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Newman’s Faith in a Synodal Church

by Emily Heidick

The Church is dynamic and as the Mystical Body of Christ acts to preserve the unity of the Body. There has not been one way to be the Catholic Church. In medieval times, there were three popes, so councils were used to maintain the unity of the Church. Later, Vatican I proclaimed papal infallibility to preserve the Church despite hesitancy from theologians like John Henry Newman. Today, the Church seeks to listen, and the Church hears that the role of women must be considered. So
often the Catholic Church can seem like a fortress of doctrine. Indeed, in the first millennium, the Church was conceptualized through the monarch model. Yet, in the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries councils acted. Through developing an understanding of the conciliar power of the fifteenth century and the ideas of John Henry Newman, one can have a framework for understanding the dynamism of a synodal Church including the call to reassess the role of women in the Church. For the sake of time and space, this essay will focus on John Henry Newman’s ideas on infallibility connecting to synodality with a brief note on conciliarism to build some context.

Pierre d’Ailly wrote that the Body of Christ must act to protect the Head.¹ In the Middle Ages, the structure of the Catholic Church highly emphasized the role of pope. In reaction to the intrusion of secular rulers, the Church consolidated power around the pope, who could use his power to preserve the Church. The Council of Basel-Ferrara-Florence exemplifies the dynamism of the Church; though the structure of the Church emphasized the power of the pope, councils saved the Church. D’Ailly wrote that councils can be called if the pope was absent and there was an issue of heresy, if the pope were insane, or if there were multiple popes causing disunity in the Church.² Newman later builds on similar requirements for elaborating on doctrine.

First, one must look at the depth of Newman’s faith to understand the framework from which he conceptualizes doctrine. Newman is an exemplar in “his absolute faith in divine providence. Throughout his life, Newman expressed profound trust in the fact that God preserves that which God creates. As a result, Newman believed that God guarantees that the Church accurately preserves and communicates certain truths.”³ Though Newman had different ideas about papal infallibility throughout

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² Oakley, 400.
his life, clearly, he was firm in his belief in God and the Church. ⁴ Some
of this oscillation was due to Newman being part of the Anglican Church
then later joining the Catholic Church, though it should be noted that
his views on papal infallibility did not necessarily directly stem from
his membership of a particular Christian community. All of Newman’s
beliefs, whether Anglican or Catholic, throughout his entire life, then,
stem from this deep faith that God reveals Godself to the Church.

One can look at the development of Newman’s ideas in instructing
how the Church develops ideas “as an incomplete expression of faith
and gradually realizing more adequate expressions.” ⁵ Newman looked
at the early church and Monophysite heresy in particular to make sense
of how the Church develops; “he was convinced that Christianity had
come into the world as a vague global idea, and only gradually found
apt expression for itself in dogmatic propositions. Yet the propositions
were necessary for revelation to maintain itself once certain questions
and objections had been raised. For example, the doctrine of Nicaea on
the divinity of Christ was a necessary response to the Arian heresy.” ⁶
The Church then acted infallibly as “substantive issues of the faith were
at stake; the living Church was expelling from its body a foreign and
unassimilable element.” ⁷ As Newman studied, “research into Athanasius
had proved to Newman that the implicit knowledge of God possessed
by the pre-Nicenes was nothing without the explicit knowledge of the
late Fathers.” ⁸ Colberg echoed, “Newman recognized that the Christian
community gradually found greater and more particular expression in
successive dogmatic propositions.” ⁹ In this way, Newman is instructive
in understanding how doctrine develops over time. The Church cannot
understand the

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⁴ Avery Dulles wrote, “John Henry Newman ran the gamut of practically all the positions on
infallibility that are compatible with a sincere acceptance of a once-for-all revelation of God
in Christ.”
⁵ Colberg, 6.
⁶ Dulles, 440.
⁷ Dulles, 438.
⁸ Benjamin John King, Newman and the Alexandrian Fathers: Shaping Doctrine in Nineteenth-
⁹ Colberg, 11.
present doctrine without understanding what came before, likewise, the historic doctrine is understood considering later theologians. Newman exemplified this profound idea that Christian belief develops which for him stems from a deep understanding that God continues to reveal to the Church. Without a clear understanding and trust that God reveals God’s truth to the Church in the time and context appropriate, one could misunderstand how theology develops. This is not relativism, rather an understanding that the Church is a mystery that will not be fully revealed in any particular space and time. Regarding the language of doctrine King wrote eloquently, “[Newman] always recognized that one way of guaranteeing orthodoxy was to come up with a formula – a word to guard against heresy; but, in the 1830s, he also recognized that to do so limits the richness of doctrinal language.” 10 The Church needs language and doctrine to protect the Body, yet this language and doctrine can change over time because it is not complete. At no one point in space and time does the Church fully comprehend the mystery of God. In this way, central to Newman’s theology is a strong belief that the Church is dynamic. While Newman was far from relativist and stood against liberalism, he also understood that the Church changes.

A clear example of Newman’s understanding of the dynamic Church is his hesitations about promoting papal infallibility. Before Vatican I, Newman believed the Roman Catholic Church was infallible though he oscillated about whether that was a positive fact. 11 Indeed:

Newman accepted the doctrine of papal infallibility when he entered the Roman Catholic Church in 1845, though it was not for him a major reason for his decision. Prior to the definition at the Vatican Council in Jul 1870, he was against the definition of papal infallibility since he held that there was no call, no necessity for it in the Church at that time and that it would needlessly unsettle Catholic consciences and deter converts to Catholicism. 12

10 King, 69.
11 Dulles, 435.
As Newman studied the Monophysite controversy, King said Newman saw himself in those opposed to the pope as “the Pope upheld the truth and the Monophysites rejected it. Researching the Monophysites in 1839, Newman claimed later, he began to think the same was true of the Anglican relation to the Pope today.”\(^{13}\) Newman’s beliefs changed throughout his own lifetime as he continued to study and develop his theology. While Newman believed in papal infallibility, he did not think it necessary for the Church to publish an official doctrine.\(^{14}\) During Vatican I, Newman drew from the example of the Immaculate Conception that had strong support from the people of God before it was instituted by the pope. In this time, Newman did not feel the Body of Christ was ready for the declaration of papal infallibility. This is interesting considering Newman did believe in papal infallibility, though he was perhaps more in tune with the Church’s indefectibility. In conclusion, based on Newman’s deep faith in God sustaining the Church, his belief that Church doctrine develops can be exemplified in his own changing ideas on papal infallibility.

Just as the early church helped Newman develop ideas on the theology of development, Newman can help the Church today develop.\(^{15}\) While one must understand that the genre of Vatican I and of the current Synod are different, Newman is still instructive. Vatican I and previous councils were called against a clear and present danger of heresy, while Vatican II and the Synod on Synodality are for renewal of the Church. This gives more freedom to the Synod to learn from Newman’s theology of development as the Holy Spirit leads. As there is not a clear and present danger of heresy, doctrine can be developed through the lens of how the Holy Spirit is moving now, in the context of history. Though Newman believed in the infallibility of the pope and Church, he counseled discernment and patience regarding the official Church teaching. Newman shows flexibility and discernment to how the Church proclaims beliefs. Likewise, Fr. Timothy Radcliffe stated in a recent webinar that

\(^{13}\) King, 49.
\(^{14}\) Page, 38.
\(^{15}\) King, 50.
doctrine today must emerge. Therefore, the role of women must be deeply considered, and the doctrine discerned for how the Holy Spirit is moving in the Church today. In the Vatican document *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*, “from all continents comes an appeal for Catholic women to be valued first and foremost as baptized and equal members of the People of God. There is almost unanimous affirmation that women love the Church deeply, but many feel sadness because their lives are often not well understood, and their contributions and charisms not always valued.” The global Church is present as women from all over the world seek recognition as members of the Body of Christ. *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent* continued with specifications of the roles of women the Church is asking for in this Body, after careful listening, many reports ask that the Church continue its discernment in relation to a range of specific questions: the active role of women in the governing structures of Church bodies, the possibility for women with adequate training to preach in parish settings, and a female diaconate. Much greater diversity of opinion was expressed on the subject of priestly ordination for women, which some reports call for, while others consider a closed issue.

Through the reading of this document, it is clear that the Body of Christ needs to consider and discern further doctrine on the role of women. What has been done historically is not sufficient evidence for what should be done today. The Church continues to develop over time as the Holy Spirit moves. If the people of God believe that God continues to reveal Godself over space and time, there should be joy instead of fear in continuing to discern how doctrine can develop. Newman wrote to Whitty that “the Church moves as a whole; it is not a mere philosophy, it is a communion; it not only discovers, but it teaches; it is bound to

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18 Francis, sec. 64.
consult for charity, as well as for faith.”¹⁹ Over half of the Church’s communion is women whose lived experiences are indeed not “mere philosophy.” If the Church is to consult for charity, the role and experience of women needs to be amplified.

The Catholic Church has developed over time: from the early church of Acts 1–3 conceptualized through the witness model to Vatican I and the height of the monarch model to the synodal Church of today. This profoundly beautiful fact gives the Body of Christ the freedom to rest in the peace of knowing that the Holy Spirit is moving through the incomplete attempts to understand the mystery of God through doctrine. In this essay, the diametric models of Vatican I and today’s Church have both been used to understand how the Church is dynamic, for even at the height of the Church consolidating power around the pope, Newman had a theology of development. After understanding the context from the Middle Ages that led to Vatican I, one can appreciate Newman’s extensive writings on how doctrine develops. If one has deep faith in the indefectibility of the Church that Newman had, there cannot be a fear of change. The Church has changed and developed over time whether or not one acknowledges it. The mystery of the Church cannot be reduced to the doctrine of one space and time, but is dynamic, discerningly adjusting in response to the Holy Spirit moving through the Body of Christ.

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Bibliography


