DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

John Henry Newman on Prayer

ANYONE COMING to Newman with the expectation of discovering a systematic and well-ordered doctrine on prayer such as perhaps one may find in a St Teresa of Avila, a Lallemant or Scaramelli is apt to be disappointed. Newman wrote no treatise on prayer. His life was an active one, and save for the period at Littlemore, 1843-45, it was not structured for one primarily engaged in a contemplative life. This is not to deny that Newman may have been a contemplative in action — personally I am inclined to believe he was — but there is no agreement as to whether Newman was a mystic or whether he experienced periods of mystical union during his prayer.¹ It must also be recalled that Newman’s teaching on prayer is for the most part contained in sermons composed not for nuns, monks or contemplatives but for the ordinary Christian coming to Church on Sundays. This, however, makes the doctrine no less lofty. The sermons were written for a definite audience at an historic moment in the life of the Church of England. From time to time Newman also spoke of prayer in his letters and in tracts, and he composed a number of meditations and prayers which were published after his death under the title Meditations and Devotions.

In light of these facts one has a choice of two approaches to Newman’s teaching on prayer. One is to attempt to construct a synthesis by putting together pieces from different writings, disregarding chronology and the context of the writings. The other — the one to be followed in this article — is to present a more or less chronological account of Newman’s teaching, situating his remarks in the context of his theological development.

Evangelical phase

When Newman began to preach at St Clement’s, Oxford, in 1824, he relied upon the writings of moderate Evangelicals within the Church of England for his material, and his language and tone reflect those writers. One of his earliest sermons — the fifth — was devoted to the importance of prayer. The greater part of it is taken up with the proper dispositions for prayer, namely, a recognition of our need for God’s grace and help, sinners that we are, and a desire for these gifts, for holiness especially. Implied in these dispositions is a recognition of one’s dependence upon the Being to whom we pray and also an expectation that God will provide help. These
dispositions likewise include a belief in divine providence, since one cannot think of God as able and willing to help us 'while we attribute the course of events merely to chance, necessity, or human contrivance, and exclude "the immediate operation of the First Cause"', the latter statement being a quotation from Thomas Scott. Although Newman does not develop it in this sermon, the concept of God's providence both general and particular was central to his spiritual beliefs and integral to his thinking about prayer. He came to see as a great mystery how God's will is realized despite the free decisions of men which are often contrary to it, and secondly, how prayer may be said to influence God.

In this sermon too Newman makes the usually sharp evangelical distinction between the 'spiritual' or 'religious' or 'real' Christian, and the worldly man who has no consciousness of his need for help and hence no desire, no taste for religion. How can such a man as the latter pray feelingly, he asks. The importance of proper feelings and affections is thus assumed in Newman's discussion. In the sermon Newman makes use of two rather plain and unexciting metaphors. What he meant by them, however, is theologically significant. Prayer is said to be the breath and pulse of the spiritual life. What did he mean by these metaphors? As he explained, unless we breathe we die, and so unless our souls receive continued support from the Spirit of God, that is, the Holy Ghost, 'all heavenly affections will languish, droop and ultimately at length perish'. Newman therefore recommends that we pray in or by the Spirit, especially invoking him at the beginning of our prayer. Scripture teaches, he says, that though we know not what to pray for, the Spirit makes intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered or put into words (Rom 8,26). Hence our first petition in prayer should be for heavenly aid to know what things to ask of God.

Secondly, prayer is said to be the pulse of the spiritual life. From it we may gauge whether the soul is in good health or not. And so:

if we find ourselves cold and careless in prayer, or irregular, or hurried, or inattentive, we should seriously ask ourselves . . . whether something has not disagreed, so to say, with our souls — whether some worldly object is not leading our thoughts from religion.

Worldliness for the Evangelicals was the great obstacle to holiness. Now since, as Newman insists in sermon upon sermon, the Christian is called to holiness in this life to prepare himself for the after life, prayer obviously assumes great importance, so that Newman can rightly deduce that there is a reciprocal relation between the spirit of prayer and a holy life — 'the more we pray, the holier will be our life; and the holier our life, the more we shall pray'. One further recommendation is offered by way of conclusion to this
sermon: as we should begin in the Spirit, so also we should conclude our prayers through Christ, since he is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2), the only advocate we have with the Father (1 Jn 20), he is our great High Priest (Heb 4), and we must come to the Father in the merits of his Son and his name (Jn 14). The trinitarian orientation of Newman’s teaching on prayer is clearly evident here. Faith in the Trinity was, he said in the Apologia, first planted deep in his mind by the writings of Thomas Scott, to whom he owed much of what he had to say in this sermon.4

We may pass over one other sermon on prayer and various occasional statements on prayer in the St Clement’s sermons. They deal for the most part with the objects for which one prays, emphasis being placed on the primacy of spiritual rather than temporal benefits, the latter being prayed for only conditionally.5 It is well to note, however, that Newman’s understanding of the Church was beginning to be enlarged during this period, especially with reference to its visible aspects.6 This and an increasing sacramental understanding of grace enlarged and deepened Newman’s doctrine of prayer which perforce must now include public as well as private prayer. In 1829-30 Newman preached at St Mary’s, Oxford, a number of sermons on private and public prayer. By this time he no longer considered himself an Evangelical, a fact that is reflected both in his remarks on the role of emotions in prayer and in his sacramental understanding of public and private prayer.

Habitual prayer or prayer of the presence of God

Preaching on the text ‘Pray without ceasing’ (1 Thess 5,17), Newman described a type of prayer which might be called living in the presence of God, and this can be done at all times and in any place.7 At first he says this prayer is commanded as a duty, but modifies this to ‘rather it is a characteristic, of those who are really servants and friends of Christ’. In fact, he goes on to establish that it is both a dictate of conscience as well as a mark of the true Christian. To be truly religious is to have this habit of continual prayer. The new life of a Christian is a life of faith, and what is faith, Newman asks, ‘but the looking to God and thinking of him continually, holding habitual fellowship with him, that is, speaking to him in our hearts all through the day, praying without ceasing?’ From Newman’s description of this type of prayer, it is evident that it is not at all times expressed in words. It is for example:

doing all things to God’s glory; that is, so placing God’s presence and will before us, and so consistently acting with a reference to him, that all we do becomes one body and course of obedience, witnessing without ceasing to him who made us, and whose servants we are.
It is, in short, 'living in God's sight'.

The continuity of this sermon with those delivered at St Clement's may be observed by his reaffirmation that prayer is the breath and pulse of the spiritual life within us, the new life implanted by the Holy Spirit. But Newman also observes that the ordinary Christian has little prayer life; he prays only now and then, when he needs something or when his feelings are unusually excited. His religious life depends on accidental excitement, which Newman is now prepared to declare 'is no test of a religious heart'. This note of distrust of religious emotion is one that appears frequently in his subsequent sermons, and it is the issue on which he is most actively opposed to the Evangelicals. The reason for this distrust was the conviction based upon personal experience that a concentration and preoccupation with feeling turns one's attention to one's self, culminating in a dangerous introspection and contemplation of one's feelings rather than centring one's attention on the object of one's faith, namely, Christ.8

**Times of private prayer**

One would perhaps conclude that, having proclaimed the importance of constant and habitual prayer, Newman was indifferent whether one set aside fixed times for formal prayer. On the contrary, he declared that it is highly expedient to have such set times and forms even for private prayer, and indeed such times are commanded in Scripture.9 The chief reason assigned for stated times of prayer, especially morning and evening, is that without them formal prayer at other times and habitual prayer during the day are unlikely to be maintained. Morning and evening prayer help to create regularity in our spiritual life, whereas 'he who gives up regularity in prayer has lost a principal means of reminding himself that the spiritual life is obedience to a Lawgiver, not a mere feeling or a taste'.

**Forms of private prayer**

In addition to set times for prayer Newman recommended the use of set forms as well.10 His reasons were connected with his strong opposition to *ex tempore* prayers, which he thought irreverent because they were expressed in unsuitable language and involved 'rude, half-religious thoughts'. Set forms of prayer also guarded, he believed, against two other forms of irreverence: distracted and wandering thoughts on the one hand, and excited thoughts on the other. The Dissenters and the Evangelicals at times criticized set forms of prayer as creating a cold formalism. With them in mind, though not explicitly mentioning them, Newman declared that forms of prayer:

are censured for the very circumstances about them which is their excellence. They are accused of impeding the current of devotion, when, in fact, that (so-called) current is in itself faulty, and ought to be checked.
While admitting that on occasion emotions will break through forms of prayer, he nevertheless maintained that this should not be the ordinary course, and he attacked the belief that feelings are an indication of earnestness in religion. On the contrary, the very purpose of fixed forms of prayer is:

*to still emotion, to calm us, to remind us what and where we are, to lead us to a purer and serener temper, and to that deep unruffled love of God and man, which is really the fulfilling of the law and the perfection of human nature.*

Lastly, Newman saw several other advantages in fixed forms of prayer. They helped one to recollect oneself quickly, and they remained in the memory, building around them associations which could prove an aid in time of temptation, perhaps even to be recalled when one had fallen into sin.

**Public worship**

In a sermon preached on 25 October 1829, Newman raised the question frequently asked by young people today; why go to church?, though they usually do not proceed further to Newman's second question, why is it not sufficient to pray in private? Newman's answers to these questions are basically ecclesiological. Christ has lodged his blessings in a body or Church, which exists before the individual is admitted into it, which does not depend on the individual member, but the individual member depends on the body. Newman appeals to St Paul and the apostles who speak of Christians as forming one body, praying together, sanctified together as one temple of Christ and of his Holy Spirit. He also cites the text of his sermon, 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them'. Since the Church mediates and applies the blessings of Christ to the individual, who is admitted into the body by the social and external rite of baptism, public prayer has preceded private. Indeed from this public adoption and gift of grace, private prayer takes its value. On the basis of this sacramental view of the Church, therefore, Newman can affirm that the Christian's hope of an answer to his private prayer arises from his having also prayed in public.

In addition to baptism, communion is also a channel of grace, and these sacraments (except in case of necessity) are performed publicly in church. The other ordinances set down in the Book of Common Prayer are likewise administered in church: confirmation, marriage, thanksgivings and burials, even if not necessary for salvation, as are baptism and communion, according to anglican teaching. If public prayer is so essential, why do we come to church just once a week? Newman asks; and replies that the Lord's day is a most appropriate one and set down in scripture, but there is no
reason for limiting it to that day. He adds: 'the blessing promised on meeting together naturally leads thoughtful men to wish to meet more frequently'. He quotes most appropriately Psalm 84 'how amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord . . . My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord — my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God'.

It may seem rather incredible to us today, but many people came to church primarily attracted by the sermon or would go from church to church to listen to a preacher of some reputation. Moreover, in rural parishes the clergyman had assumed many functions — doctor, lawyer, magistrate as well as teacher. As R. W. Church pointed out, 'the idea of the priest was not quite forgotten, but there was much . . . to obscure it'.

It is against this background that one must place Newman's assertion that the primary function of a Christian minister is his priestly function and he is a priest in church precisely 'as offering up the sacrifice of prayer and praise from the whole congregation, binding together the worship of individuals into that one united voice to which the Christian blessings are distinctly pledged'. This he does through the mediation of Christ. Secondly, the priest commemorates in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper the one perfect and sufficient sacrifice which Christ made on the cross. As is clear from the rest of the sermon, Newman at this point of his development is not prepared, though he may be later, to look upon the Eucharist as a sacrifice. There is, however, not merely a commemorative significance to his action, but an eschatological one, for the priest prepares the faithful for their final consecration to God at the last day. Although the time of public service is a most suitable one to hear a sermon, the latter 'is far inferior in dignity to the prayers, and it is for the sake of them, and is not necessary to divine worship which is complete without it'.

Intercessory prayer

Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of Newman's teaching on prayer is the special role he assigns to intercessory prayer. Basing his teaching on St Paul's Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles, Newman concluded that 'intercession is the characteristic of Christian worship, the privilege of the heavenly adoption, the exercise of the perfect and spiritual mind'. It is especially the prerogative and privilege of the obedient and the holy. Behind Newman's concept of intercessory prayer is the theology of the Holy Spirit. By the time he wrote the sermon on this topic, he had come under the influence of the Greek Fathers, particularly St Athanasius, and adopted their doctrine of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, conferred in baptism and elevating the Christian to a supernatural plane. The Holy Spirit unites the baptized not only with Christ, but, as he had come to believe while still an Evangelical, with each other. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Christian is made over into the image of Christ, so that as Christ intercedes above, the Christian intercedes here below.
Moreover, when he reads the scripture, he is able to see the course of God's providence in the great contest taking place between good and evil, and that by his prayers or absence of them the Christian is involved in an eternal destiny. In the contest between good and evil the Christian by reason of his intercessory power plays a role. On the one hand Newman calls this 'O mystery of blessedness too great to think of steadily, lest we grow dizzy'. On the other hand he is overwhelmed by the responsibility one has of interceding for others. 'How can we answer to ourselves for the souls . . . that have been lost . . . seeing that, for what we know, we were ordained to influence or reverse their present destiny and have not done it'.

**Newman's practice of prayer**

We know that Newman composed long lists of petitions that he prayed for each morning and night, varying them from day to day. There is a record of his bidding prayers at St Mary's, which is quite extensive. Also extant are long lists of names of those for whom he prayed, including almost everyone connected with the Oxford Movement. In this as in other aspects of his teaching on prayer, Newman practised what he preached, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he preached what he practised. There are prayers that he composed for morning and night, written in 1817, 1818, 1824, 1828. These morning and evening prayers are really a combination of meditation and petition. The meditations on Christian doctrine in the latter part of *Meditations and Devotions* give an idea of what they are like. Petitions were composed in 1824-25, further prayers in 1837 and thereafter. Possibly others existed but were destroyed. We know from his Journals that he prayed constantly in walks and in business. Furthermore, he introduced the daily service at St Mary's, on 14 October 1834, preaching on its importance on 2 November 1834. He wrote tracts on the liturgy, particularly on the breviary as part of the corporate worship of the Church. He prayed privately for the dead, though he did not introduce it aloud into the liturgy, because he thought it might be falsely linked with the Roman doctrine of purgatory. Likewise, he cautioned against direct invocation of Saints as 'tending to give, often actually giving, to creatures the honour and reliance due to the Creator alone'. In Tract 90 he modified these views somewhat but not entirely. His life at Littlemore may be characterized as a life of continual prayer. In saying the breviary, while an Anglican, however, Newman omitted the invocations addressed to Our Lady.

**Newman's doctrine and practice of prayer as a Catholic**

Upon becoming a Catholic, Newman of course believed in the invocation to Our Lady and of the Saints, the seven sacraments, the sacrifice of the mass and the doctrine of purgatory as taught by the Catholic Church. Allowance being made for these changes there is still a marked
continuity between Newman's teaching and practice of prayer as an Anglican and as a Catholic. How strong Newman's belief in the efficacy of prayer remained may be judged from a letter written 28 February 1876 to William Philip Gordon:

I have said three Masses for your intention concerning your brother. I can but repeat, that it is a thought I have made much use of for more than fifty years, that, so great is the power of prayer and the promise made to it, that I believe it to be successful in a particular case, though there be nothing in the visible disposition of things to countenance that belief, or when, rather, sight is in opposition to that belief. \(^{27}\)

In his letters to enquirers who were attracted to the Catholic Church but unable to take the step of joining it, he regularly recommended that they pray earnestly for light and grace.\(^{28}\) In his Letter to Pusey he reaffirmed his belief that 'prayer is the very essence of all religion' and that intercessory prayer whose vital force stems from sanctity is a 'first principle of the Church’s life' and that the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, is the great Intercessor.\(^{29}\) The intercessory power of the Christian, owing to the meritorious sacrifice of Christ, is, Newman affirmed as a Catholic, most fittingly exercised in the sacrifice of the mass.\(^{30}\) Needless to say, long lists of persons to be prayed for were read every day before Newman celebrated mass. Above the entrance door to the Oratory Newman had written: *Domus mea domus orationis vocabitur.*

One aspect of prayer life which was not only added when he became a Catholic but both practised and recommended to others, was devotion to Christ reserved in the Blessed Sacrament. In the sorrow and loneliness of his first years as a Catholic, his greatest cross was being cut off from his family and friends in the Anglican Church.\(^{31}\) On a number of occasions he mentions it in his letters and also remarks that living in a house with the Blessed Sacrament which he could visit was an enormous consolation and strength in this trial.\(^{32}\) In Dublin he received permission from Dr Cullen to have reservation in a private chapel.\(^{33}\) Before exposing the ex-dominican friar, Achilli, as a profligate in one of his Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England, he 'went before the Blessed Sacrament and begged to be kept from doing it, if wrong'.\(^{34}\) When the trial for libel lasting four days was in process, Newman spent almost night and day before it in the London Oratory, thereby leaving an indelible impression on his fellow Oratorians.\(^{35}\) Of a chapel of reservation he once wrote; 'It is the place for intercession surely'.\(^{36}\) To Lady Chatterton he remarked, 'there is no benediction from earth or sky which falls upon us like that which comes to us from the Blessed Sacrament, which is Himself'.\(^{37}\) He often recommended this devotion to converts suffering from solitariness.\(^{38}\)
Conclusion

By way of conclusion I should like to remark that Newman’s doctrine on prayer can be considered as part of a larger area of lay spirituality. At the same time his suggestions are eminently suited to priests and religious as well. Secondly, it is a doctrine rooted in a solid theology of the Church, the sacraments, and the Holy Spirit. My own concern is that it may not appear so attractive in this summary presentation as in its original form. As we know from Newman’s contemporaries, his sermons proceeded from his habitual inhabitation of the invisible world which he was able to make real for his auditors. As Dean Church remarked, ‘He preached so that he made you feel without doubt that it was the most real of worlds to him; he made you feel in time, in spite of yourself, that it was a real world with which you too had concern’. I think this judgment is valid today and that a reading of his sermons on prayer can still have the same effect. It is worth putting it to the test.

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NOTES


3 See Parochial and Plain Sermons (PPS) (London, 1901), VI, pp 247-50. Also, ‘A Particular Providence as revealed in the Gospel’, PPS III, sermon 9; MS sermon n 14: ‘it [prayer] sets vibrating (as it were) the whole system and series of God’s providence and gracious dispensations to mankind; it exerts an influence over ages yet unborn, and is felt at the very ends of the earth’. ‘So again, when men who profess Christianity ask how prayer can really influence the course of God’s Providence’ they rationalize . . . ‘the idea of Mystery is discarded’. ‘On the Introduction of rationalistic principles into Revealed Religion’, Essays Critical and Historical (London, 1890), pp 33-34.

4 MS sermon, n 5. Scott, op. cit, pp 378-93.

5 MS sermon, n 14. See MS sermon, n 150: Since Christ does not pledge himself to give temporal blessings as these were promised to the Jews, may ‘God enable us never to pray for worldly blessings but with the addition “Thy will be done”, — but with the limitation “if O Lord it will not interfere with our spiritual interests”.’ — Also MS sermons, n 67, n 103 passim.

6 ‘He has bound the Church together in one visible union and fellowship. He has appointed a certain ordinance for admission into the Redeemer’s Kingdom — even that of baptism. He has bid us, in remembrance of him, meet to eat of one bread and drink of one cup. He has sanctioned our meeting together as stated times to offer prayer and praise with one voice. . . . In a word he has appointed a visible body of a Church’. MS sermon, n 121: ‘On the use of the Visible Church’.

7 ‘Mental Prayer’, preached on 13 December 1829, PPS VIII, 304-16. Quotations are from pp 204, 209-10, 206, 207.


13 MS sermon, n 224: ‘The Liturgy, the service of the Christian Priest’, preached on 31 January 1830 and repeated on 7 October 1832 according to the diary for that day.

14 Especially the remarks about the Roman Catholics having ‘made the Lord’s supper a literal sacrifice to God — and they suppose Christ’s blessed body actually to be present on a real altar — and the priest offers it up, as the Jewish priest offered his sacrifices’, p 23. See, however, *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification* (London, 1908), pp 198-201.

15 ‘And you meet together in this place of worship at set times . . . and to prefigure that final consecration of yourself as His at the last day, when once for all and for ever He who has now begun the good work in you will stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before His Father at His coming with all His Saints’, 29.

16 MS sermon, n 214, fragment on preaching, preached on 1 November 1829, MS sermon, n 290: ‘On the object and effects of preaching’, first preached on 20 March 1831: ‘It is the peculiar office of public prayer to bring down Christ among us; it is as being collected into one, that Christ recognizes us as His. And this, then is the great reason of our meeting together for common prayer’.

17 ‘Intercession’, *PPS* III, sermon 24, preached 22 February 1835.


19 ‘We must not consider the Holy Spirit as uniting us only to Him; the same Divine Agent, also unites us one to another’, MS sermon, n 120, ‘On the Communion of Saints’, preached 27 November 1825.

20 Oratory Archives, A.10.4. 21 *AW*, p 205. Cf also 246.

22 *Letters and Diaries* (LD), IV, 339, 351.

23 *Tracts* 3, 75, 88.


27 *LD*, XXVIII, 34.

28 As examples, see letters to A. J. Hanmer, 10 February 1848, *LD*, XII, 168; to Mrs William Froude, 2 March 1854, *LD*, XVI, 66; to Louisa Simeon, 25 June 1859, *LD*, XXIV, 276.


31 ‘My severance from him [Rogers] and others is a wound which will never heal’. To William Froude, 2 January 1860, *LD*, XIX, 273.


33 To Archbishop Cullen, 8 December 1854, *LD*, XVI, 320; 24 January 1855, *LD*, XVI, p 358.


35 Among notes of Events, preserved at the London Oratory, under the year 1852: ‘Dr Newman stayed in King William Street during the course of the Achilli trial in the Court of Queen’s Bench. He spent almost day and night before the Tabernacle, and his serenity and calmness in the midst of the excitement without were remarkable’. *LD*, XV, 104, n 2.


37 To Lady Chatterton, Holy Thursday 1866, *LD*, XXII, 194.

38 To Helen Douglas Forbes, 4 October 1864, *LD*, XXI, 249.