IS NEWMAN'S THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT CATHOLIC?

H. FRANCIS DAVIS

A SERIOUS and sympathetic study of Newman's theory of development has appeared recently from the pen of Mr Owen Chadwick.[1] He concludes a painstaking historical account of theories on doctrinal development with a challenge to Newman's claim to interpret Catholicism. 'The question then for those who think Newman's theology is Catholic, is this: these new doctrines, of which the Church had a feeling or inkling but of which she was not conscious—in what meaningful sense may it be asserted that these doctrines are not "new revelation"?'[2]

That development for Newman was, in a certain sense, from an 'idea' held wordlessly and unreflexively to a formulation in words, I agree. But I am sorry that Mr Chadwick has used in this summary a word as un-Newmanic as 'feeling'. I agree that Newman was a notoriously untechnical writer, and it is true that, in at least one place in his letters, he uses the word 'feeling' to represent what he elsewhere calls our partial or unconscious recognition of a truth which we have not yet learnt to formulate. But it is also true that, at other times, Newman explicitly rejects both 'feeling' and 'experience' as words too subjective to represent our relationship to the object of Christian faith or theology. Moreover, it is remarkable that, in his Sermon of 1843, on 'Development in Religious Doctrine', he never once uses either of these words. Nor does he, I believe, use them in the *Essay on Development*.

Mr Chadwick's challenge is, first, to any claim that Newman's theology is Catholic; and, secondly, in the event of an affirmative answer, how can both Newman's theory and Catholicism defend themselves against the charge of admitting new revelation.

With regard to the first point, there is a suggestion in Mr Chadwick's book that Catholic theology has never treated the questions of tradition and doctrinal development historically; and

1 Owen Chadwick: *From Bossuet to Newman* (Cambridge University Press; 25s.).
2 *Op. cit.*, p. 195.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1958.tb06361.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

that it is doubtful whether it can allow itself the freedom to do so. Mr Chadwick makes in his volume a careful study of some of the great counter-Reformation scholastics, who were exclusively and formally logical in their approach. They were concerned, as he understands them, mainly with a discussion of the possibilities of a theological conclusion being defined, or with a dialogue on the precise contribution made by the Church's definition to the certainty of an otherwise fallible premise. Mr Chadwick clearly wonders whether there really can be a place in Catholic thought for so entirely different an approach as that of Newman.

However unlikely it might appear in theory that the Church of Bossuet, on the one hand, and Suarez, Vasquez, De Lugo and Marin-Sola, on the other, might grant citizen-rights in her theological schools to so original and historically-minded a thinker as Newman, it cannot be denied that his place in our theology is by now firmly established. It may be allowable here to repeat the often-quoted words of Pope St Pius X: 'For, as everyone knows, Henry Newman always defended the cause of the Catholic faith before the English public, so that his work was both a great benefit to his fellow-countrymen, and held in high esteem by our predecessors. For this reason he was deemed worthy to be made a cardinal by Leo XIII, a very sound judge of both men and matters. . . . Indeed, though things might be found which appear different from the usual theological mode of expression, nothing can be found which would arouse any suspicion of his faith. . . .'[3]

It is true that, in the years immediately following Newman's conversion, Catholic theology was at a low ebb. The main theologians in Rome were not even representative of the classical scholastic tradition. One of Newman's chief critics in Rome was the unfortunate Passaglia, who later was to fall away from the Church. Outside of Rome, an unfortunate impression was created for a while by an impetuous convert of not many years standing, Brownson, who simply did not possess the breadth of view to be able to understand why any theory of development was necessary. In England and Scotland, among Catholics at least, Newman got a better reception. Newman himself has, of course, been one of the factors in the astounding revival of Catholic theology that has characterized the present century, especially

3 *A.S.S.*, 1908, XLI, p. 200.

since the modernist crisis was surmounted. No one could reasonably maintain that the best Catholic theology of today is not historically minded. As far as the question of doctrinal development is concerned, there is a growing tendency for our theologians to put forward explanations that are, either consciously or unconsciously, along Newmanic principles. Examples of these are Fr Karl Rahner, S.J.,[4] of Innsbruck, Fr Taymans, S.J., of Louvain,[5] Fr Liégé, O.P., in *Catholicisme*,[6] and Professor E. Dublanchy in the *Dictionnaire Théologique Catholique*.[7] What is still more significant is the growing use of Newman's principles in the explanation and history of actual developments such as the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception.

But does the Newman theory teach that developments are, when defined, new revelation? Newman himself, of course, wrote his Sermon and his *Essay* to prove they were not new revelation, in the proper sense of that word. That they are new statements of doctrine is obvious. There could not be any development in doctrine, unless something new in the way of understanding arises. Mr Chadwick claims that, for Newman, this something new is more than a mere explanation of terms. That must clearly be admitted. A mere explanation of terms could hardly be called a development at all. It would hardly lead to an hypothesis, illustrated by a study of history, to account for it.

Yet, on the other hand, if Newman had been able to accept the possibility of 'new revelation', he would also not have written a 445-page *Essay* to prove that developments were inevitable, even in a Church whose deposit of revelation was given by the Apostles, and who considered it her duty to preserve that deposit unchanged through the centuries. In this Newman was in agreement with Bossuet. No additions to the original deposit may be made. It is true that Newman felt bound to relinquish the Vincentian canon, *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*: but only on the grounds of its being unpractical. He remained throughout loyal to the other Vincentian dictum, 'Let what has been once revealed suffice.'

Mr Chadwick thinks that, to Newman's mind, new dogmas are formulations of some original 'wordless feeling or experience'

4 cf. *Schriften zur Theologie, I.*
5 'Le progrès du dogme', *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, tom. 71, 1949, pp. 687ff.
6 Tom. III, 959–962.
7 Tom. IV, 1606–1650.

in the Church. Hence, he argues, when such feeling are formulated for the first time, that must be regarded as a new revelation. It could not be regarded as having been revealed in the beginning, since a 'feeling' is not a revelation. Hence it can only be part of revelation after its subsequent formulation in so far as its definition by the Church is equivalent to revelation. 'Newman's theory, like that of Suarez, is dependent upon the contention that definition by the Church is equivalent to revelation. If it were established (for example) in Catholic theology that "revelation ended at the death of the last apostle", Newman's theory could hardly survive without a restatement so drastic as to leave it almost unrecognizable.'[8] Such is the grave charge made by Mr Chadwick.

If the charge were true, Newman would be the first to wish to restate his theory. He never hesitated in his belief that public revelation ceased with the end of the apostolic age. 'The point to be ascertained', said Newman, 'is the unity and identity of the idea with itself through all stages of its development from first to last, and there are seven tokens that it may rightly be accounted one and the same all along.'[9] And previously, in the Sermon on Developments, Newman had written: 'As definitions are not intended to go beyond their subject, but to be adequate to it, so the dogmatic statements of the Divine Nature used in our confessions, however multiplied, cannot say more than is implied in the original idea, considered in its completeness, without risk of heresy. Creeds and dogmas live in the one idea which they are designed to express, and which alone is substantive; and are necessary only because the human mind cannot reflect upon that idea, except piecemeal, cannot use it in its oneness and entireness, nor without resolving it into a series of aspects and relations.'[10] The Fathers of Ephesus and Chalcedon, though they put forward a new definition, protested that they were but declaring the faith of Nicea. And yet they did in some sense define something new.

Newman's theory will never be understood, however, unless one bears in mind that he is not considering dogmas piecemeal, and showing how an earlier expression can develop into a later one. He is concerned with the development of the Church's understanding of a great original unified 'idea' or 'divine fact',

8 O. Chadwick, *op. cit.*, p. 160.
9 *Essay on Development*, p. 206.
10 *Oxford University Sermons*, pp. 331-2.

given during the apostolic era in the form of propositions, but itself never 'being compassed by those very propositions', for it 'would not be exhausted, nor fathomed by a thousand'.[11]

It must be remembered that the theory was devised by Newman to solve a problem written over the face of Christian history. He did not turn to this hypothesis until he had rejected three rival hypotheses. One of the rejected hypotheses was that Christianity had been corrupted from the beginning, that it had nowhere remained true to the original, and that it had grown by adding and syncretizing elements from other religions. This, the 'liberal' view, Newman had never seriously entertained. It was out of harmony with faith in the Incarnation and divinely guided Church.

He had also rejected as unrealistic the attempt to 'correct' and purify historical religion by applying the Vincentian canon and rejecting everything which could not be proved to have been held everywhere, at all times, and by all Christians. This H.C.F. solution was an abstraction. It would only result in a paper Christianity, and ultimately must be seen to be incompatible with faith in a divinely guided Church.

But Newman also felt he must reject a common 'solution' put forward by Catholics, which just denied the problem, and stated that all present 'developments' had always been held in their present form, but that they were not all mentioned in ancient documents because of a supposed *disciplina arcani*. Thus, for instance, in this view, frequent private confession and a belief in the Immaculate Conception would be as expressly recognized in the second century as they are today; and their not being mentioned in documents would be due to the custom of protecting sacred truths from the knowledge of the non-Christian. This theory, explained Newman, is untenable, among other reasons, because the *disciplina arcani* was observed neither at all times nor in all places.

Unless some other hypothesis were possible, there appeared to be no acceptable solution to the historical problem of the relationship of modern to ancient Christianity. Such were the circumstances in which Newman proposed his hypothesis that, where a deep and living truth is held with conviction by a community, it must grow and develop in those minds if it is to remain true to itself. Mere change, however, would be no guarantee of

11 *Oxford University Sermons*, p. 332.

truth; for changes—in this corruptible world of ours—are not always developments. Every group of Christians in the world has changed. Is it possible to devise a group of tests whereby we may know, among so many 'churches' which have changed, which Church appears to be the true development of the Church of the early centuries? The argument quickly pointed to Rome, so Newman was convinced, since no other Church could make a plausible claim to the continuity and unity and faithful growth which alone could prove essential identity.

Note that Newman's theory is in support of a Church as contrasted with other claimants. It is not a yardstick whereby the individual can judge of the lawfulness of individual developments. It is in this last aspect that we can see the greatest difference between Newman's *Essay* and the discussions of the great scholastics. The latter were not really putting forward their hypothesis for a developing Church, such that Newman's would later be a rival. The discussions of Suarez may still have their value towards the purpose for which they were composed. But neither Suarez nor Vasquez, nor any other of those scholastic solutions could contribute seriously towards a solution of the historical problem as to whether, in the rise and fall of human polities and theologies down through nineteen centuries, the original Church of Christ, the New Israel, the People of God, had somewhere been lost or divided or destroyed, or whether it is still to be found in that group of Christians which still has its centre in Rome. If Newman's hypothesis is accepted, and his application is approved, then the Church of Rome today must be the one True Fold of the Redeemer. As a result of that initial research, it will no longer be necessary to test each individual dogma in the light of history. The criticism of Newman has been made that, if we accept his view, we should be ready to jettison those dogmas which cannot be shown clearly to be developments. This is to misunderstand his purpose. He sought to prove that the developments, *as a whole*, could be shown to be sound. The soundness of individual dogmas, once made, was guaranteed, according to Newman, not by the hypothesis of developments and the application of the seven tests, but by the 'infallible teaching authority'.

However, as Mr Chadwick points out, Newman did have a theory as to how, in the actual life of the Church, 'new' dogmas were reached. It is characteristic of Newman to insist that they

were not normally reached by syllogistic reasoning. But it is important to recognize that his objection to formal logic is psychological, not metaphysical. He objects to it partly because it has little power, of itself, to persuade, and change the heart; and partly because people make claims for it that are not true to actual life. An example of the latter mistake was the common assumption that, if we do not reason syllogistically, we do not reason at all. In everyday life, said Newman, we rarely do reason syllogistically. Yet we do reason. All men have a reason, though not all can give a reason. Not only do we normally argue or reason informally, we normally do it unreflexively.

Mr Chadwick recognizes that, in Newman's theory, truth develops in the mind by a process of informal, yet true, reasoning. This is why I was sorry that he exaggerates Newman's opposition to, and distrust of, logic. For when such emphasis comes alongside of the suggestion that Newman's starting-point for development was a kind of feeling or experience, the reader might easily get the impression that Newman's process of development, whether in the Church or the individual, was not a reasoning process. Newman's fundamental belief in reason is shown by the fact that he made logical sequence a test of faithful developments. Mr Chadwick seems unduly to exaggerate the differences between the first and second edition of the *Essay*, in order to suggest that, in deference to Roman theologians, Newman opens up 'the possibility of a stronger affirmation of the place of logic in theology and therefore in development'. I have re-read both editions carefully, but find it hard to see any essential alteration in favour of logic, in the formal sense. Newman's position is exactly the same in both editions. Developments should follow logically from the original idea. On the other hand, they are not reached by the exercise of formal logic, but rather by that subconscious or unreflexive reasoning, which Newman was later to put under the control of the illative sense. 'An idea under one or other of its aspects grows in the mind by remaining there; it becomes familiar and distinct, and is viewed in its relations; it leads to other aspects, and these again to others, subtle, recondite, original, according to the character, intellectual and moral, of the recipient; and thus a body of thought is formed without his recognizing what is going on within him.' What happens in the individual mind, happens in a group of minds; and, in the case

of the Church, the whole is watched over by the Holy Spirit. Finally, 'logic is brought in to arrange and inculcate what no science was employed in gaining'.[12]

It may be objected that Newman's original 'idea' can only be fairly described in Mr Chadwick's words, i.e. as a feeling or experience. Newman, at least, would not have agreed. Nothing is clearer than that his 'idea' or 'impression' or 'tradition of the Apostles' or 'divine fact' had a purely intellectual meaning. It was the objective revelation of divine truth that was in the beginning entrusted to the Church, and had been handed down to each succeeding generation. It was characteristic of Newman in insisting that this underlying revealed truth could never be totally conveyed in a few, or even in a multitude of, propositions. Newman speaks of 'the tradition of the Apostles, committed to the whole Church in its various constituents and functions *per modum unius*'.[13] 'What is meant by the *depositum?*' he wrote in an unpublished essay of 1868. 'Is it a list of articles that can be numbered? No, it is a large philosophy; all parts of which are connected together, and in a certain sense correlative together, so that he who knows one part may be said to know all, as *ex pede Herculem.*' This 'philosophy' he sometimes called the 'inward idea of divine truth', or the 'inward belief' or the 'great sight'. The devout faithful, as well as the theologians, contemplate this object of their faith through the ages, and they cannot help growing in their understanding of it. They do not change the object, nor add to it, they merely learn to possess it more richly and more deeply. 'The mind which is habituated to the thought of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit, naturally turns, as I have said, with a devout curiosity to the contemplation of the Object of its adoration, and begins to form statements concerning him.'[14]

But we do not try to convert the one original impression or Object into many. The whole purpose of all our later formulations is to return to the original unity, so that we shall possess it in its unity more articulately. 'This being the case, all our attempts to delineate our impression of him go to bring out one idea, not two or three or four; not a philosophy, but an individual idea in

12 *Essay on Development*, p. 190.
13 *Rambler*, vol. 1 (new series), 1859, p. 205.
14 *Oxford University Sermons*, p. 329.

its separate aspects.'[15] It is characteristic of Newman's non-technicality that he will reject the word 'philosophy' when he is afraid it will convey too abstract an idea, while he uses it when he wishes to convey the unity underlying manifold expression.

The development is not normally from one proposition to another. It is rather an expression, often after much labour, of what had been accepted unreflexively and without realizing it when one accepted the original idea. 'For though the development of an idea is a deduction of proposition from proposition, these propositions are ever formed in and round the idea itself (so to speak), and are in fact one and all only aspects of it.'[16]

Many modern Catholic theologians have explanations of the actual development of doctrine, which are very similar to that of Newman. Take, for instance, Fr Taymans.[17] In so far as I understand him, he explains how in all knowledge of reality, when an object of consciousness is perceived, it is only partially grasped for what it is. What we already know, we possess, but not adequately. There is always room for growing in our possession of it. What is true of all knowledge is especially true, he says, of supernatural knowledge. We grasp it while all the time being conscious that we are grasping it inadequately. The knowledge of this makes us struggle to grasp it more adequately.

He puts the same truth in another way by saying that every statement affirms virtually much more than it states. The statement that Christ is the Son of God involves a background which can only slowly be assimilated. When the faithful adhere to an article of faith, they implicitly affirm all that in the real order is bound up with that article.

Fr Taymans also regards the ultimate object of faith and theology as one. He calls it simply Christ as present by faith in his Church. Thus it is that Christians throughout the ages strive to understand him more deeply. The only guide the Christian has is the sum of propositions by means of which it has been handed down. But those propositions imply much more than they say. Through these propositions Christ himself is conveyed to us, and by means of them we find our way to him, under the help of the Holy Spirit. All understanding, as an attempt to get to

15 *Op. cit.*, p. 330.
16 *Op. cit.*, p. 334.
17 *Op. cit.*

the underlying truth, involves a synthesis of data already given. Such a synthesis in so far as it sheds new understanding on the truth already given can be called a development.

Father Karl Rahner puts forward an interpretation of the development of dogmas which also has many likenesses to that of Newman. What does it mean, he asks, to say that the deposit was closed with the death of the Apostles? Clearly it cannot mean that the Apostles left a definite number of strictly fixed propositions, which would form a sort of final code, in such a way that subsequent generations of Christians would merely comment upon them. Revelation, says Fr Rahner, is a dialogue between God and man, in which something *happens* in our regard, and all that is imparted to us relates to this happening. Though the original propositions in which that salvation-event is handed down to us always remain true and may not be rejected, yet it is the understanding of the event which matters more than the form of words. The believing Church possesses the object of belief, i.e. Christ, his Spirit, the pledge of life, and the gift of eternity. No form of words can fully grasp this. The understanding of this object develops much more by the light of faith and contemplation, meditating on the articles of the creeds and propositions of Scripture in an atmosphere of living contact with the object of belief, Jesus Christ, than it does by mere logical deduction.

Fr Rahner, like Newman and Fr Taymans, emphasizes that no human sentences can express adequately their object. Since the dogmas of the Church are finite expressions of infinite truth, it is clear that only the guidance of the Holy Spirit can enable the Church to keep her gaze fixed on the revealed object of her faith, which is always greater than any propositions that attempt to express that object.

Fr Liégé understands the actual process of doctrinal development in a similar way. 'In many cases of development, theological reasoning merely brings a belated support to the Catholic sense reflected in the Church's life (*sens catholique vécu*). It is seldom that theological reasoning alone gives rise to a development. In any case, it is not by virtue of the theological middle term of scientific argument that the Church asserts the homogeneity of a dogmatic development with the word of God. Faith alone becomes the direct motive of adhesion, and no longer faith mediated by a logical process. The true theory of development is

the living and active tradition of the Church, the continuing of Pentecost.'[18]

If I have succeeded in reporting these recent Catholic theologians with any degree of accuracy, it is clear that they are all striving to express a realistic theory of how development actually takes place within the Body of Christ. This preoccupation with the actual life of the believing community, so characteristic of the approach of many thinkers today, and so much more historical in outlook than the more abstract approach before Newman, shows how Newman has, in the middle of this century, come to represent much of what is best in present theology. It is a mistake to understand this as a rejection or even substitute for the older scholastic approach. Newman himself admits that the logical sciences, together, perhaps we should add, with the study of history, still have their importance to enable us to 'arrange and inculcate what no science was employed in gaining'. In his oratorical manner, Newman exaggerates for effect. He does not maintain that science must be excluded from the process of gaining deeper understanding of the faith. 'One does not see how it can be faith to adopt the premisses, and unbelief to accept the conclusion.'[19] But normally science is too limited and too abstract for 'the spontaneous process which goes on within the mind is higher and choicer than that which is logical; for the latter, being scientific, is common property, and can be taken and made use of by minds who are personally strangers, in any true sense, both to the ideas in question and to their development'.[20]

After Newman had joined the Church, he found in the Church's teaching about the living tradition reflected in the *consensus fidelium* much to support the idea of a living tradition, such as was supported by his *Essay on Development*. In his *Rambler* article, 'On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine', he quoted Bishop Ullathorne: 'And it is the devout who have the surest instinct in discerning the mysteries of which the Holy Spirit breathes the grace through the Church, and who, with as sure a tact, reject what is alien from her teaching.' Later in the same passage, Ullathorne quoted St Augustine: 'In matters whereupon the Scripture has not spoken clearly, the custom of

18 Liégé, *op. cit.*, p. 961.
19 *Essay on Development*,
20 *Loc. cit.*, p. 211.

the people of God, or the institutions of our predecessors, are to be held as law.'[21] As a matter of historical study, Newman argued that there was a time when many of the *Ecclesia Docens* (in its wider sense, as referring to individual bishops and local councils) were unfaithful to the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, while the majority of the *Ecclesia docta* remained faithful.

It is surely undeniable that, in a Church watched over by the Holy Spirit of Truth, understanding of revealed truth should grow through the lived faith and daily contemplation of the faithful. The meaning and content of this truth, which is the mystery of Christ in his Church, may be expressed by bishops, doctors, and the mass of the faithful, and reflected in liturgies, rites, ceremonies and customs. Naturally, these are not all on the same footing. But all are part of the Body of Christ, and in all of them there is lived the life of Christ's members by the faith of Christ indwelling. It is ultimately for the teaching Church to decide, with the help of the Holy Spirit, which of the professed developments are faithful to the original deposit of sound teaching. Newman's tests were not meant to take the place of that teaching Church. They are helps, first, to judge of a development claiming to be faithful; and, secondly, after acceptance, to defend and inculcate its genuineness and the truth of the Church that professes it.

21 *Rambler, loc. cit.*, p. 211.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1958.tb06361.x Published online by Cambridge University Press