

THE OXFORD MOVEMENT

Wonderful is the contrast between the condition of the Catholic Church today and its status a hundred years ago. When the nineteenth century was still young, most of the statesmen of Europe regarded the Holy See as the feeble remnant of a once great political power, while nearly all Protestants considered the Papacy as the work of the Antichrist, and therefore to be shunned like any other evil. Today, the Vatican is a most important factor in the world of diplomacy; and many prominent sects are making friendly overtures for reunion. This reversal of feeling is due to many complex causes, but in the English-speaking world, nothing has done so much to effect it as that event which is known in the religious history of the last century, as the Oxford Movement.

"The Oxford Movement" is the name given to the attempt made by a party of Anglican or Episcopal churchmen in the early nineteenth century to abolish all purely Protestant doctrine which had gradually corrupted the teachings of their Church; to restore the Catholic faith in all its primitive purity as it was to be found in the works of the early Fathers of the Church, and finally, to free their Church from all state control. These men, with Newman at their head, looked upon the English Establishment as "The lineal descendant of the Church of Gregory and Augustine, and through them, of the Church of the Apostles." Accordingly they strove to revive those doctrines which had been almost neglected by the Anglican divines of their day. They believed in "A visible Church with sacraments and rites, an episcopal dynasty descended from the Apostles, and an obligatory body of doctrine found in the Scriptures, but only recognized by the aid of the Church."

To get a clear understanding of this program, it is necessary to review conditions which existed in England prior to 1833. That country was just beginning to feel the influence of the liberal tendency in religion and politics which was the outgrowth of the French Revolution. That movement was avowedly hostile to all religion. Just as it sought the overthrow of the Catholic Church in France and the other continental countries, so in England it aimed to destroy the Establishment. It attacked the Anglican Church internally and from without. Within, was the Broad Church party tinged with materialism,

intolerant of dogma and of authority in religious matters, and regarding one faith as good as another. Without were the Liberal politicians who regarded the Church as a department or servant of the state to be modified or abolished at will. Such were the powerful foes against which the attacks of the Oxford Movement were leveled.

When in 1833 the Liberal party gained control of Parliament, they immediately suppressed ten of the Anglican dioceses in Ireland. This was considered by the Anglo-Catholic party as an act of hostility against religion. War was immediately declared. On July 14, 1833, a day which has been considered the start of the Oxford Movement, John Keble preached his famous sermon on "National Apostasy." The sermon was the summons for all who believed in the Catholicity of the Church to rally to its defense. Among those who answered this call was a coterie of writers and scholars connected with the University of Oxford, from which the movement they were to found received its name. Chief among these men were John Keble, Hurrell Froude, and John Henry Newman. The last named became the leader of the movement, and its subsequent history is intimately connected with that of his life during the next twelve years.

It was Newman who originated the method of defense to be adopted—the publication of tracts or small pamphlets treating on the subjects under discussion. From these, the work has sometimes been called the Tractarian Movement. On his own initiative, Newman published, September 9, 1833, the first three pamphlets which he called "Tracts for the Times." The first of these tracts sounds the keynote of the movement. The clergy are to oppose the government by insisting that their power comes not from Parliament, but from the Apostles, being transmitted to them by the grace of their ordination. In answer to the popular demand, the three initial tracts were soon followed by others that appeared at irregular intervals during the next twelve years. These were not restricted to dogmatic questions but touched on moral and devotional subjects as well.

By the summer of 1835, just as interest in the Tracts began to wane, a new name appeared among their authors, which gave the movement a new impetus and an added prestige. This latest convert to the cause was E. B. Pusey, Canon of Christ Church, a man who possessed widespread influence. Because of this, and because of his great erudition, he became the official

head of the party, though Newman was still regarded as the actual leader and moving spirit. From this time on, the movement was frequently spoken of as "Puseyism."

From the beginning, Newman feared that the movement might tend towards Rome. To check this he insisted on the aspect of the Anglican Church as the *Via Media* between the "formalism and errors of Popery," and the total overthrow by the foreign reformers of traditional Catholicism. His efforts were in vain, for about 1838 distinctly Roman tendencies began to appear among his followers. This was brought about by two causes. The first of these was the publication of Froude's "Remains" in 1838-39, a year or so after the death of the author. In his book, Froude criticized the lack of authority and true sanctity in the Establishment. He wrote: "The worthies of the English Church . . . fell short of the heroic aims, the martial sanctity . . . which was exhibited in Roman Hagiology. . . . The lives of the Roman saints had no counterpart in post-Reformation Anglicanism." Newman and Keble, the editors of this book, in a preface to the second part acquiesced in the sentiments it contained.

Another thing that helped to direct the attention of Newman to Rome, and with him, of course, that of the Movement, was the adhesion of a number of young men who enthusiastically accepted the principles he upheld, but pushing these to the last conclusion, contended that the Church of Rome which they all admired, must be the ultimate end of the movement. The foremost of this party was Mr. William George Ward, Fellow and Mathematical Lecturer at Balliol College, Oxford.

Newman was in a quandary how to pacify the followers of Pusey who had no other purpose than that of reviving the latent Catholicism with the Anglican Church; and at the same time, to keep Ward and his school from going over to Rome. The controversy hinged about the interpretation of the Thirty-nine Articles. This document and the Book of Common Prayer were the principal formularies of the Anglican Church. In them were contained all the doctrines which her ministers must accept and teach. Some of the articles appeared to be anti-Catholic in their meaning, but they were worded so ambiguously that Ward believed they could be interpreted in all essentials conformably to the doctrine and ritual of the Church Universal. He pointed out the evident Catholicity of the Book of Common Prayer, com-

piled from the Roman Missal and Breviary, which had an authority equal to that of the Articles. He also urged that the apparent Protestantism of the Articles was a sop to the Puritan element, so strong in England at that time; while they were so worded that many Catholics who were ready to accept the royal supremacy but unwilling to sacrifice their ancient belief, could subscribe to them without doing too great violence to their conscience. For these reasons, Ward believed that the Establishment was a part of the Catholic Church, and he felt he could belong to its communion only as long as he could hold this theory.

Ward looked to Newman for assurance that his theory was sound, but that leader was himself losing confidence in the validity of his position. His doubts sprang from the study of the ancient heresy of the Monophysites, which he began to investigate about the middle of June, 1839. In the "Apologia" he thus describes the difficulties he encountered: "Here in the middle of the fifth century I found, as it seemed to me, Christendom of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries reflected. . . . The Church of the *Via Media* was in the position of the Oriental communion; Rome was where she now is; and the Protestants were the Eutychians."

An article of Dr. Wiseman in the Dublin Review served to increase Newman's misgivings. It quoted a maxim that made a deep impression on Newman: "*Securus judicat orbis terrarum.*" The meaning of this passage from St. Augustine is, that the deliberate judgment in which the whole Church rests and acquiesces is an infallible prescription and a final sentence against such portions of it as protest and secede. Newman, who had appealed the case of Anglicanism to Antiquity, now found his cause condemned by that tribunal. To quote his own words, "By these great words of the ancient Father . . . the theory of the *Via Media* was absolutely pulverized." From then on, his position was "Rome is the Church and we are the Church; and we need not inquire which of the two has deflected most from the Apostolic Standard."

The crisis in the movement came with the publication of Tract 90, on February 27, 1841. Newman wrote this, intending to keep the extreme party within the Establishment, and to reconcile the conservatives with the views of Ward's school. Though Newman admitted that the Thirty-nine Articles were opposed to "Roman doctrine," he went on to distinguish the threefold

sense in which his expression might be taken. "Roman doctrine," according to him, might mean (1) the Catholic teaching of the early centuries, (2) the formal dogmas of Rome, (3) the popular beliefs and usages sanctioned by Rome, which he called "the dominant errors of Popery." It was only the "innovations" embraced by the third division, he claimed, that were condemned.

At once the Tract encountered fierce opposition. Such a stream of protest poured in on the Bishop of Oxford that he asked Newman to suppress it and to discontinue the "Tracts for the Times." While Newman refused to comply with the first request, he wrote to the Bishop, March 29, 1841, giving up his place in the movement. Ward, and Oakeley, a writer of great influence, assumed the leadership and began to push the Roman tendency of Tract 90 as far as it would go.

Meanwhile Newman had withdrawn to Littlemore. It was here that he received the three blows that convinced him he could no longer be an Anglican. In his retirement he was making a translation of St. Athanasius. In the works of that great saint he read again a condemnation of the Anglican position. "The pure Arians were Protestants, and the semi-Arians were the Anglicans, and Rome now was where it was then." The second blow was the Bishops' strong condemnation of Tract 90. Newman had considered the Anglican bishops as his pope, and had held that their collective judgment was the supreme authority in matters of doctrine. By their condemnation of the Catholic doctrine set forth in the Tract, Newman believed that the Anglican Church stood revealed as a purely Protestant institution, an heretical body to which no true Catholic could belong. The third blow was the consecration of an Anglican bishop of Jerusalem who was to have jurisdiction over Lutherans and members of other Protestant sects there. To Newman, this seemed avowedly acting with Protestants as a Protestant Church.

The movement was fast drawing to an end. In 1844 Ward brought out the book which was the immediate cause of the collapse of the Oxford Movement. This was his "Ideal of a Christian Church." In it he pictured Roman Catholicism as the norm of Christianity, and proceeded to measure the Anglican Church by it. He compared the unity of doctrine and the virile sanctity to be found in Rome, with the divergent and often contradictory teachings of the Establishment, and with the lack of spiritual life in the latter. The conclusion it drew was clear. It made

the Via Media between Rome and Protestantism impossible. No one who claimed to be a Catholic could remain outside the Fold of Peter.

The Oxford Movement perished forever on February 13, 1845. On that day Ward's book was condemned by the Oxford Convocation, an action which put the Establishment on record as rejecting officially all claims to Catholicism and proclaiming herself purely Protestant.

Conversions followed rapidly. Ward, Faber, Oakeley and Newman were soon received into the Church. From then on, many other prominent Anglicans, both lay and clerical, followed their example. Among these was Manning, later to be Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, who was received in 1851. Although he did not belong to the movement he indirectly owed his conversion to it.

Unlike Methodism, that other great religious movement which originated within the Anglican Church, the Oxford party left no organization to perpetuate its aims. With the conversion of Newman, its head and founder, the Tractarian party became extinct, but its influence lives on. It gave to the Catholic Church some of the most eminent men she has produced during the last century: Faber, the great devotional writer; Newman, whose style ranks his books among the classics of our language; and finally Manning, who came closer to sitting on the Papal throne than any Englishman since the days of Adrian IV.

From England, the influence of the Oxford Movement has spread to every land where English is spoken, and everywhere the writings and examples of its leaders have reaped an untold harvest of souls for the Church. Above all, though, it should be remembered as the beginning of that movement for reunion which is being embraced by nearly all sects. The end of this movement cannot be foreseen, but we fondly hope it will hasten the realization of the prayer of Christ, "That they all may be one, as thou Father in Me, and I in Thee."

Books of Reference—John Henry Newman: *Apologia, Via Media, Letters and Correspondence*. Shane Leslie: *Life of Cardinal Manning*. Wilfred Ward: *Life of Newman*, W. G. Ward and the Oxford Movement. Catholic Encyclopedia: Oxford Movement, Newman.

—Bro. John McGovern, O. P.