

NEWMAN, THE COUNCILS, AND VATICAN II

• Ian Ker •

“[T]he continuing identity of an idea is not conserved by remaining static . . . although it has to undergo change, this is not for the sake of change itself . . . —but in order for the idea *to remain the same*. It is this kind of change which Newman terms development.”

In March 1831 Newman was invited to contribute a history of Councils to a new library of theological works. That summer he began work on the project; but by August he had decided that the Eastern Councils would need a volume to themselves. He told one of the editors of the library that what was needed was “a *connected* history of the Councils . . . not taking them as isolated, but introducing so much of Church History as will illustrate and account for them.”¹

The comment is significant for two reasons. First, it makes the point that Newman was a *historical* theologian who was convinced that theology should not be separated from history. Thus: “What light would be thrown on the Nicene Confession *merely* by explaining it article by article? To understand it, it must be prefaced by a sketch of the rise of the Arian heresy” This

¹*The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, eds., Charles Stephen Dessian et al. (London: Nelson, 1961–72; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), ii. 352–3. Hereafter cited as *LD*.

does not mean, of course, that Newman *identified* the theologian with the so-called historical theologian: he was not envisaging always “combining history and doctrinal discussion,” and in this case he was thinking of reserving detailed discussion of specific theological topics for notes in an appendix to the work.²

Secondly, the remark anticipates the way in which Newman was to become acutely aware of the interdependence of Councils which were not isolated from each other but could be properly understood only in relation to each other. We shall see how Newman reacted to Vatican I, immediately prophesying not that the definition of papal infallibility would make further Councils redundant but that there would have to be another Council to complete and moderate the First Vatican Council.

At this stage Newman thought that he could complete the projected history by adding a further volume on Western Councils—although the Council of Trent would need a separate volume on its own. Not only was the work turning out rather differently from what he had originally conceived, but he had realized that just as it is impossible to isolate theology from history so too one cannot study church history in separation from theology. It was not possible to write a history of Councils as though it were purely a matter of historical research. Like any historian, a church historian will approach his or her subject from a particular theological point of view. In Newman’s case, he was quite honest about the fact that he would be writing his history in the context of his own attitude to the theological liberalism of his time: he would inevitably be “resisting the innovations of the day, and attempting to defend the work of men indefinitely above me [the Primitive Fathers] which is now assailed.”³

In the end, Newman’s first published book, which was completed at the end of July 1832, turned out to be on a much narrower topic than his own revised plan envisaged. Far from being a history of the Eastern Councils, it was not even a history of the Council of Nicaea, which he later admitted only “occupied at most twenty pages.”⁴ In fact, it was really a history of the Arian heresy which gave rise to the Council, which of course could not be

²LD, ii. 352–3.

³LD, iii. 43.

⁴*Apologia pro Vita Sua.*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 35. Hereafter cited as *Apo.*

understood without an understanding of Arianism. However, not only was it too specialized for the intended theological library, but one of the two editors objected that Newman's view of tradition seemed to be more Roman Catholic than Protestant.

The Council which most concerned Newman during his Anglican period, and particularly the Oxford Movement, of course, was the Council of Trent. When he and Richard Hurrell Froude were in Rome in 1833, they called on Nicholas Wiseman, then Rector of the English College. According to Newman's diary for 6 April, they "had long talk with him";⁵ it was their second visit. What they heard was not encouraging: to their dismay, they discovered that there was no prospect of reunion between Rome and Canterbury without unconditional acceptance of Trent. When, three years later, Newman delivered in Oxford his *Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church viewed relatively to Romanism and Popular Protestantism*, published in 1837, he made clear what the ecclesiological *Via Media* implied in the title involved for the Tractarian reception of Trent. The fundamental distinction he makes between two kinds of Tradition is the most significant part of the book as it insists on the absolute authority of Scripture (as against the Romanists), while at the same time allowing for the importance of Tradition (as against Protestants). He divides Tradition into "Episcopal Tradition," which is derived from the Apostles, and "Prophetical Tradition," which consists of the interpretation of Revelation and which is a "body of Truth, pervading the Church like an atmosphere," and "existing primarily in the bosom of the Church itself, and recorded in such a measure as Providence has determined in the writings of eminent men." It is this latter Prophetical Tradition which Newman maintains may be "corrupted in its details," so that the explicit doctrines which develop out of it "are entitled to very different degrees of credit." So far, then, as Councils are concerned,

. . . some Councils speak far more authoritatively than others, though all which appeal to Tradition may be presumed to have some element of truth in them. And this view, I would take even of the decrees of Trent. They claim

⁵LD, iii. 276.

indeed to be Apostolic; and I would grant so much, that they are the ruins and perversions of Primitive Tradition.⁶

At this stage, then, Newman sees the decrees of Trent as deeply flawed, although containing elements of the true Apostolic or “Episcopal Tradition.”

By 1841 Newman has shifted his position. In *Tract 90* Newman attempts to rebut the most obvious objection to the whole Tractarian theory of the *Via Media*: namely, the existence of the very Protestant-sounding 39 Articles to which members of the Church of England had to subscribe. In his effort to give them a Catholic interpretation, he had to confront Article xxi, which laid down that General Councils “may err, and sometimes have erred, in things pertaining to God.” According to the Article, only those doctrines which “are taken out of Holy Scripture” are authoritative. But according to Newman, while it is true that Councils may err, this is not the case when “it is promised, as a matter of express supernatural privilege, that they shall *not* err.” And this promise “does exist, in cases when general councils are . . . gathered *in the Name of Christ*, according to our Lord’s promise.” Nothing is said about Trent, but, as Newman knew perfectly well, the Church of Rome certainly regarded it as just such a Council, that is, a “Catholic” or “Ecumenical” or “general” Council. What Newman is at pains to emphasize in *Tract 90* is that the Thirty-Nine Articles can hardly be said to be aimed at Trent since that Council had not yet taken place when they were drawn up; rather, they are directed against “the *received doctrine* of that day, and unhappily of this day too, or the doctrine of the *Roman Catholic schools*.” Indeed, Newman is anxious to show that, if anything, the Articles gain “a witness and concurrence from the Council of Trent,” which was also concerned to condemn false teachings.⁷

Anyone reading *Tract 90* can see that Newman by now has reached the position of recognizing Trent as an authentic General Council. But to understand how he has reached this position, we need to go back two years to the summer of 1839 when “for the first time a doubt came upon” him “of the tenableness of

⁶*Via Media*, i. 250–2. Hereafter cited as *VM*. All references to Newman’s works, except where otherwise stated, are to the standard uniform Longmans edition.

⁷*VM*, ii. 291–2, 295–6, 308.

Anglicanism.”⁸ Far from being concerned with Tractarian controversies, he wanted to spend the long vacation on purely academic research: he intended returning to his “own line of reading—the early controversies of the Church.”⁹ This time it was not the fourth century and the Arian problem but the fifth century and the Monophysite heresy. His reading was intended to be preparatory to various scholarly editing projects. But in the course of his studies, he was struck by two “very remarkable” features of the Council of Chalcedon—“the great power of the Pope (as great as he claims now almost), and the marvellous interference of the civil power, as great almost as in our kings.”¹⁰ It was obvious that the first aspect argued for Roman Catholicism, whereas the second could provide justification for the erastian nature of Anglicanism. However, as he read on, by the end of August he had become “seriously alarmed.” He explains in the *Apologia* what had so startled him:

My stronghold was Antiquity; now here, in the middle of the fifth century, I found, as it seemed to me, Christendom of the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries reflected. I saw my face in that mirror, and I was a Monophysite. The Church of the *Via Media* was in the position of the Oriental communion, Rome was, where she now is; and the Protestants were the Eutychians.¹¹

In other words, the orthodox Christian faith was being upheld by the Pope, whereas the heretics divided into an extreme and a more moderate party. The theological picture of Christendom in the fifth century presented to Newman a very disquieting analogy to that of the nineteenth century, with Rome on the one side, and Canterbury and Geneva respectively on the other.¹²

⁸*Apo.*, 108.

⁹*LD*, vii. 110.

¹⁰*LD*, vii. 105.

¹¹*Apo.*, 108.

¹²Stephen Thomas, *Newman and Heresy: The Anglican Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 205, claims that Newman’s account here should be viewed in the light of the “rhetorical purpose” of the *Apologia*—“But what particularly provokes suspicion is that Newman does not support this splendid piece of self-dramatization by any corroboration of letters or memoranda of the

Newman's first book was meant to be on the early Councils of the Church, even though in fact it confined itself to the heresy that necessitated the Council of Nicaea. The first serious threat to his Anglicanism came from the (then) next but one Council of the Church. As a Roman Catholic theologian, he ended his life as a theologian very largely preoccupied with the First Vatican Council. That event led him to reflect not only on that Council but more generally on Councils in general. Much, but not all of this theology of Councils, is to be found in his private letters of the time.

On 26 June 1867 Pope Pius IX announced that a General Council was to be convened. The prospect of the definition of papal infallibility particularly concerned Newman, and not only because of the specific doctrine but because all dogmatic definitions by Councils were apt to arouse controversy in the Church. Even in the case of the early Councils which had been necessary because of heresy there had been a great deal of confusion and dissension in the wake of their decisions. In the case of papal infallibility there were none of those "heretical questionings" which, Newman had pointed out in the *Apologia*, "have been transmuted by the living power of the Church into salutary truths."¹³ Even at this early stage of the proceedings Newman was well aware that Councils can have effects which are not intended. For by defining the infallibility of the pope the Council would not merely be saying something about the pope; the definition would inevitably have wider repercussions on the Church. Apart from the enormous controversy it would generate, it would necessarily lead "to an alteration of the *elementary constitution* of the Church" in so far as it would encourage popes to act independently of the bishops.¹⁴ This is not the place to consider Newman's particular objections to a definition by the Council. But his objection to its opportuneness does have a more general significance. His caution about precipitate

time—something he always does in the *Apologia* when he can" However, this ignores the fact that Newman had every reason at the time to keep quiet about this devastating bombshell for fear of unsettling his Tractarian followers. Yet he was not totally circumspect, writing on 22 September 1839 to his then closest friend Frederic Rogers: . . . the whole history of the Monophysites has been a sort of alterative . . ." (*LD*, vii. 154). The *OED* defines this obscure word as a medicine which produces alteration in the processes of nutrition.

¹³ *Apo.*, 237.

¹⁴ *LD* xxiv. 377.

changes or developments was aimed at the Ultramontanes—“We do not move at railroad pace in theological matters, even in the 19th century”—but has a wider relevance for own times. He insisted that the Church “moves as a whole,” as a communion rather than an ideology, has “no right rudely to wipe out the history of centuries” It was particularly serious if “a grave dogmatic question was being treated merely as a move in ecclesiastical politics.”¹⁵ In the contemporary Church it has sometimes seemed that those pressing for the ordination of women, for instance, have been more concerned with feminism than doctrine.

Although Newman was scandalized by the intrigues of the Ultramontanes, he could not agree with the German church historian Dollinger that their behavior in any way affected the validity of the Council. Such political maneuvering was unfortunately a feature of Councils. The fact was that General Councils had “ever been times of great *trial*” and “the conduct of individuals who composed them was no measure of their result.”¹⁶ History showed that Councils had “generally two characteristics—a great deal of violence and intrigue on the part of the actors in them, and a great resistance to their definitions on the part of portions of Christendom.”¹⁷

When the definition was finally passed, Newman immediately began to adumbrate a theology of reception. A large minority of bishops had absented themselves in protest from the final vote, and in the absence of a “moral” unanimity there was some doubt about its validity. But if there was no persistent, united opposition on their part to the definition, and, most important of all, “if the definition is eventually received by the whole body of the faithful, . . . then too it will claim our assent by the force of the great dictum, ‘*Securus judicat orbis terrarum.*’”¹⁸ This aphorism of St Augustine, which had made such a deep impression on Newman in the summer of 1839, shortly after the first blow, once again rang insistently in his ears. “The universal Church is in its judgments

¹⁵LD, xxv. 93, 95.

¹⁶LD, xxv. 158.

¹⁷LD, xxvi. 281.

¹⁸LD, xxv. 165.

secure of truth” was Newman’s own free translation.”¹⁹ This meant that “the general acceptance, judgment of Christendom” was not only “the broad principle, by which all acts of the rulers of the Church are ratified,” but also “the ultimate guarantee of revealed truth.”²⁰

As soon as it became clear that the definition was the mind of the Church, Newman began to reflect, pragmatically as ever, on what was now a *fait accompli*. Before he had had no illusions about the human side of Councils; now he was ready to admit that “a General Council may be hampered and hindered by the action of infidel governments upon a weak or time-serving episcopate.” The argument that papal authority required strengthening was not lost on Newman, who was by now prepared to admit:

It is . . . better that the individual command of Christ to Peter to teach the nations, and to guard the Christian structure of society, should be committed to his undoubted successor. By this means there will be no more of those misunderstandings out of which Jansenism and Gallicanism have arisen, and which in these latter days have begotten here in England the so-called Branch Theory²¹

Although, however, the actual wording of the definition, which was weaker than the Ultramontanes had wanted, was quite unexceptionable and even desirable in theory, still the reality was that, “considered in its effects both upon the Pope’s mind and that of his people, and in the power of which it puts him in practical possession, it is nothing else than shooting Niagara.” The proceedings at the Council were certainly scandalous but that was no excuse for Dollinger and others to exaggerate what had actually been defined. The important thing, Newman urged in his private correspondence, was patience: “Remedies spring up naturally in the Church, as in nature, if we wait for them.” The definition could not simply be considered by itself; the context, or rather lack of context, was very important, for the “definition was taken out of its order—it would have come to us very differently, if those preliminaries about the Church’s power had first been passed,

¹⁹*Essays Critical and Historical*, ii. 101.

²⁰*LD*, xxv. 165, 172.

²¹*LD*, xxv. 259.

which . . . were intended.”²² If the Council, which had been cut short prematurely by political events and suspended indefinitely by Pius IX, did reassemble, it would hopefully “occupy itself in other points” which would “have the effect of qualifying and guarding the dogma.”²³ If this was not to be, then the Council would be completed and modified by another Council, as had happened before in the history of the Church. It was characteristic that Newman turned for guidance to the history of the early Church:

Another consideration has struck me forcibly, and that is, that, looking at early history, it would seem as if the Church moved on to the perfect truth by various successive declarations, alternately in contrary directions, and thus perfecting, completing, supplying each other. Let us have a little faith in her, I say. Pius is not the last of the Popes—the fourth Council modified the third, the fifth the fourth. . . . The late definition does not so much need to be undone, as to be completed. It needs *safeguards* to the Pope’s possible acts—explanations as to the matter and extent of his power. I know that a violent reckless party, had it its will, would at this moment define that the Pope’s powers need no safeguards, no explanations—but there is a limit to the triumph of the tyrannical—Let us be patient, let us have faith, and a new Pope, and a re-assembled Council may trim the boat.²⁴

Considering that Newman had consoled himself with the thought that there were advantages in popes doing what Councils had normally done in the past, and considering that after Vatican I it was widely believed that there would be no need of future Councils, this letter is a remarkable prophecy of Vatican II. And, of course what Newman says about the way in which the Church moves “alternately in contrary directions” has application not only to Vatican II, which was hardly a linear process of movement from Vatican I, whatever the extreme Ultramontanes of the time may have assumed or hoped about the eventual reinforcing and strengthening of the definition. It may also apply to Vatican II and subsequent developments. Post-Vatican II progressives may find

²²*LD*, xxv. 262.

²³*LD*, xxv. 278.

²⁴*LD*, xxv. 310.

that their scenario for the future is as unrealistic as any Ultramontane hopes that may have been entertained for the development of the definition of papal infallibility.

The letter quoted above represents the view that Newman was forming, above all on the basis of his knowledge of the Church's early Councils. He continued to insist that the first defined Catholic dogmas "were not struck off all at once but piecemeal—one Council did one thing, another a second—and so the whole dogma was built up." It was precisely because "the first portion of it looked extreme" that controversies arose which led to subsequent Councils which "explained and *completed* what was first done."²⁵ From our vantage point, it is an exact prediction of the Second Vatican Council's constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, where the papal primacy is moderated by its being placed within the context of the apostolic college of bishops: the pope is the head, but still a member, of the college and not exalted above it.

What Newman has to say about the inevitable confusion Vatican I had caused applies even more to the effect of Vatican II on the internal life of the Church. True, no dogmatic definitions of the magnitude of papal infallibility were passed, but the actual consequences of the second reforming Council were much more disruptive on a large scale. After all, in a real sense Vatican II brought the era of the Tridentine Church to a close, whereas Vatican I did no such thing. Certainly a "new" dogma had serious theological repercussions: "intellectual scrutiny" was required of "the Vatican definitions, and their sense will have to be wrought out"—but, Newman stipulates, "in friendly controversy—words which have an obvious application in the era we live in. Catholic theology had absorbed Trent; it now had another Council to digest. Theologians had had three hundred years to explain and interpret Trent—but "now we are new born children, the birth of the Vatican Council We do not know what exactly we hold—what we may grant, what we must maintain."²⁶ These words apply at least as much to the period immediately after Vatican II, and indeed even later. The fact was, Newman pointed out, that Councils "generally acted as a lever, displacing and disordering

²⁵LD, xxv. 330.

²⁶LD, xxvi. 59–60.

portions of the existing theological system,” often being followed by acrimonious controversies within the Church.²⁷

It is, again, paradoxical that the more Newman saw reason to dread Councils, the more the papacy appealed to him. Certainly, if the proceedings of Councils “are to be the measure of their authority, they are, with few exceptions, a dreary, unlovely phenomenon in the Church.” It is striking how the more negatively Newman felt about Councils, the more positive he was towards the Petrine office: “The more one examines the Councils, the less satisfactory they are—[but] the less satisfactory they, the more majestic and trust-winning, and the more imperatively necessary, is the action of the Holy See.”²⁸

Turning now to the question of the reception, in the sense of the interpretation, of Councils, Newman had already pointed out, before the definition of papal infallibility, in a private letter of March 1870, that even if the Council did decide that the infallibility of the pope should be defined, that would still not rule out the necessity of interpretation of his definitions. The same was true of a Council’s definitions, which—just as “lawyers explain acts of Parliament”—had to be explained by theologians. Obvious as the fact might be, there was a serious conclusion that Newman does not hesitate to draw from it: “Hence, I have never been able to see myself that the ultimate decision rests with any but the general Catholic intelligence.” It was after all implied by Newman’s beloved maxim: “*Securus judicat orbis terrarum.*”²⁹ He certainly did not mean that definitions were not authentic until “received” by the whole Church; only that the validity of definitions had to be recognized by the Church—if, for example, the pope went insane no solemn teaching by him could be accepted. Eventually the definition of papal infallibility would look rather different than had first appeared to people at the time. For “the voice of the Schola Theologorum, of the whole Church diffusive” would “in time make itself heard,” and “Catholic instincts and ideas” would in the end “assimilate and harmonize”

²⁷LD, xxvi. 76.

²⁸LD, xxvi. 120.

²⁹LD, xxviii. 172.

it into the wider context of Catholic beliefs.³⁰ As time went on, too, theologians would “settle the force of the wording of the dogma, just as the courts of law solve the meaning and bearing of Acts of Parliament.”³¹ While it was hardly more than common sense that ultimately the only way in which the solemn teachings of popes and Councils could be authenticated was by the acceptance and recognition by the Church that they were indeed what they purported to be, nevertheless their interpretation involved necessarily the technicalities of theology: the meaning of dogmatic propositions was not self-evident, but they were “always made with the anticipation and condition of this lawyer-like, or special-pleader-like, action of the intellect upon them.”³² The fact is, Newman pointed out, all human statements require interpretation. And in defining doctrine, popes and Councils enjoyed an “active infallibility,” but more was involved in the infallibility of the Church than that, since a “*passive infallibility*” belonged to the whole body of the Catholic faithful, who had to determine the force and meaning of these doctrinal teachings, although naturally the chief responsibility for this lay with the theologians, whose discussions and investigations assured a clear distinction between “theological truth” and mere “theological opinion.” The differences between theologians maintained “liberty of thought,” while their consensus on points of dogma was “the safeguard of the infallible decisions of the Church.”³³ Infallibility belonged to the whole Church—again, “*Securus judicat orbis terrarum.*”

It is clear all these points apply also to the Second Vatican Council even though it was not a dogmatic Council like Vatican I. And they help to show how naive and superficial was the idea after Vatican II that all that had to be done was for the decrees to be “applied,” as though the texts spoke for themselves and the application was a simple straightforward matter. Newman by no means ruled out the possibility of what he called “a false interpretation” of the definition of papal infallibility. And,

³⁰LD, xxv. 71.

³¹LD, xxv. 447.

³²LD, xxvi. 35.

³³LD, xxvii. 338.

considering the “creeping infallibility” that followed Vatican I, he was not so far off the mark. But in that event, he predicted, “another Leo will be given us for the occasion.” The reference is to Pope St Leo’s Council of Chalcedon, which, “without of course touching the definition” of the preceding Council of Ephesus, “trimmed the balance of doctrine by completing it.”³⁴ Newman’s prophecy came true with Pope John XXIII.

The dissensions within the Catholic Church since Vatican II could have been predicted by Newman. As he knew only too well, one of the “disadvantages of a General Council, is that it throws individual units through the Church into confusion and sets them at variance.”³⁵ He was not in the least surprised at the rise of the Old Catholics and the extremism of the only partially successful Ultramontane party. Similarly, neither the Lefebvrist schism nor the ultra-progressivist position in our own time would have caused Newman much surprise. If one may use crude, political labels, the “right” won at Vatican I and the “left” at Vatican II, but the extremists at both failed to achieve all that they wanted. Another similarity is that in the aftermath of both Councils it suited the extreme protagonists on both sides, both the partially victorious and the defeated, to exaggerate what had actually been decided by the respective Councils. This enabled both Dollinger and Lefebvre to claim that the Church had done a *volte-face* and abandoned its tradition. For Newman to appeal to history in this way against the Church’s judgment was like using “private judgment” to interpret “Scripture against the voice of authority;” but if this was “unlawful,” why should it “be lawful in the interpretation of history?”³⁶ The Church certainly made use of history as it made use of Scripture, tradition, and reason, but ultimately what was important for a Catholic was “faith in the word of the Church.” To both Dollinger and Lefebvre Newman would only reiterate, “*Securus judicat orbis terrarum.*” But at the same time he would have sympathized with Lefebvre as he did with Dollinger over the aggressive extremism of the opposite side. Newman criticized Manning for the extraordinary “rhetoric” he used over the infallibility issue, especially his pastoral letter of October 1870

³⁴*Difficulties of Anglicans*, ii. 312. Hereafter cited as *Diff.*

³⁵*LD*, xxvii. 240.

³⁶*Diff.*, ii. 312.

which gave the impression that papal infallibility was unlimited.³⁷ I think he would have been at least as critical of Hans Küng and his party. Just as the extreme Ultramontanes did their best to encourage “creeping infallibility,” so contemporary progressivists constantly appeal to “the spirit of Vatican II,” but with scant regard for the actual text, let alone for those who happen to disagree with them as to the nature of what such a “spirit” might be.

It seems to me that Newman’s reflections both at the time of and in the aftermath of Vatican I—reflections, I may say, which have received little attention, at least in their fullness—are of great interest for the contemporary Church as it seeks to interpret the meaning of Vatican II, as well as its significance for the development of Catholicism. Enough, I think, has been said to illustrate how superficial is any kind of understanding which assumes that the meaning or “spirit” of the Council is patently obvious, rather than something which will only fully emerge in time and through the agency of various elements in the Church—certainly not, for example, simply through episcopal implementation, as was widely taken for granted in the years immediately following the Council.

In Newman’s reflections on Councils and their aftermaths, there are in fact two different kinds of development he is talking about. The first kind is illuminated by one of his most telling images. It occurs in the first section of the first chapter of *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, where Newman is speaking about the process of development in ideas. Pointing out that a living idea cannot be isolated “from intercourse with the world around,” he argues that this contact is actually necessary “if a great idea is duly to be understood, and much more if it is to be fully exhibited.” In Newman’s terminology, Christianity is just such an “idea.” There is an obvious objection to the argument: namely, that the further anything moves from its origin or source, the more likely it is to lose its pristine character. Conceding that certainly there is always the risk of an idea being corrupted by external forces, Newman nevertheless insists that, while “It is indeed sometimes said that the stream is clearest near the spring,” this is not true of the kind of idea he is talking about.

³⁷LD, xxvii. 383; xxv. 230.

Whatever use may fairly be made of this image, it does not apply to the history of a philosophy or belief, which on the contrary is more equable, and purer, and stronger, when its bed has become deep, and broad, and full. It necessarily rises out of an existing state of things, and for a time savours of the soil. Its vital element needs disengaging from what is foreign and temporary³⁸

It is worth noting that the conclusion to this section contains perhaps the most quoted of all Newman's sayings, but since it is invariably cited out of context it is invariably misinterpreted. The famous words are: "In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often." Newman would certainly be horrified by the way in which this sentence is flourished by the kind of progressivist for whom all change is necessarily desirable. For far from being intended as a slogan for a progressivist agenda, it is in reality a deeply *conservative* point that Newman is making. But this is far from saying that the words should bring comfort to reactionary or integralist Catholics. It is a dynamic not a static Catholicism that Newman has in mind. In terms of his thinking on the phenomenon of development, an idea like Catholicism has no alternative but to be dynamic unless it is to become ossified or to die. But there is another possibility to either living or dying, and that is to be corrupted. It is here that Newman rejects the progressivist alternative. For the sentence which precedes the celebrated aphorism and which is never quoted makes it crystal clear what kind of changing is intended: "It [that is, an idea] changes with them [that is, external circumstances] in order to remain the same."³⁹ This sentence, which is always ignored when the concluding sentence that follows it is quoted, is crucial for understanding the latter. And it sums up with admirable succinctness Newman's general theological stance, which is a *via media* between conservative and liberal Catholicism in the bad senses of reactionary and progressivist. On the one hand, the continuing identity of an idea is not conserved by remaining static; on the other hand, although it has to undergo change, this is not for the sake of change itself—if this were the case, then it would be

³⁸*Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 39–40. Hereafter cited as *Dev.*

³⁹*Dev.*, 40.

the kind of change which Newman calls a corruption—but in order for the idea *to remain the same*. It is this kind of change which Newman terms development.

Now if Newman is correct in what he says about an idea such as a philosophy or belief becoming “more equable, and purer, and stronger” as it develops in the course of time, then this is a diagnosis which we can apply to Vatican II. The participants in and observers of that Council no doubt thought they knew very well what, for better or worse, the Council meant. Both Küng and Lefebvre had absolutely no doubt in their minds about how the Council was to be understood, and, paradoxically, like Dollinger and Manning, were closely in agreement about its meaning. In retrospect, we can see much better the very limited scope of the definition of papal infallibility and appreciate the accuracy of Newman’s interpretation of it. But for both Dollinger and Manning the definition loomed very large indeed and signified far more than Catholic theology has since understood it to mean—an understanding which received the formal endorsement of Vatican II. In the case of Vatican II, it similarly suited both Küng and Lefebvre to exaggerate the revolutionary nature of the Council, even though the so-called revolution caused as much delight to the former as distress to the latter.

If it is true—and indeed it has become something of a truism—to call Newman “the Father of Vatican II” because of the ways in which he anticipated the Council in his own theology,⁴⁰ then it is not unreasonable to apply the theology of Councils which he adumbrated at the time of Vatican I, together with his theology of development, to the question of the reception and interpretation of Vatican II, as well as to future possible developments. As Nicholas Lash puts it, while before the Second Vatican Council Newman was “still an occasionally suspect stranger, an outsider to the neo-scholastic world” of Catholic theology—we might add that he was considered much more dangerous in his own

⁴⁰See, e.g., Ian T. Ker, “Newman and the Post-conciliar Church,” *Newman Today* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), ed. Stanley L. Jaki, 121–41; Nicholas Lash, “Tides and Twilight: Newman since Vatican II,” in *Newman after a Hundred Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), eds. Ian Ker and Alan G. Hill, 447–64.

time—after the Council he became “its godfather and our guide into the strange territory that now lay before us.”⁴¹

Taking Newman as our guide, then, we may legitimately use that passage in the *Essay on Development* in connection with the teaching of Vatican II and suggest that those critics, of whom Hans Küng is the most prominent, who lived through the Council and deplore the pontificate of John Paul II as a gross betrayal of Vatican II, may paradoxically be in a less good position to understand the real significance of the Council than they assume to be the case. The idea—or “spirit”—of Vatican II will grow “more equable, and purer, and stronger” if Newman’s analysis is correct, as the “stream” moves away from “the spring” and “its bed has become deep, and broad, and full.” Vatican II did not take place in a historical void; it actually met in a decade of enormous upheaval and change, a time of optimistic euphoria and a time of great moral and spiritual devastation. It took place in a period of revolution and inevitably “savoured” of “the soil” of the 1960s, that “existing state of things,” to use Newman’s words, out of which it arose. Assuming that Vatican II was an important Council, a Council which brought to an end the Tridentine era, then its “vital element needs disengaging from what is foreign and temporary.”

This takes us on to the second kind of development that Newman speaks of in his mini-theology of Councils. For it is not only a question of the meaning and significance of an “idea” like the theology of Vatican II becoming more luminous and focused as it is seen in retrospect in the developing life of the Church, but there is also the consideration that Councils open up further developments because of what they *do not* say or stress.

By way of a conclusion, I should like to draw attention to one quite unexpected post-conciliar phenomenon, which is vitally connected with the new evangelization, but which also exemplifies both the two kinds of Newmanian developments I have been talking about. I refer to the rise of the so-called new “ecclesial movements.” For, on the one hand, these initiatives can be seen as representing a reaction against certain post-conciliar tendencies, and thus helping to restore a balance. But, on the other hand, they also may be viewed as a concrete realization of what I suggest will ultimately prove to be the most significant text of the Council.

⁴¹Lash, *op. cit.*, 454.

One might say that, while the papacy emerged victorious out of Vatican I, at Vatican II the two elements in the Church which were given a high profile were the bishops and the laity. Indeed, after the Council many bishops gave the impression that they and the laity were now the key players in the life of the Church. Thanks, of course, to the pontificate of John Paul II the papacy refused to be, as it were, put down. The clergy were less fortunate, and at least some of the crisis in the priesthood can be attributed to the *de facto* marginalization of priests. But who were these 'laity' to whom bishops increasingly turned to put on committees and commissions as well as to occupy paid jobs in the diocesan bureaucracy? They certainly didn't include the aged or children, who presumably belong to the ranks of the laity. Nor did they include the uneducated. In general, the new class of "laity" that emerged in the wake of Vatican II were articulate, middle-class Catholics.

The movements were very different. For a start, they were not inspired by bishops nor were they set up by diocesan committees or commissions. They came from the "bottom" rather than the "top." Significantly, they met with papal approval and encouragement under both Paul VI and John Paul II; on the other hand, bishops were often hostile or suspicious, and even more so the new class of episcopally approved laity. Moreover, the movements were by no means restricted to a particular section of the laity nor were they marked by any sort of ageism. From this point of view, the movements very definitely represented a reaction to an unbalanced post-conciliar tendency that was the human result of certain emphases in the Council.

However, there was another respect in which the movements seem to be a concrete manifestation of Vatican II ecclesiology. For it has to be underlined that it is strictly erroneous to call the new ecclesial movements *lay* movements, since priests, bishops, religious, as well as those lay members of the movements whose commitment to the charism and apostolate of the particular movement to which they belong marks them out as quasi-religious, even if canon law has not yet caught up with them, make up their ranks. What is so characteristic and significant about the movements is that they bring together the *baptized*, whatever their particular status in the Church, in a common if differentiated mission. The movements are not lay, but nor are they clerical, and in this respect they represent a novel phenomenon.

Elsewhere,⁴² in writing about Newman's *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*—tellingly, often referred to as *On Consulting the Laity in Matters of Doctrine*—I pointed out that,

although Newman certainly uses the term laity in the famous article—he could hardly help doing so in the highly clericalized Church with which he was writing—nevertheless the historical examples he gives from the fourth century make it abundantly clear that the “faithful” comprised not only laity but also “presbyters,” “holy virgins,” and “monks,” in other words priests and religious. It was not just the laity but the faithful or baptized Christians—whatever their canonical status in the Church—who upheld the orthodox faith against the Arian heresy despite the failure of the body of the episcopate to stand firm. I also referred to a note Newman added to an appendix to the third edition of *The Arians of the Fourth Century* when he republished it in 1871. This note contains part of the article, together with some amendments and additions, including a remarkable sentence, which not even G. K. Chesterton at his most paradoxical could outdo: “And again, in speaking of the laity, I speak inclusively of their parish-priests (so to call them), at least in many places”⁴³

I then compared Newman's article with the Vatican II constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, where there is indeed a special chapter devoted to the laity. But the interesting aspect of this chapter is the virtual absence of any Scriptural or Patristic sources, which, of course, is not surprising as the early Church had not yet become clericalized and so there was no need to employ the concept. In the first two chapters, on the contrary, where the Council sets out its essential and fundamental understanding of the Church, the text not only bristles with Scriptural and Patristic references, but also avoids speaking of the Church as though it consisted of clergy and laity. The first chapter does not even employ the terms, although it does single out “the grace of the apostles” as “the primary” of the gifts of the Spirit. And the second chapter deals with the “ministerial or hierarchical priesthood” simply in terms of the specific sacrament of holy orders among the

⁴²Ian Ker, “Newman on the *Consensus Fidelium* as ‘the voice of the infallible Church,’” in *Newman and the Word* (Louvain-Paris-Sterling, Va.: Peeters Press and W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), eds. Terrence Merrigan and Ian Ker, 69–89.

⁴³*Arians of the Fourth Century*, 445.

various sacraments which build up the “common priesthood of the faithful;” again the chapter studiously avoids talking of the Church in the usual terms of clergy and laity.

In that first section of the first chapter of the *Essay on Development*, Newman says that if one was looking for the “leading idea . . . of Christianity,” round which other ideas could be grouped simply “for convenience,” then he would “call the Incarnation the central aspect of Christianity.” And later in the book he refers to the Incarnation as “the central truth of the Gospel.”⁴⁴ I have no doubt that if Newman could have been asked the same question about Vatican II, he would have said that its teaching on the idea or nature of the Church in those first two foundational chapters of *Lumen Gentium* is the central teaching of a Council which was overwhelmingly an ecclesial Council, a Council concerned with the Church, its internal components and structures, its liturgy, its relationship with other Christians, non-Christians, and the world.

But the fact is that these two crucial chapters which marked a radical return to the Scriptural and Patristic understanding of the Church as primarily not hierarchical or institutional but sacramental, the mystical body of Christ, the communion of those who have received the Holy Spirit in baptism, have been largely ignored in favor of the later two chapters on the bishops and the laity. It is hardly surprising that these two more topical chapters received more attention at the time, but in the long run it is surely the first two chapters which do not seem to be saying anything very new or interesting which will prove to be revolutionary—but only in the sense of being utterly traditional in returning the Church to its roots.

What is so significant about the new movements is that they provide flesh and blood to these two chapters. For they are not traditional religious orders or lay associations but communities of the baptized who have received the “varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts” which the Holy Spirit bestows. But if the movements make the central meaning of *Lumen Gentium* clearer and stronger, they also represent another kind of development in Newman’s terms: a reaction against both a clericalized and a laicized Church. It is not surprising that both wings of the Church

⁴⁴*Dev.*, 35–6, 324.

find them a disturbing and suspicious phenomenon. But if, in spite of not being inspired or directed by either the hierarchy or the “official” laity, these ecclesial movements are the work of the Spirit, then they may throw a lot of light on the meaning, not to say the spirit, of Vatican II. □

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Ian Ker's Newman on Vatican II maintains that, had Cardinal John Henry Newman taken part in it, he would have aligned himself with the reformist party at the Council. Reformers, Ker then adds, "sooner or later divide into moderate and extreme factions" (p. 159). In the case of the latest council, there were those who wished to interpret its decrees in the light of Tradition and those who embraced a hermeneutic of discontinuity with the past, championing radical change in doctrine and practice. Newman, the great proponent of doctrinal development, would have defended a "herm Newman on Vatican II [Ian Ker] on Amazon.com. *FREE* shipping on qualifying offers. John Henry Newman is often described as the Father of the Second Vatican Council. He anticipated most of the Council's major documents.Â Temporarily out of stock. Why wait? Try the Kindle Edition instead and start reading now. Order now and we'll deliver when available. Order now and we'll deliver when available. Newman on Vatican II book. Read reviews from worldâ€™s largest community for readers. John Henry Newman is often described as the Father of the Second Vat...Â His writings offer an illuminating commentary both on the teachings of the Council and the way these have been implemented and interpreted in the post-conciliar per John Henry Newman is often described as "the Father of the Second Vatican Council." He anticipated most of the Council's major documents, as well as being an inspiration to the theologians who were behind them. His writings offer an illuminating commentary both on the teachings of the Council and the way these have been implemented and interpreted in the post-conciliar period.