

SEMINAR ON PAPAL INFALLIBILITY

NEWMAN ON THE RECEPTION OF DOCTRINE

At the conclusion of the "seminar on papal infallibility" at the 1980 meeting of the CTSA, the suggestion was made that the presentations prepared for the seminar in 1981 be concerned with the "reception of doctrine." Subsequently, John T. Ford, C.S.C. (The Catholic University of America) and Robert G. Simons, C.M. (Mary Immaculate Seminary, Northampton, Pennsylvania) agreed to prepare papers on the suggested topic, through a consideration of the thought of John Henry Newman.

Ford's presentation focused on Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) and *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (1859). Three questions about Newman's *Essay on Development* need further exploration: (1) was Newman presenting a theory of development or only a "view"? (2) was Newman treating development as a fact or as an hypothesis? (3) did Newman consider development an inherently homogeneous process or, more rhetorically, advance an interpretation of basically disjunctive data? An examination of the *Essay* indicates that Newman seems concerned, less with formulating a theory, and more with persuading his former colleagues to "re-view" their principles and to follow his footsteps in converting to Rome; secondly, in Newman's argument, "development" is not necessarily a fact, but an alternative hypothesis to the scylla of dogmatic fundamentalism and the charybdis of doctrinal fluidity, which he considered the greatest threats to religion in his day; and thirdly, by portraying the process of development as homogeneous, Newman was able to maintain that the Church as custodian of revelation has never lost and will never lose any of the essential teaching of Christ.

On Consulting the Faithful maintained that "the body of the faithful is one of the witnesses to the fact of the tradition of revealed doctrine" and "their *consensus* throughout Christendom is the voice of the Infallible Church." In defending this thesis, Newman presented a series of historical examples that give the impression that the Church has customarily consulted the laity on doctrinal issues in the past, and can be expected to do so in the future. Newman's theological perspective seems to incorporate the patristic idea of a Divine Economy which is "realized" only through a series of events of "individual economies." In this

perspective, doctrinal isomorphism is essentially vertical, insofar as the individual events "realize" the Divine Economy; doctrinal isomorphism is secondarily horizontal, insofar as each event is related to every other through the Divine Economy.

One can surely credit Newman with a highly creative amalgamation of the idea of historical development with a platonic view of a Divine Economy; in this view, the immutability of doctrine is assured by its relationship to the Divine Economy, while doctrinal variations are allowed by the historical character of the individual "realizations." Moreover, the "growth-images" (e.g., acorn-oak) of homogeneous development resonate well with the idea of an Economy in process of realization. On closer inspection, however, a number of weaknesses in Newman's view become apparent; in particular, this organic view tends to fit fact to theory by ignoring the irregularities of historical process. Thus, in adapting Newman's view on the development and reception of doctrine, theologians need to be attentive to two problematic areas: first, in the history of doctrine, the discontinuities need a more satisfactory theoretical explanation; secondly, systematic theological explanations need to incorporate the relativity of the specifically historical.

In discussing "Newman's role in the reception of the Vatican Decrees in England," Simons pointed out that this reception took place on a number of levels: personal faith and public teaching, professional theology and the sociopolitical forum of his day. In effect, Newman's response to the doctrine not only provides a study in contrasts, but offers a basis for understanding reception in a way that is sensitive to the process of teaching. For example, even after the definition was approved by the Council, Newman was hesitant as to whether Catholics were *bound* to accept it; this hesitation, based on the apparent lack of moral unanimity at the Council, led Newman to display considerable sympathy for those who had difficulties with the definition. Newman was also moved to work out a more acceptable interpretation of the definition than that advanced by Manning and other ultramontanes. Thus, Newman stressed that accepting the doctrine does not necessarily entail acceptance of the process which preceded its formulation; moreover, a later pope or council may correct the one-sidedness of a previous one.

After the publication of Gladstone's *Vatican Decrees in Their Bearing on Civil Allegiance* (1874), Newman, at the urging of his friends, responded in his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (1875). Typical of the favorable reactions was the comment of Baron von Hügel, who wrote Newman that he felt *Norfolk* "to be probably

your finest, certainly your most opportune, work." The response in Rome was quite different; the cardinal-prefect of Propaganda wrote Manning that *Norfolk* was censurable in part, since it contained propositions apt to harm the minds of the laity; Manning, however, replied that there were many reasons for not censuring the book. Newman's bishop, Ullathorne, concurred that "any public censure would be greatly inexpedient."

Newman's *Norfolk* represents the public dimension of his response to the Vatican definition. His theological interpretation acknowledged that the active (decision-making) infallibility lies in the pope and bishops, but stressed that passive infallibility lies with all the faithful. As part of this body, theologians perform a great service for the magisterium of the Church, when they "correct popular misapprehensions and narrow views" in the teaching of the active holders of infallibility. Reception of dogma, then, entails a dialogic process between the teaching and the believing Church, a process which sometimes requires the passage of time before a correct interpretation of a particular doctrine can be established. Accordingly, Newman's approach emerges not only as more theologically balanced, but also more compassionate.

In addition to discussing both presentations, participants in the seminar suggested several topics for next year's convention: the need for a "bill of rights" in the Church; the relation of the Gallican Articles to *Pastor Aeternus*; a discussion of *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church* (Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI).

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