

# Via Media. No. I.

by J.H. Newman

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*The speaker argues that the English Church has departed from the doctrine of the sixteenth century and has adopted practices that are considered Popish.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 4:2, Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Ephesians 4:14, Colossians 2:8, 1 Timothy 4:16, 2 Timothy 4:3, Hebrews 13:8, 1 Peter 5:8, Jude 1:3

**Topics:** "Church History", "Reformation Theology"

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## Description

In this sermon by J.H. Newman, a dialogue between Laicus and Clericus explores the perceived similarities between Protestantism and Popery, questioning whether the Church has deviated from the doctrines of the Reformers. The conversation delves into the need for a potential second reformation, the differences in beliefs between the present day and the sixteenth century, and the importance of upholding the doctrines of the Church amidst changing times. Newman emphasizes the importance of understanding historical context and the gradual progression of doctrine within the Church.

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## Transcript

Laicus

.Â--Will you listen to a few free questions from one who has not known you long enough to be familiar with you without apology? I am struck by many things I have heard you say, which show me that, somehow or other, my religious system is incomplete; yet at the same time the world accuses you of Popery, and there are seasons when I have misgivings whither you are carrying me.

Clericus

.Â--I trust I am prepared, most willing I certainly am, to meet any objections you have to bring against doctrines which you have heard me maintain. Say more definitely what the charge against me is.

L

. That your religious system, which I have heard some persons style the Apostolical, and which I so name by way of designation, is like that against which our forefathers protested at the Reformation.

C

. I will admit it, i. e. if I may reverse your statement, and say, that the Popish system resembles it. Indeed, how could it be otherwise, seeing that all corruptions of the truth must be like the truth which they corrupt, else they would not persuade mankind to take them instead of it?

L

. A bold thing to say, surely; to make the earlier system an imitation of the later!

C

. A bolder, surely, to assume that mine is the later, and the Popish the earlier. When think you that my system (so to call it) arose?—not with myself?

L

. Of course not; but whatever individuals have held it in our Church since the Reformation, it must be acknowledged that they have been but few, though some of them doubtless eminent men.

C.

Perhaps you would say (i. e. the persons whose views you are representing), that at the reformation, the stain of the old theology was left among us, and has shown itself in its measure ever since, as in the poor, so again in the educated classes;—that the peasantry still use and transmit their Popish rhymes, and the minds of students still linger among the early Fathers; but that the genius and principles of our Church have ever been what is commonly called Protestant.

L

. This is a fair general account of what would be maintained.

C.

You would consider that the Protestant principles and doctrines of this day were those of our Reformers in the sixteenth century; and that what is called Popery now, is what was called Popery then.

L.

On the whole: there are indeed extravagancies now, as is obvious. I would not defend extremes; but I suppose our Reformers would agree with moderate Protestants of this day, in what they meant by Protestantism and by Popery.

C.

This is an important question, of course; much depends on the correctness of the answer you have made to it. Do you make it as a matter of history, from knowing the opinions of our Reformers, or from what you consider probable?

L.

I am no divine. I judge from a general knowledge of history, and from the obvious probabilities of the case, which no one can gainsay.

C.

Let us then go by probabilities, since you lead the way. Is it not according to probabilities that opinions and principles should not be the same now as they were 300 years since? that though our professions are the same, yet we should not mean by them what the Reformers meant? Can you point to any period of Church history, in which doctrine remained for any time uncorrupted? Three hundred years is a long time. Are you quite sure we do not need A SECOND REFORMATION?

L.

Are you really serious? Have we not Articles and a Liturgy, which keep us from deviating from the standard of truth set up in the sixteenth century?

C

. Nay, I am maintaining no paradox. Surely there is multitude of men all around us who say the great body of the Clergy has departed from the doctrines of our Martyrs at the Reformation. I do not say I agree with the particular charges they prefer; but the very circumstance that they are made is a proof there is nothing extravagant in the notion of the Church having departed from the doctrine of the sixteenth century.

L

. It is true; but the persons you refer to, bring forward, at least, an intelligible charge; they appeal to the Articles, and maintain that the Clergy have departed from the doctrine therein contained. They may be right or wrong; but at least they give us the means of judging for ourselves.

C

. This surely is beside the point. We were speaking of probabilities. What change actually has been made, if any, is a further question, a question of fact. But before going on to examine the particular case, I observe that change of opinion was probable; probable in itself you can hardly deny, considering the history of the universal Church; not extravagantly improbable, moreover, in spite of Articles, as the extensively prevailing opinion to which I alluded, that the clergy have departed from them, sufficiently proves. Now consider the course of religion and politics, domestic and foreign, during the last three centuries, and tell me whether events have not occurred to increase this probability almost to a certainty; the probability, I mean, that the members of the English Church of the present day differ from the principles of the Church of Rome more than our forefathers differed. First, consider the history of the Puritans from first to last. Without pronouncing any opinion on the truth or unsoundness of their principles, were they not evidently further removed from Rome than were our Reformers? Was not their influence all on the side of leading the English Church farther from Rome than our Reformers placed it? Think of the fall of the Scottish Episcopal Church. Reflect upon the separation and extinction of the Nonjurors, upon the rise of Methodism, upon our political alliances with foreign Protestant communities. Consider especially the history and the school of Hoadly. That man, whom a high authority of the present day does not hesitate to call a Socinian, was for near fifty years a bishop in our Church.

L

. You tell me to think on these facts. I wish I were verse enough in our ecclesiastical history to do so.

C

. But you are as well versed in it as the generality of educated men; as those whose opinions you are now maintaining. And they surely ought to be well acquainted with our history, and the doctrines taught in the different schools and eras, who scruple not to charge such as me with a declension from the true Anti-popish doctrine of our Church. For what the doctrine of the Church is, what it has been for three centuries, is a matter of fact which cannot be known without reading.

L.

Let us leave, if you please, this ground of probability, which, whatever you may say, cannot convince me while I am able to urge that strong objection to it which you would not let me mention just now. I repeat, we have Articles; we have a Liturgy; the dispute lies in a little compass, without need of historical reading:--do you mean to say we have departed from them?

C

. I am not unwilling to follow you a second time, and will be explicit. I reply, we have departed from them. Did you ever study the Rubrics of the Prayer Book?

L

. But surely they have long been obsolete;--they are impracticable!

C

. It is enough; you have answered your own question without trouble of mine. Not only do we not obey them, but it seems we style them impracticable. I take your admission. Now, I ask you, are not these Rubrics (I might also mention parts of the Services themselves which have fallen into disuse), such as the present day would call Popish? and, if so, is not this a proof that the spirit of the present day has departed (whether for good or evil) from the spirit of the Reformation?--and is it wonderful that such as I should be called Popish, if the Church Services themselves are considered so?

L

. Will you give me some instances.

C

. Is it quite in accordance with our present Protestant notions, that unbaptized persons should not be buried with the rites of the Church?--that every Clergyman should read the Daily Service morning and evening at home, if he cannot get a congregation?--that in college chapels the Holy Communion should be administered every week--that Saints' Days should be observed?--that stated days of fasting should be set apart by the Church? Ask even a sober-minded really serious man about the observance of these rules; will he not look grave, and say, that he is afraid of formality and superstition if these rules were attended to?

L

. And is there not the danger?

C

. The simple question is, whether there is more danger now than three centuries since? was there not far more superstition in the sixteenth than in the nineteenth century? and does the spirit of the nineteenth move with the spirit of the sixteenth, if the sixteenth commands and the nineteenth draws back?

L

. But you spoke of parts of the Services themselves, as laid aside?

C

. Alas!....

What is the prevailing opinion or usage respecting the form of absolution in the office for Visiting the Sick? What is thought by a great body of men of the words in which the Priesthood is conveyed? Are there no objections to the Athanasian Creed? no murmurs against the Communion Service? Does no one stumble at the word "oblations," in the Prayer for the Church Militant? Is there no clamour against parts of the Burial Service? No secret or scarcely secret complaints against the word regeneration in the Baptismal? No bold protestations against reading the Apocrypha? Now do not all these objections rest upon one general ground: viz. That these parts of our Services savour of Popery? And again, are not these the popular objections of the day?

L

. I cannot deny it.

C

. I consider then that already I have said enough to show that Churchmen of this day have deviated from the opinions of our Reformers, and become more opposed than they were to the system they protested against. And therefore, I would observe, it is not fair to judge of me, or such as me, in the off-hand way which many men take the liberty to adopt. Men seem to think that we are plainly and indisputably proved to be Popish, if we are proved to differ from the generality of Churchmen now-a-days. But what if it turn out that they are silently floating down the stream, and we are upon the shore?

L

. All, however, will allow, I suppose, that our Reformation was never completed in its details. The final judgment was not passed upon parts of the Prayer Book. There were, you know, alterations in the second edition of it published in King Edward's time; and these tended to a more Protestant doctrine than that which had first been adopted. For instance, in King Edward's first book the dead in CHRIST were prayed for; in the second this commemoration was omitted. Again, in the first book the elements of the LORD'S Supper were more distinctly offered up to GOD, and more formally consecrated than in the second edition, or at present. Had Queen Mary not succeeded, perhaps the men who effected this would have gone further.

C

. I believe they would; nay indeed they did at a subsequent period. They took away the Liturgy altogether, and substituted a Directory.

L

. They? the same men?

C

. Yes, the foreign party: who afterwards went by the name of Puritans. Bucer, who altered in King Edward's time, and the Puritans, who destroyed in King Charles's, both came from the same religious quarter.

L

. Ought you so to speak of the foreign Reformers? to them we owe the Protestant doctrine altogether.

C

. I like foreign interference, as little from Geneva, as from Rome. Geneva at least never converted a part of England from heathenism, nor could lay claim to patriarchal authority over it. Why could we not be let alone, and suffered to reform ourselves?

L

. You separate then your creed and cause from that of the Reformed Churches of the Continent?

C

. Not altogether; but I protest against being brought into that close alliance with them which the world now-a-days would force upon us. The glory of the English Church is, that it has taken the VIA MEDIA, as it has been called. It lies between the (so called) Reformers and the Romanists; whereas there are religious circles, and influential too, where it is thought enough to prove an English Clergyman unfaithful to his Church, if he preaches any thing at variance with the opinions of the Diet of Augsburg, or the Confessions of the Waldenses. However, since we have been led to speak of the foreign Reformers, I will, if you will still listen to me, strengthen my argument by an appeal to them.

L

. That argument being, that what is now considered Protestant doctrine, is not what was considered such by the Reformers.

C

. Yes; and I am going to offer reasons for thinking that the present age has lapsed, not only from the opinions of the English Reformers, but from those of the foreign also. This is too extensive a subject to do justice to, even had I the learning for it; but I may draw your attention to one or two obvious proofs of the fact.

L

. You must mean from Calvin; for Luther is, in some points, reckoned nearer the Romish Church than ourselves.

C

. I mean Calvin, about whose extreme distance from Rome there can be no doubt. What is the popular opinion now concerning the necessity of an Episcopal Regimen?

L

. A late incident has shown what it is; that it is uncharitable to define the Catholic Church, as the body of Christians in every country as governed by Bishops, Priests, and Deacons; such a definition excluding pious Dissenters and others.

C

. But what thought Calvin? "Calvin held those men worthy of anathema who would not submit themselves to truly Christian Bishops, if such could be had." What would he have said then to the Wesleyan Methodists, and that portion of the (so called) Orthodox Dissenters, which co-operates, at present, with the Church? These allow that we, or that numbers among us, are truly Christian, yet make no attempts to obtain Bishops from us. Thus the age is more Protestant now than Calvin himself.

L

. Certainly in this respect; unless Calvin spoke rhetorically under circumstances.

C

. Now for a second instance. The following is his statement concerning the LORD'S Supper. "I understand what is to be understood by the words of CHRIST; that He doth not only offer us the benefits of His death and Resurrection, but His very body, wherein He died and rose again. I assert that the body of CHRIST is really, (as the usual expression is,) that it is truly given to us in the Sacrament, to be the saving food of our souls." ..... "The SON of GOD offers daily to us in the Holy Sacrament, the same body which He once offered in sacrifice to His Father, that it may be our spiritual food."... "If anyone ask me concerning the manner, I will not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too high for my reason to comprehend, or my tongue to express." Now, if I were of myself to use these words, (in spite of the qualification at the end, concerning the manner of His presence in the Sacrament,) would they not be sufficient to convict me of Popery in the judgment of this minute and unlearned generation?

L

. You speak plausibly, I will grant; yet surely, after all, it is not unnatural that the Reformers of the sixteenth century should have fallen short of a full Reformation in matters of doctrine and discipline. Light breaks but gradually on the mind: one age begins a work, another finishes.

C

. I am arguing about a matter of fact, not defending the opinions of the Reformers. As to this notion of their but partial illumination, I am not concerned to oppose it, being quite content if the persons whom you are undertaking to represent are willing to admit it. And then, in consistency, I shall beg them to reproach me

not with Popery but with Protestantism, and to be impartial enough to assail not only me, but "the Blessed Reformation," as they often call it, using words they do not understand. It is hard, indeed, that when I share in the opinions of the Reformers, I should have no share of their praises of them.

L

. You speak as if you really agreed with the Reformers. You may say so in an argument, but in sober earnest you cannot mean to say you really agree with the great body of them. Neither you nor I should hesitate to confess they were often inconsistent, saying, at one time, what they disowned at another.

C

. That they should have said different things at different times, is not wonderful, considering they were searching into Scripture and Antiquity, and feeling their way to the Truth. Since, however, they did vary in their opinions, for this very reason it is obvious I should be saying nothing at all, in saying that I agreed with them, unless I stated explicitly at what period of their lives, or in which of their writings. This I do state clearly: I say I agree with them as they speak in the formularies of the Church; more cannot be required of me, nor indeed is it possible to say more.

L

. What persons complain of is, that you are not satisfied with the formularies of the Church, but add to them doctrines not contained in them. You must allow there is little stress laid in the Articles on some points, which are quite cardinal in your system, to judge by your way of enforcing them.

C

. This is not the first time you have spoken of this supposed system of ours. I will not stop to quarrel with you for calling it ours, as if it were not rather the Church's; but explain to me what you consider it to consist in.

L

. The following are some of its doctrines: that the Church has an existence independent of the State; that the State may not religiously interfere with its internal concerns; that none may engage in ministerial works except such as are episcopally ordained; that the consecration of the Eucharist is especially entrusted to Bishops and Priests. Where do you find these doctrines in the formularies of the Church; that is, so prominently set forth, as to sanction you in urging them at all, or at least so strongly as you are used to urge them?

C

. As to urging them at all, we might be free to urge them even though not mentioned in the Articles; unless indeed the Articles are our rule of faith. Were the Church first set up at the Reformation, then indeed it might be right so to exalt its Articles as to forbid to teach "whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby." I cannot consent, I am sure the Reformers did not wish me, to deprive myself of the Church's dowry, the doctrines which the Apostles spoke in Scripture and impressed upon the early Church. I receive the Church as a messenger from CHRIST, rich in treasures old and new, rich with the accumulated wealth of ages.

L

. Accumulated?

C

. As you will yourself allow. Our Articles are one portion of that accumulation. Age after age, fresh battles have been fought with heresy, fresh monuments of truth set up. As I will not consent to be deprived of the records of the Reformation, so neither will I part with those of former times. I look upon our Articles as in one sense an addition to the Creeds; and at the same time the Romanists added their Tridentine articles. Theirs I consider unsound; ours as true.

L

. The Articles have surely an especial claim upon you; you have subscribed them, and are therefore more bound to them, than to other truths, whatever or wherever they be.

C

. There is a popular confusion on this subject. Our Articles are not a body of divinity, but in great measure only protest against certain errors of a certain period of the Church. Now I will preach the whole counsel of GOD, whether set down in the Articles or not. I am bound to the Articles by subscription; but I am bound, more solemnly even than by subscription, by my baptism and by my ordination, to believe and maintain the whole Gospel of CHRIST. The grace given at those seasons comes through the Apostles, not through Luther or Calvin, Bucer or Cartwright. You will presently agree with me in this statement. Let me ask, do you not hold the inspiration of Holy Scripture?

L

. Undoubtedly.

C

. Is it not a clergyman's duty to maintain and confess it?

L. Certainly.

C

. But the doctrine is no where found in the Articles; and for this plain reason, that both Romanists and Reformers admitted it; and the difference between the two parties was, not whether the Old and New Testament were inspired, but whether the Apocrypha was of canonical authority.

L

. I must grant it.

C

. And in the same way, I would say, there are many other doctrines unmentioned in the Articles, only because they were not then disputed by either party; and others, for other reasons, short of disbelief in

them. I cannot indeed make my neighbour preach them, for he will tell me he will believe only just so much as he has been obliged to subscribe; but it is hard if I am therefore to be defrauded of the full inheritance of faith myself. Look at the subject from another point of view, and see if we do not arrive at the same conclusion. A statesman of the last century is said to have remarked that we have Calvinistic Articles, and a Popish Liturgy. This of course is an idle calumny. But is there not certainly a distinction of doctrine and manner between the Liturgy and the Articles? and does not what I have just stated account for it, viz. that the Liturgy, as coming down from the Apostles, is the depository of their complete teaching; while the Articles are polemical, and except as they embody the creeds, are only protests against certain definite errors? Such are my views about the Articles; and if in my teaching, I lay especially stress upon doctrines only indirectly contained in them, and say less about those which are therein put forth most prominently, it is because times are changed. We are in danger of unbelief more than of superstition. The Christian minister should be a witness against the errors of his day.

L

. I cannot tell whether on consideration I shall agree with you or not. However, after all, you have said not a word to explain what your real differences from Popery are; what those false doctrines were which you conceive our Reformers withstood. You began by confessing that your opinions and the Popish opinions had a resemblance, and only disputed whether yours should be called like the Popish, or the Popish like yours. But in what are yours different from Rome?

C

. Be assured of this--no party will be more opposed to our doctrine, if it ever prospers and makes noise, than the Roman party. This has been proved before now. In the seventeenth century the theology of the divines of the English Church was substantially the same as ours is; and it experienced the full hostility of the Papacy. It was the true *Via Media*; Rome sought to block up that way as fiercely as the Puritans. History tells us this. In a few words then, before we separate, I will state some of my irreconcilable differences with Rome as she is; and in stating her errors, I will closely follow the order observed by Bishop Hall in his treatise on "The Old Religion," whose Protestantism is unquestionable.

I consider that it is unscriptural to say with the Church of Rome, that "we are justified by inherent righteousness."

That it is unscriptural that "the good works of a man justified do truly merit eternal life."

That the doctrine of transubstantiation, as not being revealed, but a theory of man's devising, is profane and impious.

That the denial of the cup to the laity, is a bold and unwarranted encroachment on their privileges as CHRIST'S people.

That the sacrifice of masses, as it has been practised in the Roman Church, is without foundation in Scripture or antiquity, and therefore blasphemous and dangerous.

That the honour paid to images is very full of peril, in the case of the uneducated, that is, of the great part of Christians.

That indulgences, as in use, are a gross and monstrous invention of later times.

That the received doctrine of purgatory is at variance with Scripture, cruel to the better sort of Christians, and administering deceitful comfort to the irreligious.

That the practice of celebrating divine service in an unknown tongue is a great corruption.

That forced confession is an unauthorised and dangerous practice.

That the direct invocation of Saints is a dangerous practice, as tending to give, often actually giving, to creatures the honour and reliance due to the Creator alone.

That there are not seven Sacraments.

That the Roman Doctrine of Tradition is unscriptural.

That the claim of the Pope to be Universal Bishop is against Scripture and antiquity.

I might add other points in which also I protest against the Church of Rome, but I think it enough to make my confession in Hall's order, and so leave it. And having done so, I will ask you but one question. Which says more against Popery, the Articles or I? The only severe words in the Articles being, that "the Sacrifice of Masses" "were blasphemous fables a dangerous deceits;" whereas the "doctrines concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping, and Adoration, as well of images as of relics, and also Invocation of saints," are only called "a fond thing," vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of GOD."

L

. Thank you for this conversation; from which I hope to draw matter for reflection, though the subject seems to involve such deep historical research, I hardly know how to find my way ..through it.

OXFORD,

The Feast of St. James.

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