

Tracts for the Times 1

Beginning with this issue, *Nova et Vetera* will be reviving the Oxford Movement's *Tracts for the Times*. The Tracts were originally published anonymously, until Tract 18 appeared with Edward Bouverie Pusey's initials. Our Tracts for the Times will likewise appear anonymously at first, though we plan to collect them in a later volume with authors' names appended. The purpose of anonymity is not to conceal the author—that can hardly be done, since our authors' distinctive styles will be recognizable to anyone who cares to investigate—but rather to signal that these are not regular *Nova et Vetera* essays. They are essays meant to light a fire that will spread throughout the Church: a fire fostered by the Holy Spirit and aimed at strengthening the Catholic Church's commitment—in the face of the impact of religious liberalism as well as of consequent reactionary movements—to what Newman termed the “dogmatic principle” and the “sacramental principle.”

The original Tracts for the Times stimulated a movement within the Anglican Church known as the Oxford Movement. The Tracts aimed to affirm Anglicanism as the true inheritor of the Apostolic Church founded by Jesus Christ. For the Tractarians, the Church of England did not split from the Catholic Church. In their view, the English Reformers merely protested against certain abuses of a theological and a practical kind that had corrupted the Church of Rome. The Church of England tried to warn Rome and others against these corruptions. Thus, according to the Tractarians, it was Rome that split from the Church of England, and the Tractarians prayed that Rome could be reclaimed from its errors. Until then, they hoped that the Church of England, faithful to the Apostolic Church, would continue to steer between Protestant private judgment and Biblicism on the one hand, and Roman papalism, devotional excesses, and rationalism on the other hand.

The first Tract, written by Newman and published in early September 1833, laid out the rationale for the Oxford Movement. Parliament had long enjoyed a decisive role in the affairs of the Church of England. In the

period between 1828 and 1833, however, Parliament had enacted laws that delivered full citizenship and Parliamentary rights to non-Anglicans. To Newman and his friends, it seemed that the power over the Church wielded by non-Anglican Parliamentary liberals could all too easily lead to devastating doctrinal changes. The Tractarians feared that such changes, if they came about, would succeed in assimilating the Church of England, whose doctrine they believed to be a true expression of the apostolic teaching, to the religiously liberal currents of the day. This fear was not unfounded, since there were a number of influential Englishmen, such as Thomas Arnold, proposing this very thing.

In additional Tracts written and published by Newman in the Fall of 1833, he sets forth concerns about proposals to alter the Anglican liturgy and Prayer Book (including doctrinal alterations). He insists that Anglican doctrine is grounded in the teachings of the apostles and of the primitive Church, and he discusses the significance of apostolic succession for the credibility of divine revelation and for the standing of the bishops vis-à-vis State power. He reflects upon the possession of the sacraments as a mark of the visible Church of Christ. He expositis the visibility of the Church as taught in Scripture. He denounces the power-mongering of the Bishop of Rome and the problem of papal corruptions of the Gospel, and he delineates the true doctrine and true sacraments of the Church of Christ.

In early 1834 Newman published a Tract on the importance of bodily asceticism (such as fasting) for Christian life, thereby linking doctrinal fidelity with the spiritual and moral life. In the same year, he published a Tract arguing that even in times of grave corruption within and without the Church, nevertheless God is with his Church and renewal movements will spring forth. He also published a Tract that discussed precedents for reforming the Anglican Church by ensuring that urban areas have sufficient bishops and priests, as well as a Tract on the rites and practices of the apostolic and primitive Church.

As the 1830s progressed, Newman's Tracts became longer and their subjects more various. In his two Tracts on the "Via Media," composed as dialogues with someone inquiring into the principles of the Oxford Movement, Newman addresses the view that "the genius and principles of our Church have ever been what is commonly called Protestant."¹ Newman explains what he means by "Protestant" and "Popery," and he answers accusations that the Oxford Movement is tantamount to the revival of

¹ John Henry Newman, Tract 38, in Newman, *Tracts for the Times*, ed. James Tolhurst (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 102–15, at 103.

Popery. He argues that the English Reformers and the best tradition of the English Church advocate a “Via Media” between Protestant and Roman perspectives. In this light he treats the purpose and standing of the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Prayer Book. He enumerates various Roman errors, including transubstantiation, the denial of the cup to the laity, the notion of the Mass as the Church’s sacrifice, indulgences, purgatory, celebration of the liturgy in Latin, compulsory confession to a priest, the invocation of saints, the notion of seven sacraments, and the claim that the pope has universal jurisdiction. After condemning these errors, he devotes his second Tract on the Via Media to the task of criticizing the current practices of the Church of England, and to warning against the twin problems of Erastianism (State governance of the Church) and Latitudinarianism (religious liberalism) currently threatening the Anglican Church.

During the same period, Newman produced a Tract on “The Grounds of Our Faith” that critiqued the Biblicism of Protestants. Biblicism rejects the authority of the doctrine and practice of the primitive Church, as for instance with regard to baptism or the episcopacy. Newman shows that Biblicism is no secure ground even for the doctrine of the Trinity. In another Tract, “The Visible Church,” he responded to a critic who had claimed that Newman’s “doctrine of the one Catholic Church in effect excludes Dissenters, nay, Presbyterians, from salvation”—an assertion that Newman explains is baseless, even if the full means of salvation are found only in the Church of England.² Additionally, he wrote a Tract titled “On the Controversy with the Romanists” in order to explain in greater detail why the Tractarians, while often agreeing with Roman Catholicism, continue to remain separated from Rome due to the various corruptions he had earlier enumerated. He adds here some concerns about what he believes to be Rome’s exaggerated Marian devotion. Although he affirms that Anglicanism is in need of renewal, he denies that Anglicanism has ever gone astray in any fundamental way. He emphasizes, too, that the Church of England is not Protestant, even if popular opinion often imagines it is.

From Tract 73 onward, Newman’s Tracts contain some of his most powerful and profound writing. Tract 73 is “On the Introduction of Rationalistic Principles into Religion”; Tract 83 is “The Patristical Idea of Antichrist”; Tract 85 is “Holy Scripture in Its Relation to the Catholic Creed”; and Tract 90 is “Remarks on Certain Passages in the Thirty-Nine Articles.” Although not as significant, there is also Newman’s praise of the Roman Breviary in Tract 75, his lengthy and erudite argument against

² John Henry Newman, Tract 47, in *Tracts for the Times*, 136–39, at 137.

the existence of Purgatory in Tract 79, and his defense of the Tractarian understanding of baptismal regeneration in Tract 82.

In Tract 73, we find a significant investigation of faith and reason, in light of the concrete mysteries of faith. Newman responds in detail to an author who holds that scriptural revelation is fundamentally about ethics—God’s character and ours. Recognizing this claim to be nascent religious liberalism, Newman points out that the doctrine of the Trinity (for example) is not simply a practical doctrine—aimed at shaping us morally—but above all is a statement about God in himself. In the same Tract, Newman also responds to an author who describes Jesus in purely human terms, as though Jesus’s status as the divine Son did not matter for an accurate portrait of our Lord. Newman also transcribes some passages about Friedrich Schleiermacher’s writings. These passages serve to clarify Newman’s fears about a religiously liberal Christianity that renounces dogmatic realism.

Newman’s Tract on the Church Fathers’ understanding of Antichrist belongs to the process by which he moved away from his early view that the Papacy was the Antichrist. His Tract on Scripture and the Creed hammers home the deficiencies of Biblicism. If all Christian doctrine has to be proven from Scripture—rather than found in Scripture when read in light of Tradition—then, says Newman, Christian faith is on shaky ground, because Scripture is not meant to be a catechetical handbook. Once one starts rejecting doctrines as unbiblical, one eventually will have to perform the same procedure upon doctrines such as the distinct divine Personhood of the Holy Spirit. One will end up rejecting the canonicity of Scripture itself. In this Tract from 1838 (Tract 85), Newman also sums up what he thinks will soon result from religious liberalism: “The view henceforth is to be, that Christianity does not exist in documents, any more than in institutions; in other words, the Bible will be given up as well as the Church.”³ Christianity will be deemed to have had a salutary historical role in producing the current enlightened outlook, and Christianity may even be appreciated as a moral force; but Christianity will no longer be thought to have given to the world an objectively divine teaching or a divine communion.

Through these Tracts along with further Tracts by Pusey, John Keble,

³ John Henry Newman, “Holy Scripture in Its Relation to the Catholic Creed [Tract 85],” in Newman, *Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects*, ed. Gerard Tracey and James Tollhurst (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 109–253, at 233.

and others, the Oxford Movement gathered numerous adherents. It also provoked a strong anti-Catholicizing reaction, especially after the posthumous publication of Richard Hurrell Froude's papers in the late 1830s. The final straw for the Oxford Movement was Newman's Tract 90 (1841). Having long argued that the Thirty-Nine Articles could be interpreted from a Catholicizing perspective just as well (or, at least, almost as well) as they could be interpreted from a Protestant perspective, Newman decided in "Remarks on Certain Passages in the Thirty-Nine Articles" to test his theory that even the most ardent Catholicizers among the Tractarians can in good conscience affirm the Thirty-Nine Articles.

The result was explosive. Bishop Bagot of Oxford condemned the Tract, and demanded that the series of Tracts immediately cease—which they did. Eventually, almost all the Anglican Bishops in England formally condemned Newman's Tract 90, as did many prominent politicians. Oxford University's governing body, the Heads of all the Colleges, joined in the condemnation. Edward Hawkins, the provost of Newman's own Oriel College, required candidates for fellowships to repudiate Tract 90. Hawkins removed Richard Church, later Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, from his fellowship at Oriel for refusing to repudiate Tract 90 or cease lecturing on the Thirty-Nine Articles. Newman himself retreated to Littlemore. In 1843, after a sermon on the Eucharist, Pusey was suspended from further preaching from the Oxford University pulpit.⁴ In 1845, Newman made his first sacramental confession and was received into the Catholic Church. Numerous other Tractarians preceded or joined him.

It seems, then, that the Tracts ended in ecclesiastical disaster and division. If so, why would *Nova et Vetera* wish to commission a new series of Tracts for the Times? Such a title may seem tantamount to prophesying a future ecclesiastical repudiation of the tenets advocated in our twenty-first-century Tracts. It risks stamping their authors with a label associated with conflict and collapse.

From our perspective, however, the Tractarian Movement was far from a failure. For Catholics, the Tractarian Movement was on the contrary one of the greatest developments of the second millennium, bearing fruit in such a great saint and doctor as Newman. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas did not have to face historical questions about the origins and emergence of the papacy or of the seven sacraments, let alone about

⁴ For these details and others like them, see Peter B. Nockles, "The Oxford Movement in an Oxford College: Oriel as the Cradle of Tractarianism," in *The Oxford Movement: Europe and the Wider World 1830–1930*, ed. Stewart J. Brown and Peter B. Nockles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 11–33.

the lateness of patristic testimony to certain Marian doctrines. These questions had energetically emerged by Newman's day, and they fed a growing religious liberalism that deemed Catholic faith to be unreasonable. In this context, Newman's contribution was to think brilliantly about the relationship of dogmatic faith to the fruits of historical research, without ever compromising the realism of dogma. He approached this topic from a variety of angles, including reflections on university education, culture, religious pluralism, ecumenism, the broader relationship of faith and reason, biblical exegesis (including allegorical or spiritual exegesis), and the relationship between dogma and spirituality.

The Tracts for the Times, therefore, did not end in disaster from a Catholic perspective. They have borne tremendous fruit for the Church in the nearly two centuries that have followed, including during the Second Vatican Council and at the present moment. In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Newman identifies the crucial reason for their ongoing relevance: their advocacy for what he terms the "dogmatic principle" and the "sacramental principle." These principles simply could not be more relevant today.

Throughout his Anglican years, as Newman recalls in the *Apologia*, he fought "liberalism" or "the anti-dogmatic principle and its developments."⁵ Newman was well aware that "liberalism" has many meanings, political and otherwise. Specifically, he fought religious liberalism, that is, the notion that Christianity does not communicate divine truth—true revelation about God, Christ, and humanity. In his speech in Rome upon his elevation to the Cardinalate, Newman reiterated his opposition to "the spirit of liberalism in religion. . . . Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion."⁶ The dogmatic principle means that the truths articulated in the Creed about God the Trinity, the Incarnation, baptism, and so forth accurately (though certainly not exhaustively) communicate ontological realities.

The sacramental principle is equally crucial. Newman defines it in the *Apologia* as the belief that there is "a visible Church with sacraments and rites which are the channels of invisible grace."⁷ As an Anglican, he had

⁵ John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 163.

⁶ John Henry Newman, "Biglietto Speech," available at newmanreader.org/works/addresses/file2.html. In this speech, Newman refers to the movement in favor of State toleration of all religions without preference for any particular religion as true, but his definition of religious liberalism as "the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion" is the key element. See also Newman's "Note A.: Liberalism," appended to his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1947), 259–69.

⁷ Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1956 ed.), 164.

in view the accomplishment of the forgiveness of sins, or justification, by the sacrament of baptism. He also had in view episcopal and priestly ordination. As a Catholic, he affirmed all seven sacraments, as well as the divine institution of the Church's offices. For Newman, the sacramental principle also involves a particular understanding of human history, namely, as saturated with divine presence and as under the guidance of providence. Underlying every visible reality is the creative knowledge and will of God. God works out the redemption of humankind through visible realities such as Christ's holy humanity and the members of the Church across the centuries. This understanding of God's presence and action in history makes plausible Newman's claim that the Catholic Church is able to preserve and develop, without ever making an error in solemn teaching, the apostolic deposit of faith bestowed upon the Church by Christ.

The dogmatic and sacramental principles defended by Newman and the Tractarians are widely denied today. A substantial part of the populace in Western countries is effectively atheist. Even among Catholics, how many take their baptismal grace with particular seriousness? How many Catholics believe that the Eucharist unites them with Christ's Cross and resurrection in an ontologically real way? Few Catholics today take regular advantage of the sacrament of reconciliation. The Church teaches that the sacrament of marriage seals the indissolubility of a marriage and that the sacrament provides the grace to live out that indissolubility. But most Catholics seem to have the same understanding of marriage as does the surrounding culture. The sacrament of holy orders ontologically changes a man by giving him a unique participation in Christ's prophetic, sanctifying, and governing office. But this seems to be belied by the fact that priests and bishops have too often caused scandal.

If there is a crisis in understanding and living the sacramental mediation of grace, there is also today an equally grave, or perhaps even graver crisis in dogmatic realism. This crisis is reflected especially in academic theology, though it is also reflected pastorally in the ever-increasing numbers of young people leaving the Church. Although various reasons are given for why young people leave—from the Church's strict sexual teachings to the seemingly difficult relationship of science and faith—at the heart of the matter is that many young people do not believe that Jesus is God incarnate. This loss of faith does not happen in a vacuum: much of it flows from what they learn in college or university. In this vulnerable and formative time in their young lives, rather than claiming the faith as their own, they lose the faith. In many Catholic theology or religious studies departments today, the course on Christology is about the liberative praxis of Jesus of Nazareth against all priestly and patriarchal systems, and the course on

the Trinity has to do not with God but with human social structures and power dynamics. Even for seminarians, it can be unclear why their pastoral work in parishes must actually be grounded in an ongoing study of the divine mysteries of faith. To appeal to Scripture and Tradition is often seen in academic circles as fundamentalism or “classicism,” neglectful of the contextual matrices in which expressions and experiences of Christian community are continually changing. History is assumed to be about anything but the entrance of the sovereign Lord of history in a manger in Bethlehem to teach the true way of salvation, to die for the forgiveness of all sins, to rise from the dead so that fallen human beings can share in God’s life forever, beginning here and now in the Church.

In short, like the Tractarians in 1833, we today perceive growing pressures to assimilate the Word of God to religiously liberal trends. In response, our new series of Tracts aims to reassert the dogmatic principle and the sacramental principle. The doctrines that we have in view are present in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Newman points out that the Tractarian Movement never sought to produce a mere party in the Anglican Church while the main line of the Anglican Church continued on in the opposite direction. Neither the original Tracts for the Times nor our Tracts intend to rally a minority within the Church to partake in an antiquarian way of living and believing. Rather, allowing fully for the diversity of theological schools and spiritualities that has always characterized the Catholic Church,⁸ our Tracts

⁸ Newman observes in this regard, “It is a well-known point in controversy, to say that the Catholic Church has not any real unity more than Protestantism; for, if Lutherans are divided in creed from Calvinists, and both from Anglicans, and the various denominations of Dissenters each has its own doctrine and its own interpretation, yet Dominicans and Franciscans, Jesuits and Jansenists, have had their quarrels too. Nay, that at this moment the greatest alienation, rivalry, and difference of opinion exist among the members of the Catholic priesthood, so that the Church is but nominally one, and her pretended unity resolves itself into nothing more specious than an awkward and imperfect uniformity” (John Henry Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, vol. 1 [London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897], 297). Expanding upon this point, Newman sets forth a sampling of the broad range of theological differences among diverse schools and individuals within the Catholic Church; and he also grants the existence of plentiful strife among Catholics. Newman’s answer is as follows: “Left to himself, each Catholic likes and would maintain his own opinion and his private judgment just as much as a Protestant; and he has it, and he maintains it, just so far as the Church does not, by the authority of Revelation, supersede it. The very moment the Church ceases to speak, at the very point at which she, that is, God who speaks by her, circumscribes her range of teaching,

seek to speak to the whole Catholic Church with a vision for the Church, a vision that gladly appreciates doctrinal development but also warns against doctrinal and sacramental corruption.

One thing that stands out about the original Tracts for the Times is how diverse they were in length and in topic. Some are barely a few pages long; others can be almost a short book. While sharing the same general perspective, some treat a particular sacrament; others range broadly on ecclesiastical issues of the day; others are doctrinal and exegetical; others pertain to spirituality and the Christian moral life. The Tracts in *Nova et Vetera's* series, too, will exhibit such diversity.

It is now almost 170 years since Newman penned the first Tract, the beginning of a movement that, as Newman observed in 1850, had “surprising success,” insofar as “opinions which, twenty years ago, were not held by any but Catholics, or at most only in fragmentary portions by isolated persons, are now the profession of thousands.”⁹ If Christ Jesus permits the world to endure another 170 years, and if in 2192 there is somewhere a reader of this now dusty issue of *Nova et Vetera* who wonders why we tried to imitate Newman’s project without his brilliant pen, the answer is that we are striving to act, just as Newman did, out of love for “the Church Catholic and Apostolic, set up from the beginning.”¹⁰ In accord with the dogmatic principle and the sacramental principle as understood by Newman, it is our desire to assist the Church in the rough waters and ever-darkening storms of our times. N:V

there private judgment of necessity starts up; there is nothing to hinder it. The intellect of man is active and independent: he forms opinions about everything; he feels no deference for another’s opinion, except in proportion as he thinks that that other is more likely than he to be right; and he never absolutely sacrifices his own opinion, except when he is sure that the other knows for certain. He *is* sure that God knows; therefore, if he is a Catholic, he sacrifices his opinion to the Word of God, speaking through His Church. But, from the nature of the case, there is nothing to hinder his having his own opinion, and expressing it, whenever, and so far as, the Church, the oracle of Revelation, does not speak” (301).

⁹ Newman, *Certain Difficulties*, 9. Whether Newman is correct in this judgment, or whether the Tractarians simply carried forward the High Church party, is perhaps an open question.

¹⁰ Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1956 ed.), 149.