

The Catholic Church a Witness Against Real Illiberality

by J.H. Newman

The Catholic Church is a witness against real illiberality by insisting on no points but such as are of importance and by demonstrating its tolerance and comprehensiveness.

Scripture: Matthew 7:1, Romans 14:1, 1 Corinthians 12:12, Ephesians 4:1, Colossians 3:12

Topics: "Church Unity", "Christian Tolerance"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the importance of avoiding illiberality of mind in religious matters, emphasizing the Church Catholic's principle of focusing on essential points, judging opinions based on importance, and rejecting party spirit and dogmas. The Church's tolerance and comprehensiveness are highlighted through its acceptance of various opinions within its fold, promoting charitable forbearance and mutual sympathy among its members. Submission to Church authority is presented as a test of unity and preference for the edification of Christ's body over personal preferences, while schism and exclusiveness are condemned as sinful behaviors that go against the Church's teachings.

Transcript

ILLIBERALITY of mind in religious matters, bigotry, intolerance, and the like, is the disposition to make unimportant points important, to make them terms of communion, watchwords of parties, and so on.

Now the Church Catholic acts on the principle of insisting on no points but such as are of importance, of judging of opinions variously according to their respective importance, of acknowledging no parties, and of protesting and witnessing against all party spirit and party dogmas.

One remarkable instance of this is to be found in the circumstance, true as a general rule, and capable of explanation in its apparent exceptions, that it knows no master but CHRIST, as He enjoined. It struck the attention of Christians as early as the age of Athanasius, what is witnessed at this day, that heresies bear the name of individual teachers, whereas the Catholic Faith has no especial human interpreter, but is transmitted on from CHRIST through His Apostles, in every place. Considering, how the names of the champions of all opinions are circulated to and fro by all parties, it is a very surprising fact, that those only remain at this day inseparably connected with the respective doctrines of those who bore them, which belonged to heretics: e g. in spite of all the efforts that have been made, to call the orthodox faith Athanasian, that word occurs, for the most part, only in a transitory page of history, being exchanged for

Catholic by the upholders of the faith, Trinitarian even by its enemies, who, meanwhile, cannot help connecting themselves as Arians, Sabellians, Nestorians, &c. with human masters. In like manner, modern history opens upon us Lutherans, Calvinists, Brownists, Wesleyans, &c., but would be perplexed what title to give to the English Church less respectful than Episcopalian. We have plainly no human master, such as, Melancthon, Bucer, or Cranmer, whatever influence these celebrated individuals might have in their day. We are a branch of the Church Catholic. Not that the absence of such human title is a criterion of Gospel truth; for there were Gnostics of old, and Independents and Quakers now; but that the Catholic doctrine is ever free from this badge of intolerable bondage.

This is shown in the case of the parties within the Church, as well as of the heresies and sects external to it; e. g. the Augustinians, the Jansenists, or the Arminians among ourselves; or in the various monastic orders, as Benedictine, Dominican, and the like. I mean, the tolerance and comprehensiveness of the Church is shown from the fact, that she can afford to receive within her pale varieties of opinion, imposing on its members, not agreement in minor matters, but a charitable forbearance and mutual sympathy. Hence she has been accustomed to distinguish between Catholic Verities and Theological Opinions, the essentials and non-essentials of Christian Faith.

In doing this, she has been guided by the text, spoken against the Pharisees, "Judge not, that ye be not judged;" and while enforcing this command, she both exemplifies obedience to it in her own case, and also becomes herself a test, applied to the hearts of men, to ascertain whether they are bigoted and narrow minded or not. Contrast the text just quoted with 2 John 10, 11. "If any man come unto you, and bring not this doctrine," &c. and you see at once her gentleness and her severity.

Herein lies one eminent argument in favour of the divine origin of the Church, that, by the course it has actually taken, it gives us a clue to reconcile "not judging," with "not bidding God-speed."

Again, the claim of authority with which it silences quarrels, affords, I say, a test, such as we antecedently might expect would be given us, for ascertaining that latent Pharisaical temper of party which our LORD rebukes.

Submission to Church authority is the test whether or not we prefer unity, and the edification of CHRIST'S body, to private fancies.

Thus, e. g. when the man of strong feelings, in old time, merely founded a college or monastery for devotion and study, he satisfied the test. When, in modern times, he opens a conventicle, and forms a sect, he is condemned by it, as Pharisaical.

When the Baptists go so far as to separate, because they think children ought not to be baptized, they fail under the application of it, since the Church, though earnestly enjoining infant baptism, does not exclude from communion those who scruple at it; therefore the Baptists are self-banished. When the Non-conformists separated on account of the surplice, the cross in baptism, &c. they too were detected and convicted of a rebellious spirit, by the same test.

The spirit of Schism, in addition to its other inherent characters of sin, implies the desire of establishing minor points as Catholic or essential points, or the spirit of exclusiveness.

The desire of novelty is restlessness; the maintenance of our own novelty is selfishness.

Zeal is the effort to maintain all the Truth; party spirit is a perverse maintenance of this or that tenet, even though true, yet to the suppression and exclusion of every thing else. "Forte hinc appellata Catholica," says Augustine, "quod totum veraciter teneat, cujus veritatis nonnullae particulae etiam in diversis inveniuntur haeresibus."

While Dissenters are exclusive on the one hand, Papists are so on the other. The Council of Trent converted certain theological opinions into (what they maintained to be) Catholic Verities. This was wrong, whoever did it; but it is some comfort to find, that the body that thus became uncatholic, was not the Church Catholic itself. It had been wretched, indeed, had the Church, in its Oecumenic or Universal capacity, surrendered its own essential character, and added to the Catholic faith private judgments. But the Tridentine Council was a meeting of but a part of Christendom. Though the Latin communion is given at 80,000,000 souls, yet the Greek Churches are said to comprehend as many as 50,000,000, and these were not there represented. Where too were the Bishops of the Reformed Churches? Catholic doctrines are those to which the whole Catholic Church bears witness: the Council of Trent was collected only from parts of the Church, such parts as differed from the views ultimately adopted there being excluded; and, therefore, representing but a part, not the whole of the Universal Church, it assumed a privilege not belonging to it; for none but the Catholic Church can attest Catholic Truths. As to our Thirty-nine Articles, they were never imposed as essential, only as a basis of union in a particular Church.

It may be added, that, while the Catholic Church is a stay to the inquiring Christian, she is a check upon the forward. She recommends much to us, which she does not impose, like a true loving mother, "giving her judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the LORD to be faithful." All that is necessary for enjoying the privileges committed to her, is belief in the Apostles' Creed, and that teachable spirit that does not introduce novelties upon it; but in her Articles and Liturgy she aims at directing into the truth, in all its parts, such as wish "to follow on to know the LORD."

OXFORD,

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