

Cardinal John Henry Newman and the Development of Doctrine

by Fr Peter Waters 1998

The 1845 composition, *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, marked a new stage in the development of Newman's own thought. Since 1833 he had made an extensive study of the Alexandrian Church, and through this, had secured the understanding that Christianity possessed dogmatic, hierarchical, sacramental and theological principles. He came to the realization only too clearly that the Fathers, especially St Athanasius, were already teaching, defending and proclaiming the Gospel in new formulae of doctrine. They were engaged in theology in the service of the Gospel and under the guidance of ecclesiastical direction.

In the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Newman expanded the hypothesis he had been slowly establishing. There we find three important categories:

- 1. developments are to be expected**
- 2. an infallible developing authority is to be expected**
- 3. the existing developments of doctrine, are the probable fulfilment of that expectation**

* Newman noted that the whole Bible is developmental in its message and moves from beginning to end in an increasing and growing revelation. For him, this was a powerful analogy, so much so that he could conclude that Christian doctrine admits of "developments contemplated by its Divine Author".

* Given the divine gift of revelation, whereby God communicates himself to man, the appointment of a divinely appointed guardian within revelation itself, is implied. Newman identified this principle of preservation in development as the infallibility of the Catholic Church.

* The fact of Catholicism is accepted universally by those within as well as those outside the Christian fold. It is a fact with well-developed features, presenting itself as a coherently structured organism, which demands either total rejection or complete acceptance. Newman concluded that modern Catholicism is both one with the ancient Church of Alexandria and the genuine heir to the Church of St Ambrose.

For Newman, the theory of development fits with the probability that there will be growth and development in divine truth communicated to this world. He contends that it is the best theory, being the "simplest, the most natural, the most persuasive." It is clear that he is not attempting to explain the process of doctrinal development. His aim was to solve a problem, that posed by the apparent discontinuity between the Church of the apostles and contemporary Roman Catholicism.

The *Essay* was not written to prove the truth of Catholicism, but to answer an objection against Catholicism. It set out to establish that the Church of Pope Pius IX could not be shown to be unreasonable because of development beyond the Church of the Fathers. Newman compared the first six centuries of the Church's life to the then contemporary Church and concluded that the Catholic Church emerged unscathed. It was for him the authentic re-composition of an original New Testament idea into fresh consistency and form.