NEWMAN AND THE IDEA OF LAY MOVEMENTS

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Anybody who knows anything about Newman knows that he was ahead of his time in advocating a much greater degree of lay participation in the life of the Church thar was common in the 19th century. And, as is well known, it is one of the principal ways in which he anticipated the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Still, some recapitulation and the correction of a common misunderstanding will not be out of place before considering the question: Does Newman's thinking on the laity have any bearing on the contemporary phenomenon of the so-called "lay movements"?

It was his experience as founder and first rector of the Catholic University of Ireland that first really opened Newman's eyes to the very low status enjoyed by the laity in the Roman Catholic Church. Of course the Irish situation was not totally typical as the clergy there had been forced into a peculiar ascendancy as a result of persecution and the lack of an educated middle class. According to Irish clerical tradition, laymen were to be "treated like good little boys" and "told to shut their eyes and open their mouths." So at any rate Newman complained, when he found his "desire ... to make the laity a substantive power in the University" opposed at every turn. In particular, he wanted the management of the finances to be in the hands of lay people (otherwise it was like "putting one's hands into a bag"), but he was never able to persuade the Irish bishops of the advantages of having a lay finance committee. He was also keen that the ablest laymen available rather than inferior priests should be appointed to chairs, the only exception being the theology professors. Unfortunately, this policy drew Newman into sharp collision with the Archbishop of Dublin, sinc some leading members of the "young Ireland" or nationalist party were the candidates favored by the rector, to the disgust of Archbishop Cullen who viewed Irish nationalists much as the Ron-tan authorities viewed Italian nationalists like Garibaldi.

Another, apparently harmless initiative of Newman, to compile a "list of honorary members of the University," who would be "principally laymen from Ireland or elsewhere," was also viewed with suspicion by the archbishop.1 Indeed, Newman felt that the "fearful" "breach" between clergy and laity constituted the principal threat to the University's survival.2

It was Newman's sense of frustration at the hierarchical Church's refusal to allow the laity their proper role in the life of the Church that in fact led to his first theological writing as a Catholic. After his return from Ireland following his resignation as rector of the University, Newman become more and more involved in the affairs of the organ of the liberal Catholics in England, the Rambler. In the end, he was asked by the English bishops to intervene to secure the resignation of the editor, an intervention which eventually led to his taking over the editorship temporarily. Although Newman disapproved of the tone and the more extreme views put forward in the magazine, he nevertheless very much approved of its aims and objectives, and not least its championing of the rights of the laity.

On May 13, 1859 Newman received a letter from a priest called John Gillow, a professor of theology at Ushaw College, Durham, the leading seminary in England, protesting against a passage in the May issue of the Rambler (the first issue which New-man himself had edited) about the bishops' recent pastorals on the Royal Commission on education. Newman acknowledged that the passage which Gillow described as "objectionable" was written by himself. In the passage objected to, Newman, while apologizing for any offense the Rambler had inadvertently caused the hierarchy, stated boldly and uncompromisingly his view that the bishops must

really desire to know the opinion of the laity on subjects in which the laity are especially concerned. If even in the preparation of a dogmatic definition the faithful are consulted, as lately in the instance of the Immaculate Conception, it is at least as natural to anticipate such an act of kind feeling and sympathy in great practical questions ...

And he concluded with a general warning against "the misery of any division between the rulers of the Church and the educated laity," coupled with a strong plea to the bishops: "Let them pardon, then, the accidental hastiness of manner or want of ceremony of the rude Jack-tars of their vessel, as far as it occurred, in consideration of th zeal and energy with which they haul to the ropes and man the yards."3

Newman immediately wrote back to Gillow, tersely enquiring what the grounds of the objection were. He also informed his own bishop, Dr. Ullathorne, of the complaint, explaining that in the reference to the definition of the Immaculate Conception, to which Gillow had taken especial exception, he had only been pointing out that "the Christian people at large were consulted on the fact of the tradition of the Immaculate Conception in every part of the Catholic world." He was not very surprised by Gillow's attack: "Of course the Rambler will get me into trouble, as nearly every thing I do does." What he did not know was that it was to elicit from him his first original theological work as a Catholic, which marked the beginning of a theology of the Church that was to develop slowly but surely during the next two decades. Gillow wrote to explain that Newman's words seemed to mean that the infallibility of the Church lay with the laity rather than the hierarchy. Newman replied that Gillow had misunderstood the world "consult":

To the unlearned reader the idea conveyed by "consulting" is not necessarily that of asking an opinion. For instance, we speak of consulting a barometer about the weather. The barometer does not give us its opinion, but ascertains for us a fact ... I had not a dream of understanding the word ... in the sense of asking an opinion.4

Gillow accepted the explanation without demur: it had never even occurred to him as a theologian to use the word "consult" in such an untheological sense.

A few days later Dr. Ullathome called to see Newman. The bishop thought he saw "remains of the old spirit" in the Rambler. "It was irritating. Our laity were a peaceable set, the Church was peace. They had a deep faith- they did not like to hear that anyone doubted." Newman pointed out that he knew from experience that the laity in Ireland, for example, was "docile" but "unsettled." In the course of their talk, the bishop "said something like, 'Who are the laity?' I answered that the Church would look foolish without them..." Newman added that he saw his connection with the Rambler as "substantially the same work" as his mission in Dublin.5 At this interview Ullathorne advised him to give up the editorship after the July issue. Newman agreed without hesitation.

Before, however, relinquishing the editorship, he was determined to deal more fully with the place of the laity in the Church. The famous article "On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine" was completed in time for the July issue. Newman begins by defending his use of the word "consult," which he says in ordinary English "includes the idea of inquiring into a matter of fact, as well as making a judgment." Thus, for example, a "physician consults the pulse of his patient; but not in the same

sense in which his patient consults him." It is in the former sense that the Church "consults" or "regards" the faith of the laity before defining a doctrine. The Rambler wa written for lay people, not for scholastic theologians, to whom the word "consult" would naturally signify its Latin sense of "consult with." But if the laity's "advice, their opinion, their judgment on the question of definition is not asked," nevertheless, "the matter of fact, viz. their belief, is sought for, as a testimony to that apostolical tradition, on which alone any doctrine whatsoever can be defined." Newman not only refuses to offer any apology for his use of the word, but implicitly rebukes his critics by remarking, "if we do not use the vernacular, I do not see how the bulk of the Catholic people are to be catechised or taught at all." Because the "perfect accuracy" of a theological lecture in Latin was lacking, "a want of this exactness" did not necessarily indicate "self-will and undutifulnes."6

Newman's defense of his use of the word "consult" did not convince Bishop Ullathome, who pointed out that taking advice, "that is, to seek guidance from another's judgment, is both the Latin sense, the technical theological sense, and the literal and primary English sense of the word."7 One sees the Bishop's point, although it is harc to see what other word Newman could have used. However, it is undoubtedly true that Newman's terminology has been the source of much confusion. Indeed, many people to this day who are only superficially acquainted with Newman's thought readily suppose that Newman meant that the pope and bishops ought to "consult," that is, take the advice of the people of God before teaching or defining authoritatively. And because Newman did think that the hierarchy should, in this sense, certainly consult with lay people on non-doctrinal matters that are the laity's concern, the confusion has only increased.

Having defended his use of the word "consult," Newman now turns to consider the question, why consult the laity? The answer is plain, he says: "because the body of the faithful is one of the witnesses to the fact of the tradition of revealed doctrine, and because their consensus through Christendom is the voice of the Infallible Church." There are "channels of tradition," through which "the tradition of the Apostles, committed to the whole Church ... manifests itself variously at various times," none of which "may be treated with disrespect," even though the hierarchy has sole responsibility for "discerning and discriminating, defining, promulgating and enforcing any portion of that tradition." He himself, he explains, is "accustomed to lay great stress on the consensus fidelium" in order to compensate for the lack of testimony from bishops and theologians in favor of defined points of doctrine. At the time of the definition of the Immaculate Conception, Bishop Ullathorne had referred to the faith of the laity as a "reflection" of the teaching of the Church, and Newman comments with dry irony: "Reflection; that is, the people are a mirror, in which the bishops see themselves. Well, I suppose a person may consult his glass, and in that way may know things about himself which he can learn in no other way."8

He now proceeds to his celebrated historical example drawn from that period of the early Church's history which he had studied so deeply and intensely as an Anglican. In spite of the fact that the 4th century was the age of great doctors and saints, who were also bishops, like Athanasius, Ambrose, Chrysostom and Augustine, "nevertheless in that very day the divine tradition committed to the infallible Church was proclaimed and maintained far more by the faithful than by the Episcopate." During the Arian heresy, "in that time of immense confusion the divine dogma of our Lord's divinity was proclaimed, enforced, maintained and (humanly speaking) preserved, far more by the "Ecclesia docta" than by the "Ecclesia docens"... the body of the episcopate was unfaithful to its commission, while the body of the laity was faithful to its baptism." The importance of the illustration is shown by the fact that it occurred so early in the history of the Church and involved the very identity of Christ. Newman boldly concludes by saying that "there was a temporary suspense of the functions" of the teaching Church, the unpalatable truth being that the "body of bishops failed in their confession of the faith." The danger of the present time, when the hierarchy was so faithful and orthodox, was that the role of the laity would be neglected-but "each constituent portion of the Church has its proper functions, and no portion can safely be neglected." The article ends with an almost defiant challenge in the well-known words:

I think certainly that the Ecclesia docens is more happy when she has enthusiastic partisans about her than when she cuts of the faithful from the study of her divine doctrines and requires from them a fides implicita in her word, which in the educated classes will terminate in indifference, and the poorer in superstitions.9

In the succeeding years Newman's concern for the place of the laity in the Church hardly diminished as the tide of Ultramontanism rose ever higher. For example, at "the root," he felt, of the English bishops' hostility to English Catholics going to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge was that "same dreadful jealousy of the laity" which he had experienced to his cost in Dublin. It was not so much that Wiseman and Manning were afraid (as they alleged) that Catholics would lose their faith by going to university, but that they were, according to Newman, simply terrified of "the natural influence" an educated laity could exercise an influence, Newman drily observed, "which would be their greatest, or (humanly speaking) is rather their only, defense against the world."10 Newman also thought that the hierarchy had good reason, in the circumstances, to be afraid of the laity, who, he believed, "could do any thing if they chose." As for those clergy like himself who were not enamoured of the prevailing authoritarianism and clericalism, "Our only hope," he remarked, "is in the laity knowing their own strength and exerting themselves."11

Years after he had resigned the rectorship of the Catholic University, at least Newman had the satisfaction of learning that the Irish bishops had finally agreed to laymen not only participating in the University's financial affairs but also in its general management. He even wondered if the University might now become "a middle station at which clergy and laity can meet, so as to learn to understand and to yield to each other and from which, as from a common ground, they may act in unison upon an age, which is running headlong into infidelity." Indeed, there appeared to be "ecclesiastics all over Europe, whose policy it is to keep the laity at arms- length; and hence the laity have been disgusted and become infidel, and only two parties exist, both ultras in opposite directions."12

All this is more or less familiar ground, but I want now to turn to two rather less well-known aspects of Newman's thinking on the lay element in the Church. The first of them, like his idea of "consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine," came to him from his loving study of the early Church. At the very beginning of the Oxford Movement, Newman, while not actually advocating the disestablishment of the Church of England, wondered whether the time had not come for the Church to become once again a "popular" institution. Recalling how the "early Church threw itself on the people." He asked: "now that the Crown and aristocracy have deserted us, must we not do so too?" His own first public act was to start writing the first of a series of articles for the British Magazine. "called the 'Church of the Fathers'...on the principle of popularity as an element of Church power, as exemplified in the history of St. Ambrose."13 In this article Newman acknowledged diplomatically the fact tha hitherto the Church of England had "depended" on the state "is so natural and religious a position of things when viewed in the abstract, and in its actual working has been productive of such excellent fruits in the Church, such quietness, such sobriety, such external propriety of conduct, and such freedom from doctrinal excesses, that we must ever look back upon the period of ecclesiastical history so characterized with affectionate thoughts." But, Newman continues, mere conservatism should not prevent the question, "what is intended by Providence to take the place of the time-honoured instrument, which He has broken (if it be yet broken), the regal and aristocratical power?" His own answer, which he knew would "offend many," was, "we must look to the people." He conceded, "Who at first sight does not dislike the thoughts of gentlemen and clergymen depending for their maintenance and their reputation on their flocks? of their strength, as a visible power, lying not in their birth, the patronage of the great, and the endowment of the Church (as hitherto), but in the homage of a multitude?" He had to confess that he had "before now had a great repugnance to the notion" himself, but he had "overcome it, and turned from the Government to the People," because he was "forced to do so." The suspicion of a hint of irony is confirmed by a later remark to the effect that "St. Ambrose and his brethren" might "have as reasonably disbelieved the possible existence of parsonages and pony- carriages in the 19th century, as we the existence of martyrs and miracles in the primitive age." At any rate Newman is prepared to state bluntly that "what may become necessary in time to come, is a more religious state of things also." The Bible, after all, prefers the poor to the rich, and in practice "the Church, when purest and most powerful, has depended for its influence on its consideration with the many."14 Such was the primitive Church.

As an Anglican, Newman was not concerned with the clericalization of the Church but rather with the contracted nature of its lay basis. He wanted, as he put it in a letter "to encourage Churchmen to look boldly at the possibility of the Church's being made to dwell in the affections of the people at large. At present it is too much a Church for the Aristocracy, and for the poor mainly through the Aristocracy; with few attractions for the middle classes."15 At the beginning of the Oxford Movement, he was still prepared to concede that personally he felt that "the most natural and becoming state of things" was "for the aristocratical power to be the upholder of the Church" yet he could not "deny the plain fact that in most ages the latter has been based on a popular power."16

As a Catholic, Newman was not only anxious for recognition of the laity, but he was also keenly aware of the need to make the Church more "popular." He had already

as an Anglican readily agreed (in a review article) with the French Catholic thinker de Lamenais that "the Latin Church rose to power, not by the favour of princes, but o people." Although the Church was not "developed upon its original idea" of "appealing to the people," nevertheless, Newman commented, "what we do see from the first ... is, religion throwing itself upon the people." Corruptions there may have been in the papacy, but "It was not the breath of princes or the smiles of a court which fostered the stem and lofty spirit of Hildebrand and Innocent. It was the neglect of self, the renunciation of worldly pomp and ease, the appeal to the people." However, the radical conclusion reached by Lamenais that the pope should not only renounce his "temporalities" but "place himself at the head of the democratic movement throughout Europe" (on the ground that "Liberty is the cry of the day") finds no echo in the more cautious Anglican Newman, for whom "rebellion is a sin" and "innovation" to be suspected "on principle."17

But writing many years later as a Catholic, he wondered if Lamenais might not turn out to be "a true prophet after all." Although the then reigning Pope Pius IX was hardly likely to adopt "such a line of action," still it had happened before in the time of the great Hildebrand (Pope Gregory VII), and Newman wondered privately: "though we may have a season of depression, as there was a hideous degradation before Gregory, yet it may be in the counsels of Providence that the Catholic Church may at length come out unexpectedly as a popular power."18 These words were written in 1871, a year after the definition of papal infallibility, when it seemed that the forces of Ultramontane authoritarianism and clericalism had achieved their irreversible triumph. At the time, however, Newman predicted that there would be another Council which would modify the definition by a fuller teaching on the nature of the Church. Certainly his tentative prediction of a renewed, popular Catholicism may seem to have found some measure of fulfillment in the widespread disestablishment of the Catholic Church in Catholic Europe and Latin America since the Second Vatican Council.

In turning to the second of the two less well-known aspects of Newman's view of the laity in the Church, we come at last to the question of the extent to which Newman's thought and practice anticipate the rise in the 20th century of the phenomenon of the so-called "lay movement." Clearly, the contemporary lay movements could hardly have arisen, let alone survived, in the Ultramontane Church of Pio Nono. For they are obviously born out of a new sense of the laity's role, a sense which pre-dates the great Vatican II Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, which in turn, however, confirms and ratifies both a theology and a praxis that had been gradually developing in Europe since World War I. In practical terms one thinks, for example, of the Legion of Mary and Opus Dei, while the outstanding theological work must surely be Yves Congar's Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of the Laity (English tr. 1957).

In looking for anticipations in Newman of this banding together of lay people into movements, one cannot help but recall in the first place that Newman himself as an Anglican headed a "movement" consisting of both clergy and laity, a movement we call the Oxford or Tractarian Movement. In the beginning it was very much a clerical movement, the initial idea being to form a society of clergy centered on Oxford, but with branches spreading all over the country. However, Newman much preferred the less structured idea of a loosely knit movement to a formally organized society or association. He was strongly opposed, in particular, to any kind of formal authorization of the Tracts for the Times (which he initiated) by a committee or board. Instead, he wanted the Tracts to be circulated by personal contact and to be personally written by individuals.19 As he put it in the Apologia, his principle was that "Living movements do not come of committees."20 Far from the Tracts being intended only for the clergy, Newman was especially delighted by a contribution from his friend John William Bowden, precisely because he was a layman.

Theological tracts were not the only form of literature that the Tractarians employed. Newman typically saw that the Movement must have an imaginative as well as an intellectual appeal. And so he and his collaborators soon began publishing "Records of the Church" or what he called "little stories of the Apostles, Fathers etc., to familiarize the imagination of the reader to an Apostolical state of the Church."21 Clearly this kind of propaganda was intended at least as much for the laity as for the clergy. The same was true of the Lyra Apostolica, the verse section in the British Magazine which he and Hurrell Froude had conceived of a year before the Movement proper began, hoping to advance their religious views through what Newman called the "rhetoric" and "persuasion" of poetry.22 When the verses were published in book form in 1836, Newman was amazed by their remarkable success in advancing "Apostolical views," as he told a woman friend, Maria Gibeme, herself intimately involved in the Movement. Newman was keen that Maria should try her hand at writing "some Apostolic stories" for children and hoped that she could collaborate with his sister Jemima and sister-in-law Anne Mozley. What he thought was really needed was "a library on all subjects for the middle classes and the Clergy."23 In other words, he wanted the Movement to be propagated by every possible kind of writing, for the laity as well as the clergy, and for women and children as well as men. Since fiction was becoming a particularly effective medium of communication and since practitioners of the art were often women (including Newman's own sister Harriett, herself a successful author of children's books), lay women played a significant role in the Tractarian Movement. If the great Tractarian poet was a clergyman, John Keble, the great Tractarian novelist was a woman, Charlotte M. Yonge.

When Newman looked back at such prominent precursors of the Movement as Alexander Knox, the Irish theologian, and the Romantic philosopher and poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he was struck by the fact that they were both "laymen and that is very remarkable," as was Dr. Johnson, "another striking instance."24 Many of the leading members of the Tractarian Movement were laymen, often prominent in public life. It was the absence of this kind of easy collaboration between clergy and laity that struck Newman so unfavorably when he became a Catholic.

When the Roman Catholic hierarchy was restored to England in 1850, a storm of anti-Popery erupted in the face of this so-called "Papal Aggression." Newman's response to the publicly orchestrated campaign against Catholics is very interesting. He thought it could be profitably exploited by making it an excuse for "getting up a great organization, going round the towns giving lectures, or making speeches,... starting a paper, a review etc." He recommended gathering laymen to speak at public meetings in the big towns. Young Catholics particularly, he felt, should band together as the Tractarians had. In other words he saw the possibility of another "movement," although this time he seems to have seen it as much more lay than clerical. He seems to have sensed that here was the potential beginning of another movement like Tractarianism, the occasion being again the persecution of the Church, although this time a different Church. Now the condemnations of the Tracts for the Times and the suspension of preachers by the authorities at Oxford might be matched by the fining, imprisonment and even transportation of recalcitrant Catholic bishops. But, as in the past, Newman sadly realized that the bishops would not rise to the occasion. However, now his main complaint was that the Catholic bishops had not bothered nor did they intend to consult the laity on the best course of action to take. His own bishop, he was convinced, "has a terror of laymen, and I am sure they may be made in this day the strength of the Church."25

Newman himself embarked on a series of public lectures in June 1851, which were intended to counteract the traditional English prejudice against Catholicism. They were published in book form as Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England: Addressed to the Brothers of the Oratory. These "Brothers of the Oratory" constituted the so-called "Little Oratory," which was the confraternity of laymen traditionally attached to an Oratory. Of all the Oratorian activities and works, Newman considered this as "more important than anything else."26 The Oratory, after all had started in Rome as a kind of lay movement led by St. Philip Neri the so-called "Apostle of Rome." It had not been intended to be another congregation or order of priests. The first "Oratory" was simply the group of laymen that gathered for discussion and prayer and study with St. Philip. Actual community fife came later when an inner or "core" group began to live together, three of whose members were ordained to the priesthood. We can see from Newman's surviving Oratory papers27 that he was very conscious of the original lay basis of what eventually developed into the Congregation of the Oratory, in which the few lay members would be subordinated to the priestly majority. In recognizing the "Little Oratory" as indispensably attached to the Oratory, Newman was consciously or unconsciously adverting to the Oratory's essentially lay antecedents. Not content with the traditional "Little Oratory" of laymen, Newman in 1856 proposed to the Pope "the formation of a female [little] Oratory."28 Of course a "Little Oratory" only consisted of a relatively small number of lay people closely associated with the local Oratory. But when we take into account Newman's hope that the Oratory would spread through the cities and towns in England, we can see how such an extended "Little Oratory" would in fact have formed a kind of widespread lay movement, although it would be as loosely knit as would the individual autonomous Oratories. Needless to say, Newman's dream was never fulfilled.

In our own day the various flourishing lay movements differ greatly in the extent of their organization and structure, with the closely knit, hierarchical Opus Dei at one extreme, and at the other extreme a multitude of loosely affiliated and more or less structured or unstructured prayer groups and communities belonging to the

Charismatic Renewal movement. Newman's own connection with, or interest in, lay movements to some extent reflects this variety. For on the one hand he deplored attempts to organize the Tractarian Movement into an organized association or society with rules and officers, while on the other hand his own vocation as an Oratorian priest involved him closely in a lay group with a definite framework and link with a priestly community itself bound, albeit loosely, by a canonical rule.

There are many today in the Church who see the various and diverse lay movements as a contemporary equivalent of the early monks or the medieval friars or the Jesuits of the Counter-Reformation, in both renewing the Church herself and in evangelizing the world. Perhaps in conclusion we may say that not only was Cardinal Newman's theology of the laity a brave and brilliant anticipation of Lumen Gentium, but his concern that the Church should once again become a Church of the people and his acute insight into the apostolic potential of lay people "banding together" foreshadows both the "base communities" and the lay movements of the Church of the 20th century.

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Notes

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