shall not be "turned unto fables." . . .

Intellect, the Instrument of Religious Training

University Church, Dublin

August 27, 1856

And when He came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was carried out, the only son of his mother: and she was a widow.

Luke 7:12.

This day we celebrate one of the most remarkable feasts in the calendar. We commemorate a Saint who gained the heavenly crown by prayers indeed and tears, by sleepless nights and weary wanderings, but not in the administration of any high office in the Church, not in the fulfilment of some great resolution or special counsel; not as a preacher, teacher, evangelist, reformer, or champion of the faith; not as Bishop of the flock, or temporal governor; not by eloquence, by wisdom, or by controversial success; not in the way of any other saint whom we invoke in the circle of the year; but as a mother, seeking and gaining by her penances the conversion of her son. It was for no ordinary son that she prayed, and it was no ordinary supplication by which she gained him. When a holy man saw its vehemence, ere it was successful, he said to her, "Go in peace; the son of such prayers cannot perish." The prediction was fulfilled beyond its letter; not only was that young man converted, but after his conversion he became a saint; not only a saint, but a doctor also, and "instructed many unto justice." St. Augustine was the son for whom she prayed; and if he has been a luminary for all ages of the Church since, many thanks do we owe to his mother, St. Monica, who having borne him in the flesh, travailed for him in the spirit.

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Monica . . . becomes an image of Holy Church, who is ever lamenting over her lost children, and by her importunate prayers, ever recovering them from the grave of sin . . . This, I say, is not a history of past time merely, but of every age. Generation passes after generation, and there is on the one side the same doleful, dreary wandering, the same feverish unrest, the same fleeting enjoyments, the same abiding and hopeless misery; and on the other, the same anxiously beating heart of impotent affection. Age goes after age, and still Augustine rushes forth again and again, with his young ambition, and his intellectual energy, and his turbulent appetites; educated, yet untaught; with powers strengthened, sharpened, refined by exercise, but unenlightened and untrained, goes forth into the world, ardent, self-willed, reckless, headstrong, inexperienced, to fall into the hands of those who seek his life, and to become the victim of heresy and sin. And still, again and again does hapless Monica weep; weeping for that dear child who grew up with her from the womb, and of whom she is now robbed; of whom she has lost sight; wandering with him in his wanderings, following his

steps in her imagination, cherishing his image in her heart, keeping his name upon her lips, and feeling withal, that, as a woman, she is unable to cope with the violence and the artifices of the world. And still again and again does Holy Church take her part and her place, with a heart as tender and more strong, with an arm, and an eye, and an intellect more powerful than hers, with an influence more than human, more sagacious than the world, and more religious than home, to restrain and reclaim those whom passion, or example, or sophistry is hurrying forward to destruction.

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The human mind, as you know, my Brethren, may be regarded from two principal points of view, as intellectual and as moral. As intellectual, it apprehends truth; as moral, it apprehends duty. The perfection of the intellect is called ability and talent; the perfection of our moral nature is virtue. And it is our great misfortune here, and our trial, that, as things are found in the world, the two are separated, and independent of each other; that, where power of intellect is, there need not be virtue; and that where right, and goodness, and moral greatness are, there need not be talent. It was not so in the beginning; not that our nature is essentially different from what it was when first created; but that the Creator, upon its creation, raised it above itself by a supernatural grace, which blended together all its faculties, and made them conspire into one whole, and act in common towards one end; so that, had the race continued in that blessed state of privilege, there never would have been distance, rivalry, hostility between one faculty and another. It is otherwise now; so much the worse for us; the grace is gone; the soul cannot hold together; it falls to pieces; its elements strive with each other. And as, when a kingdom has long been in a state of tumult, sedition, or rebellion, certain portions break off from the whole and from the central government and set up for themselves; so is it with the soul of man.

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Young men feel a consciousness of certain faculties within them which demand exercise, aspirations which must have an object, for which they do not commonly find exercise or object in religious circles. This want is no excuse for them, if they think, say, or do anything against faith or morals: but still it is the occasion of their sinning. It is the fact, they are not only moral, they are intellectual beings; but, ever since the fall of man, religion is here, and philosophy is there; each has its own centres of influence, separate from the other; intellectual men desiderate something in the homes of religion, and religious men desiderate something in the schools of science.

Here, then, I conceive, is the object of the Holy See and the Catholic Church in setting up Universities; it is to reunite things which were in the beginning joined together by God and have been put asunder by man. Some persons will say that I am thinking of confining, distorting, and stunting the growth of the intellect by ecclesiastical supervision. I have no such thought. Nor have I any thought of a compromise, as if religion must give up something, and science something. I wish the intellect to range with the utmost freedom, and religion to enjoy an equal freedom; but what I

am stipulating for is, that they should be found in one and the same place and exemplified in the same persons. I want to destroy that diversity of centres, which puts everything into confusion by creating a contrariety of influences. I wish the same spots and the same individuals to be at once oracles of philosophy and shrines of devotion. It will not satisfy me, what satisfies so many, to have two independent systems, intellectual and religious, going at once side by side, by a sort of division of labour, and only accidentally brought together. It will not satisfy me, if religion is here, and science there, and young men converse with science all day, and lodge with religion in the evening. It is not touching the evil, to which these remarks have been directed, if young men eat and drink and sleep in one place and think in another: I want the same roof to contain both the intellectual and moral discipline. Devotion is not a sort of finish given to the sciences; nor is science a sort of feather in the cap, if I may so express myself, an ornament and set-off to devotion. I want the intellectual layman to be religious, and the devout ecclesiastic to be intellectual.

This is no matter of terms, nor of subtle distinctions. Sanctity has its influence; intellect has its influence; the influence of sanctity is the greater on the long run; the influence of intellect is greater at the moment. Therefore, in the case of the young, whose education lasts a few years, where the intellect is, there is the influence. Their literary, their scientific teachers, really have the forming of them. Let both influences act freely, and then, as a general rule, no system of mere religious guardianship which neglects the Reason, will in matter of fact succeed against the School. Youths need a masculine religion, if it is to carry captive their restless imaginations, and their wild intellects, as well as to touch their susceptible hearts.

Look down then upon us from Heaven, O blessed Monica, for we are engaged in supplying that very want which called for thy prayers and gained for thee thy crown. Thou who didst obtain thy son's conversion by the merit of thy intercession, continue that intercession for us, that we may be blest, as human instruments, in the use of those human means by which ordinarily the Holy Cross is raised aloft, and religion commands the world. . . .

The Mission of St. Philip Neri

The Oratory, Birmingham

January 15 and 18, 1850

I awaked last of all, and as one that gathereth after the grape-gatherers. In the blessing of God I also have hoped; and as one that gathereth grapes, have I filled the wine-press. See that I have not laboured for myself only, but for all that seek discipline.

Sirach 33:16-18

. . . Things which other saints have allowed in themselves, or rather have felt a duty, he could not abide. He did not ask to be opposed, to be maligned, to be persecuted, but simply to be overlooked, to be despised. Neglect was the badge which he desired for himself and for his own. “To despise the whole world,” he said, “to despise no member of it, to despise oneself, to despise being despised.” He took great pleasure in being undervalued and made little of, according to the Apostle’s sentiment, “If any man among you seem to be wise, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.” And hence you know, when he became so famous in his old age, and everyone was thinking of him mysteriously, and looking at him with awe, and solemnly repeating Father Philip’s words and rehearsing Father Philip’s deeds, and bringing strangers to see him, it was the most cruel of penances to him, and he was ever behaving himself ridiculously on purpose, and putting them out, from his intense hatred and impatience of being turned into a show. “He was always trying,” says his biographer, “either by gestures, or motions, or words, or some facetious levity, to hide his great devotion; and when he had done any virtuous action, he would do something simple to cover it.”

This being the disposition of St. Philip, you will understand how it was, that while he wished to do the very work which Savonarola intended, he set about it, not on principle merely, but on instinctive feeling, in so different a way. Here, as in other cases, the slowest way was the surest, and the most quiet the most effectual; and he rather would not have attempted that work at all, than have sacrificed his humility and modesty to the doing of it. Accordingly he, whose mission was to Popes, Cardinals, and nobles, to philosophers, authors, and artists, began with teaching the poor who are found about the doors of the Roman Churches. This was his occupation for years; soon he added to it another undertaking of the same kind. He used to go about the squares, shops, warehouses, schools, and shop-counters, “talking with all sorts of persons in a most engaging way about spiritual things, and saying, ‘Well, my brothers, when are we to set about serving God, and doing good?’” and he began to make some great conversions.

. . .

He had been fifteen years in Rome before he was ordained; and then at length, on his receiving faculties for hearing confessions, he began, at the age of thirty-five, his real mission – that long course of ministry, which, carried on for years three times fifteen, down almost to the hour of his death, has gained for him the title of Apostle of Rome.

You know, my Brethren, what is commonly meant by an Apostle of a country. It means one who converts its heathen inhabitants to the Christian faith, such as St. Augustine of England; accordingly, his proper function is Baptism. Hence you find St. Augustine, St. Patrick, St. Boniface, or St. Francis baptizing their hundreds and thousands. This was the office to which St. Philip wished to minister in India; but it was his zeal and charity that urged him, not his mature judgment; for the fierce conflicts, and the pastoral cares, and the rude publicity of such exalted duties, were unsuited to his nature; so he was kept at home for a different work. He was kept at home, in the very heart of Christendom, not to evangelize, but to recover; and his instrument of conversion was, not Baptism, but Penance. The Confessional was the seat and seal of his peculiar Apostolate. Hence, as St. Francis Xavier baptized his tens of thousands, Philip was, every day and almost every hour, for forty-five years, restoring, teaching, encouraging, and guiding penitents along the narrow way of salvation.

We are told in his *Life*, that “he abandoned every other care, and gave himself to hearing confessions.” Not content with the day, he gave up a considerable portion of the night to it also. Before dawn he had generally confessed a good number. When he retired to his room, he still confessed everyone who came; though at prayers, though at meals, he broke off instantly, and attended to the call. When the church was opened at daybreak, he went down to the Confessional, and remained in it till noon, when he said Mass. When no penitents came, he remained near his Confessional; he never intermitted hearing confessions for any illness. “On the day of his death he began to hear confessions very early in the morning,” after Mass “again he went into the Confessional,” in the afternoon, and “during the rest of the day down to supper time,” he heard confessions. After supper, “he heard the confessions of those Fathers who were to say the first Masses on the following morning,” when he himself was no longer to be on earth. It was this extraordinary persevering service in so trying, so wearing a duty, for forty-five years, that enabled him to be the new Apostle of the Sacred City. Thus it was, as the lesson in his Office says, that “he bore innumerable children to Christ.” He was ever suffering their miseries, and fighting with their sins, and travailing with their good resolves, year after year, whatever their state of life, their calling, their circumstances, if so be that he might bring them safe to heaven, with a superhuman, heroic patience, of which we see so few traces in the fiery preacher at Florence.

Savonarola, in spite of his personal sanctity, in spite of his protests against a mere external sanctity in Catholics, after all, began with an external reform; he burned lutes and guitars, looking-glasses and masks, books and pictures, in the public square: but Philip bore with every outside extravagance in those whom he addressed, as far as it was not directly sinful, knowing well that if the heart was once set right, the appropriate demeanour would follow. You recollect how a youth came

to his Exercises one day, dressed out “in a most singular and whimsical fashion”; and how Philip did but fix his eyes on him, and proceed with the discourses and devotions of the Oratory, and how, by the time that they were at an end, the poor sinner had become quite another man; his nature was changed all at once, and he became one of the Saint’s most fervent penitents. A rich ecclesiastic came to him in coloured clothes, like a layman: Philip talked with him for a fortnight, without saying a word about his dress. At the end of the time he put it off of his own accord and made a general confession. His biographer says: “He was very much against stiffness and off-hand prohibitions about wearing fine clothes, collars, swords, and such-like things, saying that if only a little devotion gained admittance into their hearts, you might leave them to themselves.” If he spoke of them, it was good-naturedly and playfully. You recollect he said to a lady, who asked if it was a sin to wear slippers with very high heels, according to an excessive fashion of the day, “Take care they do not trip you up.” And to a youth, who wore one of those large, stiff frills, which we see in pictures, he remarked, “I should caress you much more, if your collar did not hurt me.”

Savonarola is associated in our minds with the pulpit rather than the confessional: his vehemence converted many, but frightened or irritated more. The consequences came back upon himself and his penitents. Some of his convert artists were assassinated, others were driven into exile, others gave up their profession altogether in disgust or despair. Philip had no vocation, and little affection, for the pulpit; he was jealous of what the world calls eloquence, and he mortified his disciples when they aspired to it. One he interrupted and sent down; another he made preach his sermons six times over: he discoursed and conversed rather than preached. And “he could not endure harsh rebukes,” says the writer of his life, “or anything like rigour. He allured men to the service of God so dexterously, and with such a holy, winning art, that those who saw it cried out, astonished: ‘Father Philip draws souls as the magnet draws iron.’ He so accommodated himself to the temper of each, as, in the words of the Apostle, to become ‘all things to all men, that he might gain all.’” And his love of them individually was so tender and ardent, that, even in extreme old age, he was anxious to suffer for their sins; and “for this end he inflicted on himself severe disciplines, and he reckoned their misdeeds as his own, and wept for them as such.”

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Would that we, his children of this Oratory, were able to do a work such as his! At least we may take what he was for our pattern, whatever be the standard of our powers and the measure of our success. And certainly it is a consolation that thus much we can say in our own behalf: that we have gone about his work in the way most likely to gain his blessing upon us, because most like his own. We have not chosen for ourselves any scene of exertion where we might make a noise, but have willingly taken that humble place of service which our Superiors chose for us. The desire of our hearts and our duty went together here. We have deliberately set ourselves down in a populous district, unknown to the great world, and have commenced, as St. Philip did, by ministering chiefly to the poor and lowly. We have gone where we could get no reward from society for our deeds, nor

admiration from the acute or learned for our words. We have determined, through God's mercy, not to have the praise or the popularity that the world can give, but, according to our Father's own precept, "to love to be unknown."

May this spirit ever rule us more and more! For me, my dear Fathers of the Oratory, did you ask me, and were I able, to gain some boon for you from St. Philip, which might distinguish you and your successors for the time to come, persecution I would not dare to supplicate for you, as holy men have sometimes supplicated; for the work of the Oratory is a tranquil work, and requires peace and security to do it well. Nor would I ask for you calumny and reproach, for to be slandered is to be talked about, and to some minds notoriety itself is a gratification and a snare. But I would beg for you this privilege, that the public world might never know you for praise or for blame, that you should do a good deal of hard work in your generation, and prosecute many useful labours, and effect a number of religious purposes, and send many souls to heaven, and take men by surprise, how much you were really doing, when they happened to come near enough to see it; but that by the world you should be overlooked, that you should not be known out of your place, that you should work for God alone with a pure heart and single eye, without the distractions of human applause, and should make Him your sole hope, and His eternal heaven your sole aim, and have your reward, not partly here, but fully and entirely hereafter. . . .