

**SERMON NOTES OF JOHN
HENRY CARDINAL
NEWMAN, 1849-1878,
SECOND EDITION**

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Sermon Notes of John Henry Cardinal Newman, 1849-1878, Second Edition by John Henry Newman

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JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

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SERMON NOTES

INTRODUCTION

CARDINAL NEWMAN in his Church of England days always read his sermons. He discontinued this practice, except on very special occasions, after his conversion. At both periods he was following what happened to be the more general custom in the Communion to which he belonged.

It is not likely that his preaching suffered much by the change. If it had, he would have gone back to his old practice. He would have preferred, it is true, to do what most other priests did, for he hated singularity in any shape, but this was not a sufficient reason for running the risk of even partial failure before *mixed congregations* in a town where he was a stranger, and at a time when from various causes the no-Popery feeling was particularly strong. Neither does the change, though he was past middle life when he made it, seem to have been a difficulty to him. Apparently he soon discovered that the thoughts that he had in his mind when he entered the pulpit developed themselves and took new shapes while he was speaking; for the Notes which are now being published were for the most part written out not before, but *after*, the sermon.

These Notes were given by the late Father William Neville, the Cardinal's literary executor, to Father Henry Bellasis, then a member of the Birmingham, now of the Roman Oratory. 'The Sermon Notes,' writes Father Bellasis, 'were given me by Father William as a present one Christmas. The only thing I remember his saying was that the Cardinal had the practice of going to his room after preaching, and writing down in the form of notes what he had said. This is how they come to be in these books. You may remember that the Cardinal went on preaching in his turn, till he complained that he sometimes forgot what he was going to say—he must have been eighty-three when this (not uncommon) complaint attacked him. . . . However, he felt it at eighty-three, and then, if you remember, he took to reading some of his Parochial Sermons from MS.—touched up, I suppose, a little bit—and very nice it was for those who had never heard him *read* in his younger days. I have a recollection of his doing this several times. . . . As to his preaching, I was too young to remember much about it, except that he always had a small Bible in his hands, and quoted a good deal, always reading the texts, after finding them, and not (quoting) from memory.¹ He used to be rung down by the

¹ He wished to quote from the *Rheims and Douay Version*, which was not familiar to him as was the *Authorized Version*.

M.C.,¹ usedn't he ? I always heard that *he was very obedient to the bell, and stopped shortly afterwards.*'

'I was too young to remember' is what all who now survive and used to hear the Cardinal preach, before he had come to extreme old age, have to repeat. Still it may be worth while setting down the little that can be recalled. He held the Bible which was in his hands while he was preaching rather close to his face, for the print was small and he was short-sighted. Memory pictures him as constantly turning over its leaves, after the rather fumbling manner of an old man, while he was speaking, presumably in order to find the next passage he intended to quote. It is impossible to say whether on the whole he spoke quickly or slowly, for there was no appearance either of haste or deliberation. His manner of speaking was the same in the pulpit as on ordinary occasions; in fact, he was not preaching but conversing, very thoughtfully and earnestly, but still conversing. His voice, with its gentleness, the truceness of every note in it, its haunting tone of (if sadness be too strong a word) patient enduring and pity, has often been described by those who heard it at St. Mary's

¹ The Master of Ceremonies at the Sunday High Mass, more often than not one of the bigger boys of the Oratory School. Needless to say this functionary used not his discretion but a watch. After a time the M.C. was privately instructed not to ring the bell when Father Newman preached, because he obeyed it too promptly.

in the old Oxford days, and, judging from their descriptions, it seems to have been the same in old age as it was then. Probably the initial impression on one who heard it for the first time would be that it varied very little. This, however, was certainly not the case. Changes of expression or feeling were constantly coming over it, but so naturally and in such perfect unison with what was being said at the moment, that they were hardly noted at the time. It was only afterwards, if something had struck home and kept coming back to the mind, that one realised that it was not the words only, but something in the tone of the voice in which they were said, that haunted the memory.

What is the kind of impression that Newman's sermons were likely to make on a boy or very young man who listened to them? It would probably not be long before he felt that the preacher had the power of making things seem very real. He would also be rather surprised, and perhaps half puzzled, as if it was something a little incongruous, that a man who seemed so aloof from everyday life should speak even more plainly and simply than ordinary men. From time to time he might almost be startled at some change in the preacher's voice and the words which accompanied it. Take, for example, in the present volume (p. 301) the way in which the ignominy of the Crucifixion is described—'as we fix a noxious bird up.' Only those who have heard Newman

can imagine the distress which would have come over his voice in uttering these words, and the kind of haste, as if to get them out and done with; followed by a quick return to the calm with which he had been speaking a few seconds before. Very probably some of his hearers were, without knowing why, almost as shocked as if they had now heard of the Crucifixion for the first time. These little outbreaks came and went as a flash of lightning. They seemed like a momentary loss of the perfect self-restraint habitual to the speaker followed by an instant recovery. An extraordinary thing about them was the very slight change in the voice which they seemed to entail. It was like a mere breath of wind passing over the surface of perfectly still water. The Cardinal's voice, as is well known, was not a strong one. It was of the low and gentle kind, which in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred tends to be monotonous and even flat. But in his case the lack of volume or compass capable of changes on a large scale was made up for by a purity of tone upon which the faintest modulations told. Those who knew the Cardinal hear him while they read him, and often a passage, whether in a sermon or a lecture, comes home to them in a way it can hardly do to others, because they have the music of his voice in their memory as well as the printed words before their eyes. Take in the present volume (p. 50) the account of a man's enjoyment of his life. One hears the almost

genial tone which has come over the preacher's rather sad voice while he is speaking of pleasures in themselves innocent, the summer stroll, the warm fire, and so forth, then the note of sorrow when he comes to pleasures not harmless.

Newman's power of entering into minds quite alien to his own has often been pointed out. 'We,' wrote James Mozley in 1846, 'have often been struck by the keen way in which he enters into a regular tradesman's vice—avarice, fortune-getting, and so on. This is not a temper to which we can imagine Mr. Newman ever having felt in his own mind even the temptation but he understood it. . . . No man of business could express it more pungently, more *ex animo*.' From time to time he would show this power in conversation even when he was very old, and the voice played its part. One evening he was talking quietly about the progress of unbelief. He anticipated a time when the world at large would assume that Christianity had been disproved. Those who persisted in believing in it would neither be listened to nor reasoned with. What would be said to them amounted to this: 'It has been disproved, we cannot disprove it again.' The tone of anger and impatience he put into his voice just for the moment it took to say these words, is the reason why a not otherwise remarkable conversation is remembered by one person who was present, nearly a quarter of a century afterwards.