

**LEOPARD'S SPOTS.  
CHANGE OR DEVELOPMENT?**

Fr Peter Cornwell. Bath,  
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Notoriously, the Leopard cannot change his spots but tonight we ask, may he not develop them? The saying is, of course, used to identify 'unchangeable ness'. So it is said, by both friends and foes, that the Catholic Church is unchangeable. For friends it is the welcome rock of stability in an ever-changing world; for enemies it just sticks out like a sore thumb. Well that is as may be but in fact we have a problem about this 'unchangeableness'. Years ago an advertising guru put it like this: 'if you want to get your message across, you have to water it down. But, if you water it down, what is it that you get across?' So the politician may let go the bathwater of, what he calls, party dogma only to find the baby of, what he calls, 'enduring values' also swept away. So there are those who believe that if the Church is to communicate with our world, then it has, as they say, to 'keep up with the times'- tune in to the spirit of the age. But of course the reply comes back 'Marry the spirit of the age and then, as that one age passes and another arrives, you will soon find yourself a widower'. But then the critic of the modernising programme may find that, in his zeal to hold on to what he believes to be the 'timeless truth', he has simply exchanged 'the spirit of the age' for 'the spirit of a former age'. Marrying antiquity is no more timeless than marrying modernity.

Now this evening I want to seek the assistance of the Blessed John Henry Newman in wrestling with this problem. Newman certainly did not buy into 'keeping up with the times'. He was politically and socially a conservative. When he went to Rome to receive his Cardinal's hat in a famous speech he spelt out his highly nuanced attitude to what he called 'the Liberalistic theory'. There was, he said, much that was 'good and true' in it 'the precepts of justice, truthfulness, sobriety, self-command, benevolence', the very 'natural laws of society' which he was to celebrate and promote in his great 'Idea of a University' but, when it came to 'Liberalism in religion' which held 'that there is no positive truth in religion, that one creed is as good as another, that revealed religion is not a truth but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous; and that it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy', then he drew the line. . Of such 'liberalism' Newman had been a life-long opponent. For he believed that God was not the object of a number of human guesses but that he had revealed himself in the man Jesus of Nazareth. God's 'word', his self-expression had been made flesh and we beheld the glory.

Years before Newman had been wrestling with our problem of the Leopard's Spots. In a University Sermon preached at St Mary's in Oxford Newman held up Mary, the Mother of the Lord, as the model of the Church pondering on and trying to express the wonder of what God had given. 'Mary', he declared 'is the pattern of our faith, both in the reception and in the study of divine truth. She does not think it enough to accept, she dwells upon it; not enough to possess, she uses it; not enough to assent, she develops it.' Newman is quite clear; at the heart of this pondering is gift, pure gift. In the birth, living, dying and rising of Jesus, God gives himself to us out of sheer love. For he is Love, and so gives himself that we might share in that divine life of love and so come to our human fulfilment as sons and daughters made in his image and likeness. The first thing to be done with a gift, as every child knows, is simply to take it, receive it – and that in the Christian religion, we call 'faith'. But after taking the gift every child will eagerly explore that gift and that is what Mary does and what we do – 'faith seeks understanding.'

Only two years after that sermon, Newman was out in the village of Littlemore on the verge of moving from the Church of England into catholic unity. Now the problem of the Leopard's Spots had a new edge to it. He may have been disillusioned with the church of his baptism but was the Roman Catholic Church really the true Church? He had been to Rome, surveyed the Vatican and sampled Italian churches and was not much impressed. Was this really the same Church as that of the Apostles? It did not look much like it but then frankly neither did Barchester with its Anglican Deans and Chapters. Perhaps those were right who were beginning to say that the whole history of Christianity, starting as far back as St Paul, was one of decline from primitive purity, that the Gospel treasure had got lost in the cut and thrust of events. But could there be a more positive reading of this handing on of the treasure through time and space? So Newman was hard at work out at Littlemore on his Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine. It was he said an 'hypothesis to account for a difficulty'; and that difficulty was our friend the problem of the Leopard's Spots.

So Newman, the old conservative, found himself writing words which might not have been strange coming from a scientist like Darwin or a radical politician: 'To live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often'. Change was a dangerous word, one that Rome found disturbing but not only Rome. For it was a word offensive also to the pious ears of other Christians. If the followers of Christ could not agree on much else, on this they were agreed that the pure gospel was the most primitive gospel. As St Vincent of Lerins famously put it ' what had

been held always, everywhere and by all'. The difference between these Christian communities was over which of them had the best claim to be most primitive. Of course, in the world of political ideas there was the same exaltation of the primitive past, of a Golden Age. So those who stood for the liberties of the subject against the tyranny of kings appealed to the good old Magna Carta and alleged ancient rights. Rousseau, after all, insisted that Man was born free but the passage of time had thrust him into chains.

In truth *The Essay on Development* is an odd book - full of flashes of insight but also curiously incomplete, giving the impression of just fading out. And this Newman admitted. 'Before I got to the end' he wrote in his *Apologia* 'I resolved to be received and the book remains in the state it was then, unfinished.' He had at least convinced himself by his arguments and was received by Fr Dominic into Catholic unity. Yet in a way this open-endedness, this conscious incompleteness is typical of Newman's theological work; for him it was always 'Work in Progress'. So, as he wrestled with the issues of faith and reason, we find that his great book 'The Grammar of Assent' has the background of a life-long pondering - another University sermon, endless notes towards a book, and many letters written to others who were troubled by the same issues.

Newman was a scholar who had buried himself in the history of the early church's institutions and thinking. Here he discovered that, as with other institutions and ideas, to live is indeed to change. Just as political parties like the Whigs had changed over the years, so too it was with religious institutions. And if critics felt squeamish about lumping Holy Church with secular institutions, they should realise that there was no irreverence in considering divine work 'under earthly forms 'since the Lord himself bore one'. If the Word is made flesh the Gospel is thrown into the stream of human history and so has to make its way through different times and places, through ever varied situations and cultures. All this is what we call 'Traditio' - Tradition, not lumps of antique practises and thought, but the process, the movement of handing on the Gospel through time and space. Of course this is a risky rocky stream but it is always the risk of divine love reaching out to a world. The risk, he wrote has to be taken if what is on offer 'is to be duly understood and fully exhibited'. If Christianity 'be an universal religion suited not to one locality or period but to all times and places it cannot but vary in its relations and dealings towards the world around it, that is, it will Develop.' So, passing through different ages and cultures, it changes in order to remain the same.

The word made flesh means for Newman that we have to take seriously the fleshly historical life of the Church – those earthenware pots, as St Paul called them, in which the gospel treasure is carried. Thrown upon the great concourse of men, Christianity moves on the stage of world history.’ Christianity, he writes, is ‘no dream of the study or of the cloister. It has long since passed beyond the letter of documents or the reasonings of individual minds and has become public property.’ Instead of a safe hole being dug in which the master’s money may be protected, that money is chanced on the tumultuous dangerous markets of the world. So the enterprise is accompanied by argument, debate and conflict. ‘It is elicited by trial and struggles into perfection. Nor does it escape the collision of opinion even in its earliest years.’

All this noisy argument debate and conflict, we can see not only in those early centuries of the Church’s life but also right back in the pages of the New Testament. Just re-read Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians for the realities of turmoil in those earliest days. But this exposure to conflict and the danger of corruption in the passage of time was not only the risk that had to be taken to get the message across, it was also the way in which the message and its implications could be more fully understood. Time, wrote Newman ‘is necessary for the full comprehension and perfection of great ideas.’ When a big idea explodes on the world there is ‘a general agitation of thought; there will be a time of confusion, when conceptions and misconceptions are in conflict.’ ‘It is indeed sometimes said that the stream is clearest nearest the spring’ but argues Newman ‘Whatever use may fairly be made of this image, it does not apply to the history of a philosophy or sect which, on the contrary, is more equable, and purer and stronger, when its bed has become deep and broad and full.’ And this is precisely what we see in the explosion of the Christ event. It was like striking oil, a great powerful overwhelming gush of divine energy. But then gradually, as we see from the New Testament onwards the pipes of careful words and protective institutions are laid to carry this energy throughout the world. so that people of different times, places and cultures could also begin to receive the gift.

The writers of the New Testament, those earliest witnesses, juggle with the great old images of Israel, they hammer away at words and bend hallowed ideas – all in order to do justice to what St Paul calls ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ’. So Jesus is ‘the image of the invisible God’, here is the God who has spoken in varied and fragmentary ways to our forefathers now speaking through his Son, this is the Word made flesh in whom we see the Glory of God. Newman speaks of this structure of Scripture as ‘unsystematic and various’ and its style ‘figurative and

indirect' A vivid picture is painted but one which raises ever more questions. If, as St John affirms, the Word really is made flesh, how does the humanity and Godness of Jesus fit together? Is Jesus half-God and half-Human? Has the God bit taken over some part of the human make-up? Has the Godness simply swallowed up the Humanity? If then we go on to speak of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, have we cut adrift from monotheism and profess 3 Gods? Or is there a sort of hierarchy stretching between the high and lifted up God and us creatures – with God the Father at the top, the Son a bit lower and Holy Spirit lower still?

These were the questions, which people asked, and the pondering Church, not only of the first centuries but also ever after, had to wrestle with and reach some sort of conclusions about them. They never imagined that they had come up with neat solutions. They were content to say that they were setting up signposts to prevent the faithful from following false trails, content just to guard the mystery from easy oversimplifications. Newman was always clear that, even the most hallowed words of the Church, those of scripture, creeds and dogmas could never be adequate to grasp the ungraspable mystery of God. 'Catholic dogmas' he wrote 'are but symbols of a divine fact which, far from being compassed by these very propositions, would not be exhausted, not fathomed, by a thousand.' In the end the hammering and bending of words and institutions which make up the developing life of the church is nothing to do with 'keeping up with the times' or cutting the cloth of faith to the measure of men's minds – it is all to do with the struggle to bear more adequate witness to the overwhelmingness of the divine Gift.

Of course Newman was well aware of the dangers of distortion and corruption as well as the gain of deeper understanding. He tries to set out a set of tests of true development. True development is of a conserving nature, seeking to carry into the present all the good things of the past. It is, he wrote, 'an addition which illustrates not obscures, corroborates not corrects the body of thought which went before it'. True development involves gain not loss, enrichment not impoverishment. So that the mark of a true conversion is 'ever of a positive not negative character.' And yet, with all this need for conservation, Newman insisted that 'one cause of corruption in religion is the refusal to follow the course of doctrine as it moves on, and an obstinacy in notions of the past.' So the Samaritans would not add the testimony of the Prophets to the Law, the Sadducees would not take on the development of ideas of life after death and, in later times in the early church, the so-called Ebionites wanted to stick to purely scriptural images for the Christ and refused the use of Hellenistic

philosophical language. To be so stuck in the past was as much a betrayal as selling out to every whim of contemporary thought.

When these days we are told that the Catholic Church is unchangeable, we tend to be frankly sceptical. We know that once upon a time Christians owned slaves – even bishops and popes did. We know that Christians of all sorts attacked the idea of religious liberty and that many of them supported the burning of heretics and witches. We know that the Papacy clung on to secular power and energetically resisted the growth of democracy. And thankfully we know that there has been change; that Catholic bishops, priests and nuns have struggled and even died for human rights. We know that Popes call for religious freedom. There has evidently been change in the life of the Church and many of us are old enough to have already lived through many such changes. Experience has taught us to expect more. Of course senior clerics, like senior politicians, often like to preserve the self-image of ‘unchangeableness’ and it is one of the innocent entertainments of Vatican watching, to observe the massaging of the more interesting statements of Popes and Bishops. But historians of the Church’s thinking and institutions have known the truth that indeed ‘to live is to change.’ Doctrines develop as the treasure is further explored, questions are asked, debates are engaged in and answers are sought. The Church’s organisation also changes. The centralisation of power in the Vatican was in part a defensive response to the reformation dispersal of Christianity and to the disruption and aggression of the French Revolution but it has also been a centralising strengthened and encouraged by ever-easier means of communication. The style of priesthood has changed. Eamon Duffy’s magical book ‘Voices of Morebath’ gives a vivid picture of the end of the road for the old priest-farmer model of ministry, well-equipped for a particular age and society – the priest as the smallholder amongst smallholders not greatly educated; yet given sufficient skills to say Mass and dispense the sacraments and effectively so by one deeply immersed in the life of his people. All that changed with the Catholic reformation led by the Council of Trent. Priests became seminary trained, more professional, better educated but lifted out of the life of the people and set within a clerical caste. And things, which have changed before can, of course, change again, partly under the pressure of outside events but partly also because of a return to sources and a new pondering on them.

As we have seen from Blessed John Henry Newman it is not a matter of ‘any sort of change’. If the overwhelming gift which God gives of himself is to reach human beings who live in time and space, the Word has to be made flesh, has to enter this stream of life. That is the law of

Incarnation by which the Church must live. We have no right to opt out of this. We have to share in the great risk of love. This means being fully present in our world as it is, alert to what is going on, alive to the issues which press in on us all so that, as Vatican 2's *Gaudium et Spes* has it 'the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time are the joy and hope, grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.' It is here, fully present in our world, that we shall then, as the Council puts it, be able to 'read the signs of the times.' But that as Newman, often called the 'father' of the Council, insisted is not just a matter of going with the tide being captured by the spirit of the age. The discernment of true development from corruption or deviation can only be made by those focussed on the divine gift, the unsearchable riches of Christ. As the Epistle to the Ephesians has it: we are not to be children 'carried about with every wind of doctrine' but those 'growing up to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him, who is the Head, into Christ'. The course of development is in the end a matter of being led by Holy Spirit into all truth. of taking ever more seriously the wonder of the gift given and its ever-new implications for the human race. So, declares *Lumen Gentium* 'The Church, clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal'. The Christ is always out ahead of us and we always limp along behind trying to catch up.

In all this we do not shout at the world but participate in it, knowing that, if the worst of the world too often rubs off on the Church, so too God has not left himself without witness in that world. So what we are engaged in is a conversation in which we are always peering to see the face of Christ in that world and bending to hear the echo of his voice. This means that we are looking for the eyes into which the hook of the gospel fits. It means also that we have to face the fact that often the drive to change things for the better comes from outside the Church. We have seen this over such matters as religious freedom, slavery, democratic government and child labour. And I suspect that we see the same over issues of women's rights and care for the environment. The fact that we have often seemed to drag our feet and been reluctant converts to such developments should not make us grumpy and reluctant to admit the truth. If the true light was 'in the world, and the world was made by him' and if Holy Spirit is the wind which blows where it will, then we shall know that God is not imprisoned in his Church, and we shall respond to the word of his truth from wherever it comes. This should be the goad, which drives us back to our sources, back to the gift given us in Christ to take it not less seriously but more so. So the recognition of the equal status of women

sends us to take on board the truth proclaimed by St Paul that in Christ ‘there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female,’ a truth bearing the same divine imperative which drove us to the liberation of slaves. So too the call for humans to care for our home the earth drives us to a deeper understanding of that picture in the Letter to the Roman of ‘creation groaning in travail’ a creation waiting ‘in eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God’, to a re-reading of the Genesis call to human ‘dominion’ as stewardship, a taking of responsibility for the gift of this world.

Finally we may ask: to whom does the task of this discernment of the path of true development belong? *Lumen Gentium* is clear that it belongs to the whole People of God for all of us by Baptism share in Christ’s Prophetic office. ‘The whole body of the faithful’ it declares has ‘an anointing that comes from above’ so that ‘it cannot err’. Adhering to that faith, which the stream of tradition has carried to us, all of us are involved in the task of penetrating it ‘more deeply with right judgement’ and applying ‘it more fully in daily life’. And Newman who argued strongly for the involvement of the laity in this ongoing task of pondering and developing, would have said Amen to all that. Of course he and the Council both saw a place for the authority of bishops and popes. If the people of God are given their heads, there will, as always, be argument as well as discussion, debate as well as consensus, so the people need a Referee who can blow the whistle, or a conductor who can bring the varied talents of gifted individual musicians into a symphony, turn inevitable conflict from destruction to creativity But Referees running around a field by themselves do not make a game, and Conductors waving a baton by themselves make no music. When a sniffy prelate said ‘Who are the laity?’ Newman responded that the Church would look pretty silly without them. That though takes us into a subject big enough to demand separate treatment. Suffice it to say that, as I believe Blessed John Henry Newman can help us with those Leopard’s Spots, so too I believe he can help us to see the role of authority in our common life. But all that is for another day.

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