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BEAUTEOUS TRUTH: LOVE, REASON AND IMAGINATION

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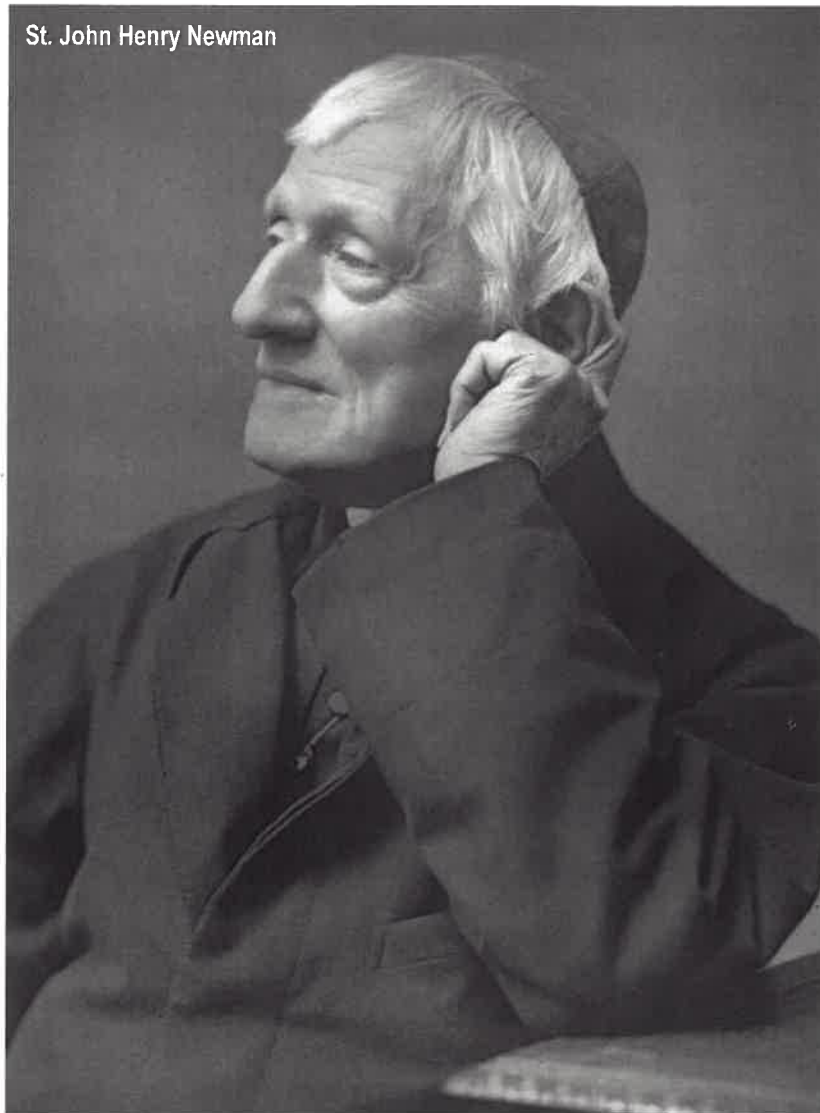


Education and Imagination

Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:12)

Explain a hurricane, but without using science since you believe in God. This challenge from one of my students was just the most obvious expression of a serious problem that lies at the heart of the Church's difficulty in passing on the Faith to this rising generation. They have fundamentally lost a *Catholic Vision*. Christianity is more than just a list of propositions or a list of dos and don'ts. It is "the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction".¹ Far too often we try to teach doctrine without teaching the *Catholic Vision*. We assume, as in earlier times, that the vision is a given, that just growing up in a Catholic household, or even attending a Catholic school means that the Catholic vision of the world has been passed on. But it has not. The culture in which we find ourselves, and in which our children are being formed, possesses a radically different vision. The Christian message and the *Catholic Vision* are completely alien to the prevailing cultural vision. From television to textbooks, from storybooks to YouTube we are being formed in a vision that is fundamentally materialist. The only *real* things, this

St. John Henry Newman



vision says, are those we can see and measure. When the Christian message is preached to this vision it is nothing more than incomprehensible nonsense. A perfectly coherent Christian explanation of the need for redemption, or the importance of prayer, or even the existence of God must sound as ridiculous as the demand to explain a hurricane without science. Given that the fastest growing segment of religious affiliation is those without one, it

seems about as convincing. The incompatibility of Christianity with the world's vision is obvious even to children. While this fact is sobering, I think it also offers us an opportunity to rise to the challenge, to transform our education, and to provide a *Catholic Vision* that can speak to the deficiency in the world's vision and inspire a new generation of saints.

The Imagination

How do we do this? How do we *teach* a world view, a *Catholic Vision*? The short answer is that you do not, in fact that you *cannot*. "First shoot round corners", Saint John Henry Newman says, "and you may not despair of converting by a syllogism".² The *Catholic Vision* cannot be argued or taught in a classroom as you might teach history or science or even as we commonly try to teach religion. It must be *shown and lived*. But *how*? That is the real question. Newman himself shows the way. Though he was a deeply intellectual man, a theologian of the highest caliber, he also recognized the limits of reason to bring us to faith. While acknowledging that faith and reason are not contradictory, he also knew that first principles matter and that we cannot argue someone into or out of these principles. "I cannot convert men, when I ask for assumptions which they refuse to grant to me; and without assumptions no one can prove anything about

anything.”³ This is the situation in which we find ourselves. We cannot convince a materialist the truth of Christianity with even the most astute argumentation. They won’t grant the assumption that we need—that there *is* a reality that we can neither see nor measure. We cannot argue an unbelieving intellect into Christianity, but we can form an imagination in the *Catholic Vision*. The imagination, once formed, will be able to assent to the Christian idea. Not only can we do this, we must, lest the battle be lost.

We cannot love what we do not know,⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas rightly observes, but we cannot know what we cannot imagine. If the imagination is closed off to certain ideas, if our first principles will not grant certain assumptions, then our reason cannot operate upon those ideas and thus we cannot come to knowledge of them. So, to love God we must know Him, and to know Him our imagination must be formed in a *Catholic Vision* of the world, one that admits the possibility of the transcendent. Defining the imagination as a power of the rational soul is difficult. It is part of the intellectual power, certainly, but is not identical to it. Newman notes in his journal, “Imagination is the habit or act of making mental images,”⁵ but exactly what this means he does not really explain. While we might not be entirely satisfied with this as a definition, he helpfully provides a great definition by example in his commentary on the Tamworth reading room where in he contrasts the power of the sciences to influence us through rational inference and the imagination’s power to move the heart. “Deductions have no power of persuasion”, he writes, “The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us.”⁶ The imagination, because it is the bringing of images to our mind, presents us with *realities*. Our imagination does not present us with abstract ideas, but with objects that are concrete, and therefore more easily knowable. We find facts interesting, certainly, but it is the example of those around us that inspires change.

Our own lives are undoubtedly full of such examples. We can all remember a subject in school that was utterly opaque until one particular teacher brought it to life. The ideas she was teaching were the same as those all our previous teachers on

the subject communicated, but it was that one teacher who awoke our *imagination* to the subject, and it became *real*. Our Lord Himself employs this approach to education. When God became man, He did not spend His time writing a book explaining, with all clarity, the doctrines of the Faith. Rather, He spent His time showing His disciples how to live that they might go and set the world ablaze by their way of life as well as by their teaching. This is not surprising for Newman: “It is in human nature to be more affected by the concrete than the abstract.”⁷ This is why the imagination is so important, and why it is essential for Catholic schools to form a *Catholic Vision* in their students. By so doing, we will provide a way to take what can seem at first like nothing more than mere abstraction and make it real and present to the mind.

Cor ad cor loquitur

The formation of a *Catholic Vision* can be accomplished by the living out of Newman’s great motto *cor ad cor loquitur*—heart speaks to heart. Before we can form the head in right *thinking*, we must first form the imagination in right *seeing*. This is done firstly by speaking from our own hearts. “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”⁸ St. Paul VI’s words ring just as true for today’s students. As in the early years of the Church it was the witness of the martyrs that drew people to the Faith, so too in our day we need to lead with witness. Today’s witnesses must capture the imagination of their students, must speak to their hearts before they can speak to their heads. Catholic schools must be places of Christian witness *in order* to be places of Christian learning. If Catholic schools are going to take their faith seriously, then they need to teach not simply sound doctrine, but they must also be marked with the practice of great love, and formation in a Christian way of life. These things are vital to a *Catholic Vision*. From the principal on down, each person a student encounters in their Catholic school should be prepared to give testimony to their own faith and the way that the Lord has worked powerfully in their lives. Our work is one of the formation of hearts and minds in a vision that sees God’s work in the world as real and tangible. The *Catholic Vision* of a world in which, by the miracle of the Incarnation, God works in and through our mundane lives must be at the heart of the entire

school community.

Newman’s motto can instruct us in a yet deeper meaning. As important as speaking from our hearts is, it is even more imperative that we allow our students to be formed by the Master Teacher: Our Lord Himself. We must form our students to let His Sacred Heart speak directly to their hearts through prayer, most especially through that greatest prayer, which is the Mass. At its heart the *Catholic Vision* is a sacramental vision. The Good News is not only that there is a transcendent God, but that He has visited His people and remains with them in their ordinariness. The sacraments, in their physicality, present realities to our imagination, rather than abstractions to our minds. In *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Newman distinguishes between the two kinds of assent our mind gives. The first he calls *real assent*, which is what the mind gives to those things presented to us through the concrete reality of our senses. He contrasts this *real assent* with what he calls *notional assent*, which the mind gives to abstract ideas, or notions.⁹ Of these two kinds of assent, *real assent* is the stronger: “Real apprehension, then, may be pronounced stronger than notional, because things, which are its objects, are confessedly more impressive and affective than notions. . . . Experiences and their images strike and occupy the mind as abstractions and their combinations do not.”¹⁰ For this reason exposure to the sacramental life in a Catholic school is essential, as it provides access to the true and living God. A theology class with its offer of notional knowledge of God can never replace the real experience of God in the Sacraments. This is not to say that the notional is not a real and important aspect of our knowledge, it certainly is. Newman notes, “In either mode of apprehension, be it real or notional, the assent retains its essential characteristic of being unconditional.”¹¹ Nevertheless, the real assent is foundational and must come first. It is the precondition for notional assent. I will never assent to a notion that I cannot imagine being a possibility. When the great author J. R. R. Tolkien writes to his son Michael in 1941 about the great loves and trials of his life he concludes powerfully: “Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament. . . . There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth.”¹² These words do not express a notional knowledge of

the *idea* of God, but a *real* knowledge of God Himself. Tolkien does not present his son with a theological principle to love, he presents him with the reality of Jesus Himself in the Blessed Sacrament. This is exciting, this captures the imagination, and this is precisely what a Catholic school should put before its students. Should they be able to define *transubstantiation*? Certainly. But first, and more importantly, they should be able to echo the words of Tolkien from their hearts.

Servants who can one day become Sons

These considerations lead to the heart of the matter. What is the *point* of Catholic education? Is it simply that our students have a better grasp on secular knowledge than their public school counterparts? That their standardized test scores are above average? That they are good students and *nice* people? Or do we want something *more*? Our goal must be higher. We must form students with a *Catholic Vision*, who really *know* God and their irrevocable call to rejoice with him in heaven. In the *Screwtape Letters* C. S. Lewis puts God's plan for us—

and our students—succinctly: “He wants servants who can finally become sons.”¹³ This is the staggering reality, and the humbling mission of our Catholic schools. If we are to rise to this great challenge, it cannot be with half-hearted attempts. We cannot have kind-of-Catholic schools. If we are to help our students to see the world with a Catholic Vision, our Catholicism must animate all we do. That can only be accomplished by an imagination redeemed.

Justin Shay is a Catholic school principal in Minnesota, where he lives with his beloved wife Ellen. He is dedicated to inspiring the imagination of his students to see aright the Living God.

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7. Newman *Grammar of Assent*, p. 50.

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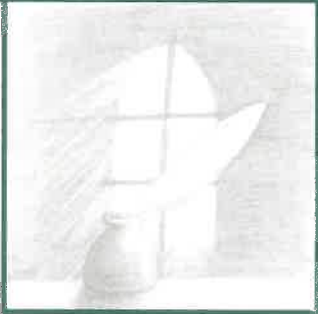
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New Voices

New Poetry in English

Michael Jamieson Williams



Aurora

The sun will still excite the sky
Despite the inky veil of night,
Enrapturing the mortal eye
With glowing tapestries of light.

An emerald yields to azure hue
Then twists into a violet whirl.
From time to time there's crimson, too,
And ghostly swathes of vibrant pearl.

Apollo shuttles burning thread
To weave through Earth's magnetic loom
As west and warp cross overhead
Make dancing fabrics in the gloom.

Uplifted is the human gaze
That will through frosty midnights mark
Ribbons of luminescent rays
Which cast a shadow in the dark.

The rainbow is a candle flame
To this inferno in the heaven;
The sun's monotonous and tame
As through its course it's slowly driven.

