John Henry Newman as a ‘Father’ of Vatican II

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Introduction: Fathers and Doctors

The answer to the question, which has been mooted since the close of Vatican II, of whether John Henry Newman can, in any meaningful sense, be described as a ‘Father’ of the Council, depends very much on what one understands by the appellation, ‘Father.’

In its first and simplest sense, the word ‘Father’ is applied to those bishops who participated in the council. Hence, Pope Benedict XVI, during a meeting with the parish priests and the clergy of Rome in 2013, contrasted the ‘Council of the Fathers’ (the council understood as an exercise in ‘faith seeking understanding’) with the ‘Council of the Media’ (the council understood in terms of a “political hermeneutic,” namely as “a power struggle between different trends in the Church”).[1] This basic understanding of ‘Council Father’, i.e., as a ‘participant’ in – and, therefore, in some sense, a shaper of – the event, would seem to be at work when Newman is described as, for example, the “absent Council father” or the “invisible peritus” of Vatican II, and reflects the conviction that what the Council actually proposed dovetails (to a greater or lesser extent) with what Newman’s thought was.

Those who advocate such a view of Newman are obliged to acknowledge that there is no direct reference to Newman in any of the conciliar documents, though Ian Ker has recently argued that a “more or less direct reference” to Newman’s theory of development of doctrine may be found in Dei Verbum, §8.[2] Ker has convincingly argued that a good case can be made for the view that Newman’s reflections on a number of themes “offer a balanced, corrective commentary” on their treatment in the conciliar documents, while Newman’s analysis of the history and significance of councils contains “a number of salutary warnings and predictions that could have provided an illuminating, not to say consoling, commentary on events during and after the tumultuous years of the Council.”[3]

Ker’s analysis establishes Newman as an important ‘commentator’ on the council, but more would seem to be needed for him to qualify as a ‘Father of Vatican II.’ The key in this regard might be found by returning to the more classical use of the term, Father, when applied to prominent Christian thinkers. In the technical parlance of Christian tradition, ‘Father’ is an “honorary title” which bears the traces of its complex origins in “a host of common, human, Old Testament, and Graeco-Roman conceptions, such as (a) the father as progenitor of life and as head of the family, for whose welfare and authoritative leadership he was responsible; and as (b) the guardian and mediator of experience and tradition and thus as the authentic teacher, particularly of the faith.”[4]

The ecclesiastical use of the term builds upon the “natural concept” of paternity, since those accorded the title are regarded as the “fathers of the believers, since in the act of baptism they are the progenitors of the new life, in the proclamation and interpretation of the faith they are their educators and teachers, and as leaders of the community they are the authorities and providers of the ‘family’.” While the term, until the fourth century, was applied only to bishops it was later applied to priests and deacons. A ‘Church Father’ is an “authentic tradent and guarantor of the true faith,” “a reliable teacher …to whom one may appeal when in doubt.”[5]

Generally speaking, the appellation ‘Church Father’ is restricted to those who, in addition to their doctrinal orthodoxy, their proven holiness of life, and their (at least implicit) recognition by the Church, lived in antiquity, i.e., “the period of the ancient church.”[6] There is, however, a common ten-
The tendency to conflate the notion of ‘Church Father’ with the notion of ‘doctor’ of the church. The doctors of the church include such ‘recent’ additions as, for example, Alphonsus de Liguori (1696-1781), who was declared a doctor of the Church in 1871, Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) who was declared a doctor of the Church in 1997, and Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) who was declared a doctor of the Church in 2012.

Bernard McGinn has written that “[w]hat is distinctive about the doctors as a group is the model they present of combining the intense love of God and neighbor that defines sanctity with a commitment to the intellectual work of learning, preaching, teaching, and writing.” Their significance, then, is not confined to their reputation for holiness, but is to be sought “especially in their writings. Doctors exist to be read and studied.”[7] In a somewhat more nuanced fashion, Cardinal Ratzinger, speaking in 1990, declared that “the characteristic of the great Doctor of the Church . . . is that he teaches not only through his thought and speech but also by his life, because within him, thought and life are interpenetrated and defined. If this is so,” he went on to say, “then Newman belongs to the great teachers of the Church, because he both touches our hearts and enlightens our thinking.”[8]

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It is interesting that McGinn proposes Newman as a candidate for the title, ‘doctor of the Church’, in view of his “contributions to Christian teaching.” He argues that these are “remarkable, reminding us of some of the great patristic doctors whom he studied and loved so well.” McGinn points out that, since Newman’s theology “was formed more in dialogue with patristic than with scholastic thinkers,” his “life and thought link the first doctors of the church with the issues of the modern age.” For McGinn, this means that “Newman witnesses to the doctoral charism as no other figure of recent centuries.”[9]

Since the ‘doctors (and potential doctors) of the church’ may (mutatis mutandis) reasonably be taken to represent its medieval and modern ‘Fathers,’ Newman might indeed be regarded as a candidate for the latter accolade and one might well appeal to Vatican II as ‘evidence’ of the congruence between his fundamental theological insights and the Church’s formal teaching. In this view of things, the description of Newman as a ‘Father of Vatican II’ might well be understood in the sense in which it is applied to those towering figures whose words and deeds are recalled and honored throughout the great Catholic tradition which finds expression in Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Newman’s growing reputation as a seminal Christian thinker and a man of exemplary sanctity (a view confirmed by his beatification in 2010) suggests that he may one day achieve a status akin to those classical Fathers who are remembered for their vigorous advocacy and defense of a particular understanding of the Church’s tradition of faith or their attempts to secure the Church’s place in an environment hostile to its interests. Their status as ‘Fathers’ was a recognition of the fact that they reflect and gave shape to a particular age in the Church’s life. Viewed from this perspective, Newman might in fact qualify as a father of Vatican II, that is to say, as an advocate of some of its most significant claims and as the living embodiment of its response to the age which constituted the Council’s historical context.[10]

Newman and the Spirit of Vatican II

To relate Newman’s thought (and life) to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is no longer unusual. Newman is often lauded for his prescience and portrayed as a harbinger of a more positive attitude towards the laity, a greater appreciation of the historical (and ‘developmental’) character of the tradition of faith, a more experimentally-based theology, and so on.[11] Indeed, Newman has even been hailed as a herald of postmodernity, as a defender of what is sometimes called a ‘tradition-specific’ approach to truth, a thinker who was at least aware of the contextual character of every claim to rationality (though he always insisted on the objectivity of truth).[12] Nicholas Lash has remarked that, “If Vatican II can be said, with Paul VI, to have been ‘Newman’s hour’ and if it can therefore be said to have been, in some sense, ‘Newman’s Council,’ this is not because his thought had much influence on the conciliar debates, but rather, we might say, because during the Council the Catholic Church ‘caught up’ with Newman.”[13] There is some truth in this claim, but if the Council did indeed ‘catch up’ with Newman, it could only have been because Newman’s theological inheritance was, at the very least, widely distributed amongst those shaping the Council’s thought. Elsewhere, Lash says something similar when he remarks that “explicit acknowledgement of particular lessons learned [from the study of Newman by theologians] is a poor guide to the impact he has had,” and recalls that, by the 1960’s, “. . . ‘development’ was the buzzword and was widely seen as Newman’s gift.”[14]

A complete intellectual genealogy of the periti and ‘Fathers’ of Vatican II would, of course, be most revealing in this regard but it is unlikely that it will ever be available. However, a few examples of the intellectual lineage of some major players may prove instructive. Three of the theologians involved in the drafting of Dei Verbum were quite familiar with Newman’s intellectual legacy and his theory of development in particular, at least in part through their personal contacts with leading Newman scholars. Yves Congar had been exposed to Newman’s work through the writings of, among others, Jean Guitton and Louis Bouyer, who was himself a peritus at the
Council. (Bouyer also drew Newman to the attention of Johannnes Willebrands, the later Cardinal Archbishop of Utrecht, who, in 1960, was appointed Secretary of the newly established Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and who assisted in the preparation of a number of conciliar documents, including those on ecumenism and religious freedom.)[15] Edward Schillebeeckx was a contemporary of his fellow Dominican and Belgian, Jan Hendrik Walgrave, a leading authority on Newman’s theory of doctrinal development. Karl Rahner had been a student of the great German Newman specialist, Erich Przywara. Already in 1941, Congar was pondering the possibility of applying “to the life of the Church and the possession of faith in fide Ecclesiae” the notions of ‘unconscious’ or implicit knowledge developed by Newman. Congar remarked that, “To our knowledge, only Newman has applied them in this way.”[16]

Speaking in 1990, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, while acknowledging his limited “competence” in the field of Newman studies, declared that three of his mentors, Alfred Läpple, Gottlieb Söhngen (whom Ratzinger described as his “true teacher in theology”), and Heinrich Fries, had provided him with a deep appreciation of Newman’s thought. From Läpple, he learned “Newman’s teaching on conscience [which] became an important foundation for [his] theological personalism,” and which “permeated” his “image of the human being as well as [his] image of the Church.” It also enabled him to understand “the primacy of the Pope.” Söhngen introduced him to Newman’s Grammar of Assent and thereby taught him “the special manner and form of certainty in religious knowledge.” Fries was his entry into “Newman’s teaching on the development of doctrine” which Ratzinger “regard[s], along with his doctrine on conscience, as his decisive contribution to the renewal of theology.” The upshot of all this was Ratzinger’s conviction that Newman “had placed the key in our hand to build historical thought into theology, or much more, he taught us to think historically in theology and so to recognize the identity of faith in all developments.”[17]

Vincent Ferrer Blehl, the first postulator of the cause for Newman’s canonization, spoke of the Council as representing “the assimilation by the Church of many of Newman’s most significant theological and historical insights” and, in this respect, “revealed him to be a prophet.”[18] The affinity between Newman’s thought and the concerns and aspirations of the Council, especially as regards the nature and task of the Church, led Pope John Paul II to describe him as “our true spiritual contemporary.”[19]

It seems fair to say, then, that Newman, at the very least, anticipated the concerns of the council and that his theological presence certainly made itself felt, and may well have permeated the minds and hearts of some of its most significant participants. But one can perhaps go even further and argue that Newman’s major concerns were actually manifest in the very dynamics of the Council. This is the subject of the following reflection.

Newman and the Dynamics of Vatican II

In his 2008 study, What Happened at Vatican II, John W. O’Malley argued that the Council was marked by two great theological turns, a turn to the past in the form of ressourcement (i.e., a return to the sources, especially the patristic sources, of the faith), and a turn to the future in the form of the recognition of the legitimacy of doctrinal development, both of which turns were undertaken with a view to making the Church meaningful to the present age (aggiornamento, “Italian for updating or modernizing”).[20]

As regards the turn to the past, the council, under the influence of figures like Congar and other representatives of the so-called ‘nouvelle théologie’, adopted “a style of discourse more closely resembling the style of the Fathers than the style used by previous councils.” Indeed, O’Malley ventures that, “If we are looking for special characteristics of Vatican II, this has to rank high, maybe even first, among them.”[21]

As regards the turn to the future, the most striking example was undoubtedly the Council’s decree on religious liberty, a decree which was manifestly the fruit of the Church’s encounter with modernity, an encounter which prompted the reappropriation of its centuries-old tradition. O’Malley recalls that John Courtney Murray, the architect of the decree, had written that “the issue of development of doctrine [was] … the issue underlying all issues at the Council.”[22]

O’Malley agrees with Murray’s assessment but adds two items to the foundational issues shaping the dynamics of the council, namely, “the relationship of [the] center to the rest of the church,” which surfaced especially in the discussions regarding episcopal collegiality, and the question of how authority in the Church should be exercised, which was manifest in the demand for a less “authoritarian and unidirectional style” of “thinking, speaking, and behaving” in favor of “a more reciprocal and responsive model.”[23] We might summarize these three issues as doctrine (and its development), ecclesiology, and authority.

This notion of “three issues-under-the-[many] issues” addressed by the council is, for O’Malley, essential to understanding its “spirit,” which O’Malley defines as “an orientation that goes beyond specific enactments.”[24] In his view, the ‘dynamics’ of the council, so to speak, were shaped by the presence of these three themes, though they themselves were never identified as the council’s leitmotifs. O’Malley acknowl-
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edges that these three issues “are not perfectly distinct from one another” and are only manifest in the discussions and proposals surrounding the attempts to address particular pastoral concerns. Nevertheless, he insists that they “provide lenses for interpreting the council” and even “a first step toward a hermeneutic that transcends an often myopic, sometimes almost proof-texting, approach to the council that focuses on the wording of the documents without regards for contexts, without regard for before and after, and without regard for vocabulary and literary form.”[25]

Clearly, these three issues were at the heart of Newman’s entire theological enterprise. It could hardly be otherwise since, for him, doctrinal development is an ‘event’ involving the entire community of the Church (which, in Newman’s phraseology, needs to be ‘consulted’[26]), and which is formalized by a pronouncement of the Church’s hierarchical authority (ideally, an ecumenical council). While one need not insist on a strict isomorphism between Newman’s major concerns and O’Malley’s ‘issues-under-the-issues,’ it is clear that Newman’s entire theology was shaped by his profound appreciation of the radically historical character of Christian faith, an appreciation that led him to two fundamental insights, namely, that the truth contained in Christianity (what we call revelation) can only be discerned in and through engagement with history, and that this truth has its own history, a history which is inextricably bound up with the life and fortunes of the Church in its entirety.

Newman and the Dynamics of the Postconciliar Church

What is particularly intriguing, from a Newmanian perspective, is O’Malley’s claim that, “by their very nature,” the three ‘issues-under-the-issues’ at the Council (i.e., doctrine, ecclesiology, and authority) “do not admit of definitive resolution one way or the other.” As he puts it:

Their essence is to be in tension. Each of them pulls in opposite directions. Both directions have validity; neither is absolute. The church, like any organization, must deal with the tension, not deny it. If the institution is to be healthy and effective in carrying out its missions, it must maintain and exploit the dialectic between continuity and change, between center and periphery, between firmness and flexibility.[27]

These remarks are reminiscent of Newman’s reflections on the interaction among the three ‘offices’ which constitute the Church’s essential structure and determine her mission. Christ had united in himself three offices or missions, namely, those of priest, prophet and king.[28] Christ is priest because he mediates between the faithful and the Father. He is prophet because he proclaims the truth. He is king because he has authority over his followers.

In the Church these offices are divided among the members of the community. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that they are concentrated in particular ‘centers of action’[29] (Newman’s terminology) within the Church. The priestly office takes shape in the visible ecclesial community (the parish) under the leadership of the pastor. The teaching office takes shape in the Church’s theological life, that is to say, in the efforts of theologians and the Magisterium to articulate the content of the faith through the formulation of doctrine. The kingly office takes shape in the episcopal ordering of the Church, under the authority of the Pope in collaboration with the world episcopate. [30] Newman insists that these three offices flow from, and serve, a more fundamental, organic unity. And he is also insistent that they should not be regarded in hierarchical terms. Indeed, it has been said that Newman’s vision is less hierarchical than that of Vatican II. The Council recognizes that lay people possess these three offices in virtue of their baptism and confirmation,[31] but regards ordination, especially episcopal ordination, as involving a more profound participation in them.[32] With the exception of the episcopal office, “Newman seems to make the distribution of the offices depend largely on the temperament and training of individuals.”[33] And one must not forget that Newman saw the kingly office primarily in functional terms. It serves mainly to order the Church’s life, not its doctrine. What is especially striking is that Newman situates the priestly office mainly at the level of popular religion, the priest and his flock in their parishes. And he locates the teaching office in the broad circle of theology. Of course, Newman recognized the authority of the Magisterium to pronounce on matters of faith. But he also insisted that this faith must be manifest in the life of the community as a whole (sensus fidelium).

What is most striking about Newman’s analysis, however, is his description of the relationship which obtains among the three offices. As Newman sees it, this relationship is inevitably characterised by tension and even competition. Indeed, Newman recognized that the three offices could clash with one another. He saw two reasons for this: (1) the fact that each office has a distinctive objective; and, (2) the fact that each office employs different means to realize that objective. As Newman explains it:

Truth is the guiding principle of theology and theological inquiries; devotion and edification, of worship; and of government, expedience. The instrument of theology is reasoning; of worship, our emotional nature; of rule, command and coercion .... Each of the three has its separate scope and direction; each has its own interests to promote and further; each has to find room for the claims
of the other two; and each will find its own line of action influenced and modified by the others, nay, sometimes, in a particular case the necessity of the others converted into a rule of duty for itself.[34]

In other words, each office must seek to realize its own interests while, at the same time, making room for the interests of the two others. To make matters even more complicated, each office is threatened by a particular danger. Newman makes this point very clearly: “In man as he is, reasoning tends to rationalism; devotion to superstition and enthusiasm; and power to ambition and tyranny.”[35] In other words, those exercising each office can fail in a particular direction. Pastors and all those who are primarily concerned with Christian spirituality run the risk of allowing superstition to take over from a healthy life of prayer and devotion. Theologians, whose main task is critical reflection, run the risk of losing touch with the life of faith, that is to say, with prayer and devotion. Bishops, whose main task is the effective government of the Church, run the risk of becoming preoccupied with power for its own sake.

In this way, the stage is set for all sorts of conflicts: for example, between bishops who insist on order and stability, and theologians who insist on discussion and debate; between pious souls who are convinced that devotion is the most important aspect of Christian life, and theologians - and even bishops - who challenge traditional religious practices; between bishops who expect obedience from their priests, and priests who insist that they are closer to the people and know their real needs; and so on and so forth.

Newman never lost sight of the fact that the three offices exist to serve the one tradition of faith, but his analysis of their interaction does contain three valuable lessons for today’s post-conciliar Church.

The first is that, whatever one’s particular responsibility or place in the Church, one must never lose sight of the whole body.

The second is that those who exercise particular responsibilities in the Church must not be alarmed if, on occasion, the pursuit of one goal seems to predominate. They may - indeed they must - resist excess of whatever kind, but they must also be prepared to recognize that truth is never in their camp alone. Newman, for example, warned theologians of the need to accept the limits of their discipline: “... Theology cannot always have its own way; it is too hard, too intellectual, too exact, to be always equitable, or to be always compassionate; and it sometimes has a conflict or overthrow, or has to consent to a truce or compromise, in consequence of the rival force of religious sentiment or ecclesiastical interests; and that, sometimes in great matters, sometimes in unimportant.”[36]

The third lesson is that those who exercise particular responsibilities in the Church must be prepared to risk conflict if this is the result of an honest determination to fulfill their task.

We might summarize by saying that, from a Newmanian perspective, the life of faith is best served when responsibility is exercised by all, with a view to the well-being of the whole community and all dimensions of its life, in full awareness of the need to give history its due, while trusting always in the Lord of history who has made time his instrument.

It seems fair to say that Vatican II – perhaps somewhat overenthusiastically, but that was, after all, typical of the spirit of the age – endorsed this vision, and that while we can debate whether Newman inspired it or perhaps even shaped it, there is very good reason to believe he would have approved of it.

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ENDNOTES

[7] Bernard McGinn, The Doctors of the Church: Thirty-Three Men and Women who Shaped Christianity (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 175, 176. McGinn’s book predates the inclusion of St. John of Avila (1500-1569) and St. Hildegard of Bingen, both of whom were declared a doctor of the Church in 2012 by Pope Benedict XVI.
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[10] A good case can be made for the claim that Newman’s affinity with us extends to his awareness of, and attempts to come to terms with, the threat to religion posed by what we now describe as secularization. On this theme, see Terrence Merrigan, “The Exile of the Religious Subject: A Newmanian Perspective on Religion in Contemporary Society,” in Staf Hellemans, Peter Jonkers (ed.), A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers, (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015), 193-222.

[11] See C.S. Dessain, Newman’s Spiritual Themes (Dublin: Veritas, 1977) 30 who argues that, at Vatican II, “the things Newman fought for were brought forward – freedom, the supremacy of conscience, the Church as a communion, a return to Scripture and the fathers, the rightful place of the laity, work for unity, and all the efforts to meet the needs of the age, and for the Church to take its place in the modern world.”


[23] O’Malley, 9, 11.


[26] Mindful of G.K. Chesterton’s insistence that the entire community includes ‘those who have gone before us in faith’, one might even substitute the word ‘constituency’ for ‘community’ here. See G.K. Chesterton, Heretics/Orthodoxy (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000) 195-196: “But there is one thing that I have never from my youth up been able to understand. I have never been able to understand where people got the idea that democracy was in some way opposed to tradition. It is obvious that tradition is only democracy extended through time. It is trusting to a consensus of common human voices rather than to some isolated or arbitrary record …… Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead.” See John Henry Newman, On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine (London: Sheed & Ward, 1961).

[27] O’Malley, 12.


[30] In 1877 Newman spoke only of “the Papacy and its Curia” (Via Media, 25) in regard to the kingly office. Avery Dulles points to the limitations of this approach, but writes that, “This surely was not Newman's full thought on the matter.” Dulles locates the cause of Newman’s interest in the papacy in his concern to make amends for his Anglican hostility to the Pope. See Avery Dulles, “The Threefold Office in Newman's Ecclesiology,” in Newman After a Hundred Years, I.T. Ker, A.G. Hill (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 391-392. Newman observes that the pope “inherits these (three) offices and acts for the church in them (...) he is not himself the Body of Christ, but the chief part of the Body” (Via Media, 25).

[31] Lumen gentium, §31, §34-36; Apostolicae Cistitutae, §2, §10.

[32] Lumen gentium, §21, §25-27; Christus Dominus, §11, §12-16; Presbyterorum ordinis, §1, §4-6; Optatam totius, 4.


