

## METHOD IN THEOLOGY

Topic: The dialectic of authority in Newman's *Apologia*  
Convener: J. Michael Stebbins, Gonzaga University  
Presenter: Richard M. Liddy, Seton Hall University

The aim of this session was to analyze John Henry Newman's *Apologia pro vita sua* as an illustration on several levels of what Bernard Lonergan has called "the dialectic of authority."

Richard Liddy began his presentation by recounting Charles Kingsley's famous attack in print on Newman's integrity. Newman realized that he had to answer Kingsley not simply by meeting argument with argument, but rather by laying bare the living reality of his own mind through an account of the intellectual odyssey that had brought him to the decision to enter the Roman Catholic Church. In the *Apologia* he relates the various internal conflicts he experienced as his study of Church history and the writings of the Fathers gradually led him to pose with ever-increasing poignancy the question of the precise locus of the Church's authority. Newman's insistence on rigorously facing up to every relevant question on the issue brought him to the conclusion that the infallible authority of the Catholic Church is a divine blessing, and not the evil its detractors claim it to be.

Thus, on one level, there was a dialectic going on within Newman himself as he journeyed toward his entry into the Catholic Church in 1845. At the same time there was the obvious dialectic going on between Newman and Kingsley as Newman wrote the *Apologia* in 1864. And finally, perhaps most interesting of all, Liddy pointed out, the *Apologia* offers evidence of yet a third dialectic, this one going on within the Catholic Church in 1864 as Newman asserted a delicate balance between the tenets of liberal Catholics and ultramontane defenders of papal authority. The former group tended to assert that human action should be guided principally by reason or private judgment; the latter, that it should bow to the teaching authority of the Church. But Newman maintained that preferring either element to the exclusion of the other was a mistake: rather, he saw the Catholic community as the one place in the stream of human history where both elements of the dialectic are fully present and can meaningfully engage one another – the use of reason evoking the exercise of authority, that exercise in turn evoking the reaction of reason, and so on, "as the ebb and flow of the tide." This "incessant noisy process" was for Newman the chief way in which divine providence shapes the human pursuit of the truth within the church.

Liddy's presentation was followed by a wide-ranging conversation about the manner in which authority functions in the Church in our own day and about the conditions that must be fulfilled for the authentic exercise of that authority.

Because this was the final meeting of the Method in Theology Continuing Group, the last part of the session was spent discussing possible ways in which the topic of theological method could continue to be effectively addressed at future CTSA conventions.

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