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## CHAMPIONS OF THE LAITY: BROWNSON AND NEWMAN

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*In the post- Vatican II era, the emergence of a multitude of advocates of the rights and privileges of the laity is not at all surprising. More interesting, perhaps, is the defense of the lay state at a time in which most people tended to think of the Church as identical with the clergy. In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, the American layman Orestes Brownson and the English cleric John Henry Newman both perceived the need of a strong laity in the service of the Faith. In the article below, Fr. Ryan records their views, especially as affecting lay efforts to promote the welfare of the Church in the media and in education.*



THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL MARKS A LANDMARK IN THE RECOGNITION AND encouragement the Church has given anew to the apostolate of the laity in the work of the Church. Its official thought on the theme is contained mainly in its “Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity.” (1) It might be called a happy consummation of what had gone before. As the Council was addressing itself to the subject, a layman made the pungent remark, “The lay apostolate has been simmering on the ‘back burner’ of the Church’s apostolic life for nearly two thousand years, and finally the Fathers of this Council moved it up to the ‘front burner’ and turned the heat up all the way.”(2) This, however, should

in no sense imply that the Church did not recognize and encourage the apostolate of the laity in past ages.

In 1960 the Benedictine Monks of Solesmes, France, published a large volume in which they had collected and arranged the various papal pronouncements on the subject.(3) That there was a differing emphasis on the matter from age to age may be true, but the lay apostolate has existed in the Church from the days of Our Lord himself, and great names are scattered all through her history as illustrious lay apostles.

Perhaps, however, there was a waning recognition of the great importance of the laity in the work of the Church in the nineteenth century, due to various factors.(4) At least two great converts to the Church seem to have thought so—Brownson in America and Newman in England. It may be of interest to sample their views on the subject.

### THE DEFENSE OF THE LAY STATE: BROWNSON

It was in an article entitled “Right of the Temporal”(5) in the October issue of his *Quarterly Review* that Brownson felt that it was time for him to say something in recognition or defense of the lay society. He rightly sensed that the article would not be too well received by some, and hence he forewarned against a misunderstanding of the purpose of the article. He told his readers he wished to explain that the high-toned papal doctrine, the strong assertions of the supremacy of the Church as representing the supremacy of the spiritual order, which they had found in the pages of

his *Quarterly*, and which he trusted they would always find there, do not absorb the temporal in the spiritual, or assert the exclusive right of spiritual persons in all things. Catholics had for years fought the battle of authority, he continued, and had at times gone even further than they should, because of the necessity for its full and just vindication, and because it was everywhere decried and resisted. He now intended to do the same for the temporal order, chiefly because he believed the interests of the spiritual order itself require there should be a full, unreserved recognition and assertion of the rights the Church leaves to laymen and lay society.(6)

In this same massive article, which dealt with a multiplicity of topics, he took occasion to express his grievance as a Catholic publicist. In his deep love for the Church he had been freely discussing during his Catholic career the burning questions of the day in an earnest desire to promote the true interests and welfare of the Church. Although he frankly acknowledged that the solution of all such matters closely affecting the Church rests with the clergy, some seemed disposed to deny his right even to offer any thought of his own gained from his own experience and serious reflection. Against this he could not but protest. He felt that he too was a member of the Church and had a perfect right to be genuinely concerned about her best interests. On this score he hit out at his critics on a line of thought that chimes in much better with post-Vatican Council II theology on the apostolate of the laity than thought in his own day. He wrote:

Indeed, we cannot accept the assumption which not the clergy, but some laymen in their name make, that laymen, in matters of religion, can neither know or say anything, that they are wherever the interests of religion are involved, to be counted interlopers or nullities.... No doubt they must work under the spiritual chiefs, but this is not saying that they may not work at all, or that it is not lawful for them to work with intelligence of their own, and with free will, as free moral agents. We know of no law of the Church which exempts us, as laymen, from our obligation to labor for the promotion of the interests of religion, [or] that imposes on the clergy alone the duty of loving our neighbor and

seeking his salvation....

In our age when education and intelligence are not confined to the clergy, and are often possessed in as eminent degree by the laity as by them, when the most notable defenses of Catholic history have been made by laymen, sometimes by non-Catholics, when the controversy between us and our enemies is removed from the sphere of theology, and made in the main a lay question, to be decided by the reason common to all men, rather than by authority, the fullest liberty must be given to laymen, compatible with the supremacy of the spiritual order and the discipline of the Church.(7)

Brownson's thought here on the role of the Catholic laity is remarkably in harmony with that of Vatican Council II. Vatican Council II declared:



*Brownson*

In the Church there is diversity of service but unity of purpose. Christ conferred on the apostles and their successors the duty of teaching, sanctifying, and ruling in his name and power. But the laity, too, share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own role to play in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world.... The laity derive the right and duty with respect to the apostolate from their union with Christ their head. Incorporated into Christ's Mystical

Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by Our Lord himself.(8)

In his deep desire to do what he could as a Catholic layman to promote the welfare of the Church, Brownson continued to involve himself in all the burning questions of the day that related to the Church. In his article in 1862 on "Lacordaire and Catholic Progress"(9) he again insisted on his right as a Catholic publicist to discuss and urge what he could not but regard as promoting the true interests of the Church. The right to do this much, he asserted, is the right of every Catholic, whether cleric or lay, simply holding himself bound in the sphere of ac-

tion to obey the constituted authorities. He was bound to obey the voice of the Church, he said, but not bound to take no thought for the interests of religion and society, or to refrain from expressing honest convictions, when they in no sense impugn Catholic dogma, or what is unchangeable in the constitution of the Church. He added emphasis when he wrote:

There is a mission of genius, of intelligence in the Church, which is not necessarily confined to the clergy, and may be committed to laymen.. .for the Church has a right to the service of the genius, the intelligence, the learning, the good-will, and zeal of all her members, of laymen as well as clergymen. We see nothing unCatholic in this non-hierarchical mission, any more than there was under the Old Law in the mission of the prophets, which was distinct from that of the ordinary priesthood, and, as we may say, extra-hierarchical .... (10)

Here again Brownson's thought is in perfect harmony with that of Vatican Council II. In its "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity" it declared:

An individual layman, by reason of the knowledge, the competence, or the outstanding ability which he may enjoy, is permitted and sometimes obliged to express his opinion on things that concern the good of the Church.... Let it always be done with truth, courage, and in prudence, with reverence and charity toward those who by reason of their sacred office represent the person of Christ.(11)

Orestes Brownson was quite aggressive and militant in character, and the impression might here be given that he was lacking in reverence toward ecclesiastical authority. Just the opposite is true. In discussing this matter he considered it important to say: "The Catholic cause can never be promoted by any anti-hierarchical action. Much good may be done that is not done by or under the direction of the hierarchy but no good end can be obtained in opposition to it."(12) He lived the truth of his own words. He could say without the least fear of contradiction: "Whatever else may be said of us, it cannot be said of us that we have ever refused to demean ourselves before authority, in the first and last instance, as a humble and docile Catholic."(13) In sincerity he added: "We yield to no man in our reverence for the ecclesiastical character, in our respect for authority, or in our willingness to submit to its decisions..."(14)

Perhaps nowhere did Brownson plead more earnestly for a recognition of the role of the Catholic laity than in the field of education. In the year 1862 the status of Catholic education in the country was hotly debated. Brownson had opened the columns of his *Quarterly* to articles critical of that status, and he himself had plenty to say on the subject.(15) At the commencement of St. John's College (Fordham), July 12, 1860, Archbishop Hughes warmly dressed down all those who had been humiliating Catholics before the public by speaking disparagingly of their system of education. But the discussion did not abate. Brownson himself regarded education as a mixed question, partly spiritual and partly secular. The Catholic Church, he remarked, has the unquestionable right of founding, sustaining and managing in its own way schools for the education and training of candidates who are to fill offices in the spiritual society: "But beyond this, education is secular."(16) Yet he found all Catholic colleges of the day under the control of spiritual persons, secular priests, or religious orders or congregations, in which a layman had and could have no authority.(17) This he regarded as an unfair exclusion of the laity from its proper role in the field of education.

Showing remarkable prescience in the matter, Brownson pleaded for such a change in this state of affairs as would allow the Catholic laity their proper place in the management of Catholic colleges and universities. He maintained that the college and the university, though they should work in subordination to the spiritual interests of which the Church is the guardian, are secular institutions. Hence, in all save spiritual matters, they should be under the control of the secular society, or, if under the control of priests and religious, then under their control as agents of the secular society, not of the ecclesiastical. For the primary object of the college and university, save the faculty of theology, should be to meet the wants of a secular society, whether the professors be priests, religious, or seculars.(18) "The Catholic lay society is not a monastery,"(19) he said.



#### EDUCATION AND THE LAYMAN: NEWMAN

Newman's views were fairly similar. When Rector of the Catholic University of Ireland, his attempt to establish a finance committee composed of the laity was

effectively thwarted. Even when he endeavored later to appoint a layman vice-Rector, though it was within his jurisdiction according to the constitutional rules of the university, he was stymied.(20) Later still he was to make a well-tuned plea, when touching upon a pastoral letter of the English Bishops, for a greater consideration of lay opinion in matters concerning Catholic education.(21)

Newman desired greatly that the laity should receive such an education as would adequately qualify them for intelligent leadership in their own province. In his Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England he expressed his hopes and expectations of the laity when he said:

What I desiderate in Catholics is the gift of bringing out what their religion is.... You must not hide your talent in a napkin, or your light under a bushel. I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold, and what they do not hold, who know their creed so well, that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it; I want an intelligent, well-instructed laity; I am not denying that you are such already; but I mean to be severe, and, as some would say, exorbitant in my demands. I wish you to enlarge your knowledge, to cultivate your reason, to get an insight into the relation of truth to truth, to learn to view things as they are, to understand how faith and reason stand to each other, what are the bases and principles of Catholicism .... (22)

Later as Rector of the University of Ireland, Newman stressed the great importance of a cultivation of the philosophy of religion if the new difficulties or objections that had arisen were to be met. This department he regarded as especially suitable to be cultivated by lay writers, directly within the province of those whom he himself was training. In this matter he observed that he had historical precedent on his side. He wrote:

Theologians inculcate the matter and determine the details of revelation. They view it from within; philosophers view it from without, and this external view may be called the Philosophy of Religion, and the office of delineating it externally is most gracefully performed by laymen. In the first age laymen were most commonly the Apologists. Such were Justin, Tatian, Athenagoras, Aristides,

Hermias, Municius Felix, Arnobius, and Lactantius. In like manner in this age some of the most valuable defenses of the Church are from laymen, as De Maistre, Chateaubriand, Nicholas, Montalembert, and others.(23)

Newman continued to show a remarkable sensitivity to the importance of the role of the laity in the Church. But he had few or none among the rulers of the Church in England who sympathized with his views. His own Bishop, William Ullathorne of Birmingham, he found quite insensitive to his views on the matter. He wrote:

A great prelate [Dr. Ullathorne], said to me some years ago, when I said that the laity needed instruction, guidance, consideration, etc. etc: "You do not know them, Dr. N., our laity are a peaceable body-they are peaceable." I understood him to mean: "They are grossly ignorant and unintellectual, and we need not consult, or consult for them at all".... And at Rome they treat them according to the tradition of the Middle Ages, as in "Harold the Dauntless" the Abbot of Durham treated Count Witikind. Well, facts alone will gradually make them recognize the fact of what a laity must be in the 19th century .... (24)

In his original account of this conversation he had with Bishop Ullathorne on the importance of an educated laity ("the bishop not allowing the weight of anything he said"), Newman narrates that Bishop Ullathorne finally said something like, "Who are the laity?" To which Newman replied, in essence, that the Church would look foolish without them.(25) When Newman remarked that "at Rome they treat them according to the tradition of the Middle Ages", he was scarcely referring to the Holy See itself, but rather to some of the officialdom there. Perhaps no one there had a more lowly opinion of the mission of the Catholic laity in the work of the Church than Msgr. George Talbot, Archbishop Manning's henchman in the Eternal City. In a long letter to the Archbishop in April, 1867, after referring to the hotly debated question about a Catholic mission or chaplaincy at the University of Oxford, Talbot remarked: "What is the province of the laity? To hunt, to shoot, to entertain." He proceeded then to give profuse advise to the Archbishop, Primate of England, on how he should rule the Church in England, particularly touching the laity. (26)

In spite of much opposition, Newman's efforts to

provide for the development of an educated laity that would naturally blossom into leadership in its own province gradually prospered. A number of the English gentry and nobility were sending their sons to the University of Oxford in the 1860's, and Newman felt deeply that it might be disastrous for them to be without any spiritual and intellectual guidance in an atmosphere so secular as that of such seats of learning. His dream or hope was to establish a Catholic mission or chaplaincy at the University. But in this he met strong opposition, particularly in the persons of Archbishop Manning, Fr. Herbert Vaughan and Dr. William George Ward. The story is a long one and cannot be told in any detail here.(27) What is called "mixed education" was under the ban and was strongly discouraged. That is why Rome had authorized the establishment of the Catholic University of Ireland of which Newman had become Rector-to keep Catholic youth away from the recently established Queens Colleges. Those opposed to Newman's plan of establishing a Catholic chaplaincy at Oxford professed to fear that his presence there would only draw an increased attendance of Catholic youth-a thing quite undesirable in their view. After a protracted wrangle over the matter, Newman concluded that the Holy Father himself (influenced no doubt by his advisers) had ruled against his plan. He wrote in April, 1865: "This morning I have made up my mind, as the only way of explaining the way in which all the bishops but two turned round, that the extinguisher on Oxford was the pope's own act. If so, we may at once reconcile ourselves to it. Another pontiff in another generation may reverse it." To this Wilfrid Ward adds: "The year 1893-three years after Newman had passed away-saw the realization, under the pontificate of Leo XIII, of the hope expressed in this letter."(28)

Archbishop Manning, in 1867, discussed the formation of a Catholic University College at Kensington apparently for the purpose of filling the vacuum in the

field of higher Catholic education. Fr. Weld, S.J., his representative, sought Newman's cooperation. While Newman could not of course but approve any attempt to supply for Catholic education under Catholic auspices, there were features in Manning's plan that made him hesitate. His foremost objection was the likely exclusion of laymen from any management of the University College. Fr. Weld in his interview with Newman had implied that at least some of the professors were to be Jesuits. This was not acceptable to Newman. "Of this I am resolved," he said, "I will have nothing to do with the plan unless the professors are lay."(29) From the views expressed by Fr. Weld, Newman could only conclude that the proposed University College was to be half college and half Jesuit novitiate. It turned out to be an utter failure.

## PROPHETS OF THE AGE

These two intellectual giants, Brownson in America and Newman in England, anticipated the significance of the Church's "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity" promulgated at Vatican Council II. The Decree treated its subject elaborately from every possible angle and stressed the additional importance of the role of the laity in an age of new problems and new errors. It declared:

Since, in this age of ours, new problems are arising and extremely serious errors are gaining currency which tend to undermine the foundations of religion, the moral order, and human society itself, this sacred Synod earnestly exhorts laymen, each according to his natural gifts, and learning, to be more diligent in doing their part according to the mind of the Church, to explain and defend Christian principles, and to apply them rightly to the problems of our era.... Modern conditions demand that their apostolic activity be more intense and broader.(30)



## NOTES

1 Walter Abbott, S.J., *Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1960, pp.486-525.

2 Abbott, S.J., *ut supra*.

3 *Papal Teachings on the Lay Apostolate*, selected and arranged by the Benedictine Monks of Solesmes (translated by a secular priest). St. Paul edition (Jamaica Plain, Boston, 30, Mass., 1960).

4 One of the worst evils that afflicted the Church in America in the early part of the nineteenth century was lay trusteeism. It was an unlawful interference in ecclesiastical affairs by groups of laymen here and there in the country. Its results were truly disastrous, especially in the diocese of Charleston, South Carolina, and St. Mary's parish in Philadelphia. This evil could not but operate at the time against a full and frank recognition of the active role of the laity in the Church.

5 Brownson's *Works*, v. XII, pp.376 ff. Brownson's son Henry collected and arranged his father's main writings in 20 volumes in the years 1882-1887. Henry himself was the publisher, Detroit, Michigan. Henry also published a three volume Life of his father: *Orestes A. Brownson's Early Life, 1803-1844* (Detroit, Henry F. Brownson, Publisher, 1898); *Orestes A. Brownson's Middle Life, 1845-1855* (Detroit: Henry F. Brownson, Publisher, 1899); *Orestes A. Brownson's Latter Life, 1856-1876* (Detroit: Henry F. Brownson Publisher, 1900).

6 *Ibid.* p.404.

7 *Ibid.* pp.382-384.

8 Abbott, *ut supra*, pp.491,492.

9 *Works*, v.XX, pp.249-278.

10 *Ibid.*, pp.270,271.

11 Abbott, *ut supra*, p.64.

12 *Works*, v.XX, p.218.

13 *Ibid.*, 219.

14 *Ibid.*, p.167.

15 Brownson did not wantonly intrude himself into the discussion on Catholic education. He was invited, even strongly urged, to give his views on the subject by one of the Archbishops of the country at the time (probably Hughes). "Rights of the Temporal," *Works*, v.XII, p.403. 16 *Works*, v.XII, pp.399, 400.

17 *Ibid.*, p.400.

18 *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, "Conversations of Our Club," October, 1858, pp. 446, 447; also *Works*, v. XXI, p.400.

19 *Works*, v. XII, p.385.

20 F. McGrath, *Newman's University, Idea and Reality* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1951), pp.444, 447.

21 Josef Altholz, *The Liberal Catholic Movement in England, The Rambler and its Contributors, 1848-1864* (London: Burns and Oates, 1962), p.101. 22 John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., Sixth edition, 1889), pp-390, 391.

23 Wilfrid Ward, *The Life and Times of John Henry Newman* (London: Longmans. Green, and Co., 1912), v.1, pp.396, 397.

24 *Ibid.*, v.II, p.69.

25 *Ibid.*, v.I, p.497.

26 *Ibid.*, v.II, p.147.

27 The full story can be found in Ward's *Life of Newman*, v. II, chapters XXI, XXIV, and XXV.

28 *Ibid.*, v.II, p.71.

29 *Ibid.*, v.II, pp.195-197.

30 Abbott, *ut supra*, pp.496, 488.