

Notes on Newman's *Apologia*

Here are a few notes on Newman's great spiritual autobiography, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (*A defence of one's own life*). The aim here is simply to arouse your interest in reading Newman's testimony for yourself if you have not done so already.

I.

Newman cared deeply for truth. On his conversion to Rome, Newman's personal integrity in telling the truth was questioned by the well-known Victorian author and Anglican clergyman, Charles Kingsley (1819-75). Kingsley had a gift for making words bite, e.g. '*Feelings are like chemicals, the more you analyze them the worse they smell*'. On Newman's conversion, Kingsley wrote: '*Truth for its own sake, had never been a virtue with the Roman clergy. Father Newman informs us that it need not, and on the whole ought not to be.*'

In rapid response to Kingsley, and in only a few months, Newman wrote his great *Apologia*, in which he explained what led him to the Catholic Church and how he acted with integrity whether one might agree he chose the right path or not. The *Apologia* had a great success in moving the hearts of Victorian England and in spite of the suspicions Anglicans held for the convert to Rome and the suspicions of his new Catholic brethren-- that Newman might yet be too Protestant and liberal to their taste--the book relaxed shoulders and warmed many to respect the author.

The *Apologia* remains popular and in print today. Throughout the years it has converted many to follow Newman to Rome (or certainly to renew their Christian faith within whatever church denomination they belong). I can testify to two people in my life who point to the *Apologia* as a key to their conversion to Rome—one is an undergraduate friend from Sewanee days and the other is one of my godchildren.

II.

Newman was a wordsmith *par excellent*. When he preached on Sundays from the pulpit of the University Church, Oxford, it was to a packed house of students, dons and townsfolk. His preaching tone is said to have been that of a whisper and yet everyone heard him, listening with great attention and stillness.

G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) is another English convert to Roman Catholicism and one much influenced by Newman. He was a lay theologian, journalist, writer and author of the '*Father Brown*' crime novels. He beautifully summarizes Newman's amazing literary skill with an allusion to the (Kingsley) impetus for the writing of the *Apologia*:

But always his [Newman's] triumphs are the triumphs of a highly sensitive man: a man must feel insults before he can so insultingly and splendidly avenge them. He is a naked man, who carries a naked sword. The quality of his literary style is so successful that it succeeds in escaping

definition. The quality of his logic is that of a long but passionate patience, which waits until he has fixed all corners of an iron trap. But the quality of his moral comment on the age remains what I have said: a protest of the rationality of religion as against the increasing irrationality of mere Victorian comfort and compromise.

What better illustration of the truth of Chesterton's observations about Newman than the words of Newman himself? In this passage from the *Apologia* Newman renders the human condition and our helplessness to save ourselves as persuasively as any early Church father or any Christian apologist since St Paul penned his *Epistle to the Romans*:

To consider the world in its length and breadth, its various history, the many races of men, their starts, their fortunes, their mutual alienation, their conflicts; and then their ways, habits, governments, forms of worship; their enterprises, their aimless courses, their random achievements and acquirements, the impotent conclusion of long-standing facts, the tokens so faint and broken of a superintending design, the blind evolution of what turn out to be great powers or truths, the progress of things, as if from unreasoning elements, not towards final causes, the greatness and littleness of man, his far-reaching aims, his short duration, the curtain hung over his futurity, the disappointments of life, the defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary hopeless irreligion, that condition of the whole race, so fearfully yet exactly described in the Apostle's words, "having no hope and without God in the world"—all this is a vision to dizzy and appall; and inflicts upon the mind the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution.

