

**John Henry Newman**

## *An Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent*

### **§ 2. Belief in the Holy Trinity**

...now I turn to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, with the purpose of investigating in like manner how far it belongs to theology, how far to the faith and devotion of the individual; how far the propositions enunciating it are confined to the expression of intellectual notions, and how far they stand for things also, and admit of that assent which we give to objects presented to us by the imagination. And first I have to state what our doctrine is.

No one is to be called a Theist, who does not believe in a Personal God, whatever difficulty there may be in defining the word "Personal." Now it is the belief of Catholics about the Supreme Being, that this essential characteristic of His Nature is reiterated in three distinct ways or modes; so that the Almighty God, instead of being One Person only, which is the teaching of Natural Religion, has Three Personalities, and is at once, according as we view him in the one or the other of them, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—a Divine Three, who bear towards Each Other the several relations which those names indicate, and are {125} in that respect distinct from Each Other, and in that alone.

This is the teaching of the Athanasian Creed; viz. that the One Personal God, who is not a logical or physical unity, but a Living *Monas*, more really one even than an individual man is one—He ("unus," not "unum," because of the inseparability of His Nature and Personality),—He at once is Father, is Son, is Holy Ghost, Each of whom is that One Personal God in the fulness of His Being and Attributes; so that the Father is all that is meant by the word "God," as if we knew nothing of Son, or of Spirit; and in like manner the Son and the Spirit are Each by Himself all that is meant by the word, as if the Other Two were unknown; moreover, that by the word "God" is meant nothing over and above what is meant by "the Father," or by "the Son," or by "the Holy Ghost;" and that the Father is in no sense the Son, nor the Son the Holy Ghost, nor the Holy Ghost the Father. Such is the prerogative of the Divine Infinitude, that that One and Single Personal Being,

the Almighty God, is really Three, while He is absolutely One.

Indeed, the Catholic dogma may be said to be summed up in this very formula, on which St. Augustine lays so much stress, "Tres et Unus," not merely "Unum;" hence that formula is the key-note, as it may be called, of the Athanasian Creed. In that Creed we testify to the Unus Increatus, to the Unus Immensus, Omnipotens, Deus, and Dominus; yet Each of the Three also is by Himself Increatus, Immensus, Omnipotens, for Each is that One God, though Each is not the Other; {126} Each, as is intimated by Unus Increatus, is the One Personal God of Natural Religion.

That this doctrine, thus drawn out, is of a notional character, is plain; the question before me is whether in any sense it can become the object of real apprehension, that is, whether any portion of it may be considered as addressed to the imagination, and is able to exert that living mastery over the mind, which is instanced as I have shown above, as regards the proposition, "There is a God."

"There is a God," when really apprehended, is the object of a strong energetic adhesion, which works a revolution in the mind; but when held merely as a notion, it requires but a cold and ineffective acceptance, though it be held ever so unconditionally. Such in its character is the assent of thousands, whose imaginations are not at all kindled, nor their hearts inflamed, nor their conduct affected, by the most august of all conceivable truths. I ask, then, as concerns the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, such as I have drawn it out to be, is it capable of being apprehended otherwise than notionally? Is it a theory, undeniable indeed, but addressed to the student, and to no one else? Is it the elaborate, subtle, triumphant exhibition of a truth, completely developed, and happily adjusted, and accurately balanced on its centre, and impregnable on every side, as a scientific view, "totus, teres, atque rotundus," challenging all assailants, or, on the other hand, does it come to the unlearned, the young, the busy, and the afflicted, as a fact which is to arrest them, penetrate them, and to support and animate them in their passage through life? {127} That is, does it admit of being held in the imagination, and being embraced with a real assent? I maintain it does, and that it is the normal faith which every Christian has, on which he is stayed, which is his spiritual life, there being nothing in the exposition of the dogma, as I have given it above, which does not address the imagination, as well as the intellect.

Now let us observe what is not in that exposition;— there are no scientific terms in it. I will not allow that "Personal" is such, because it is a word in common use, and though it cannot mean precisely the same when used of God as when it is used of man, yet it is sufficiently explained by that common use, to allow of its being intelligibly applied to the Divine Nature. The other words, which occur in the above account of the doctrine,—Three, One, He, God, Father, Son, Spirit,— are none of them words peculiar to theology, have all a popular meaning, and are used according to that obvious and popular meaning, when introduced into the Catholic dogma. No human words indeed are worthy of the Supreme Being, none are adequate; but we have no other words to use but human, and those in question are among the simplest and most intelligible that are to be found in language.

There are then no terms in the foregoing exposition which do not admit of a plain sense, and they are there used in that sense; and, moreover, that sense is what I have called real, for the words in their ordinary use stand for things. The words, Father, Son, Spirit, He, One, and the rest, are not abstract terms, but concrete, and adapted to excite images. And these words thus {128} simple and clear, are embodied in simple, clear, brief, categorical propositions. There is nothing abstruse either in the terms themselves, or in their setting. It is otherwise of course with formal theological treatises on the subject of the dogma. There we find such words as substance, essence, existence, form, subsistence, notion, circumincession; and, though these are far easier to understand than might at first sight be thought, still they are doubtless addressed to the intellect, and can only command a notional assent.

It will be observed also that not even the words "mysteriousness" and "mystery" occur in the exposition which I have above given of the doctrine; I omitted them, because they are not parts of the Divine Verity as such, but in relation to creatures and to the human intellect; and because they are of a notional character. It is plain of course even at first sight that the doctrine is an inscrutable mystery, or has an inscrutable mysteriousness; few minds indeed but have theology enough to see this; and if an educated man, to whom it is presented, does not perceive that mysteriousness at once, that is a sure token that he does not rightly apprehend the propositions which contain the doctrine. Hence it follows that the thesis "the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in Unity is mysterious" is indirectly an article of faith. But such an article, being a reflection made upon a revealed truth in an inference, expresses a notion, not a thing. It does not relate to the

direct apprehension of the object, but to a judgment of our reason upon the object. Accordingly the mysteriousness of the doctrine is not, strictly speaking, {129} intrinsic to it, as it is proposed to the religious apprehension, though in matter of fact a devotional mind, on perceiving that mysteriousness, will lovingly appropriate it, as involved in the divine revelation; and, as such a mind turns all thoughts which come before it to a sacred use, so will it dwell upon the Mystery of the Trinity with awe and veneration, as a truth befitting, so to say, the Immensity and Incomprehensibility of the Supreme Being.

However, I do not put forward the mystery as the direct object of real or religious apprehension; nor again, the complex doctrine (when it is viewed, *per modum unius*, as one whole), in which the mystery lies. Let it be observed, it is possible for the mind to hold a number of propositions either in their combination as one whole, or one by one; one by one, with an intelligent perception indeed of all, and of the general direction of each towards the rest, yet of each separately from the rest, for its own sake only, and not in connexion and one with the rest. Thus I may know London quite well, and find my way from street to street in any part of it without difficulty, yet be quite unable to draw a map of it. Comparison, calculation, cataloguing, arranging, classifying, are intellectual acts subsequent upon, and not necessary for, a real apprehension of the things on which they are exercised. Strictly speaking then, the dogma of the Holy Trinity, as a complex whole, or as a mystery, is not the formal object of religious apprehension and assent; but as it is a number of propositions, taken one by one. That complex whole also is the object of assent, but it is the notional object; {130} and when presented to religious minds, it is received by them notionally; and again implicitly, viz. in the real assent which they give to the word of God as conveyed to them through the instrumentality of His Church. On these points it may be right to enlarge.

Of course, as I have been saying, a man of ordinary intelligence will be at once struck with the apparent contrariety between the propositions one with another which constitute the Heavenly Dogma, and, by reason of his spontaneous activity of mind and by an habitual association, he will be compelled to view the Dogma in the light of that contrariety,—so much so, that to hold one and all of these separate propositions will be to such a man all one with holding the mystery, as a mystery; and in consequence he will so hold it;—but still, I say, so far he will hold it only with a notional apprehension. He will accurately take in the meaning of each of the dogmatic

propositions in its relation to the rest of them, combining them into one whole and embracing what he cannot realize, with an assent, notional indeed, but as genuine and thorough as any real assent can be. But the question is whether a real assent to the mystery, as such, is possible; and I say it is not possible, because, though we can image the separate propositions, we cannot image them altogether. We cannot, because the mystery transcends all our experience; we have no experiences in our memory which we can put together, compare, contrast, unite, and thereby transmute into an image of the Ineffable Verity;—certainly; but what *is* in some degree a matter of experience, what *is* presented for the imagination, the affections, the devotion, the {131} spiritual life of the Christian to repose upon with a real assent, what stands for things, not for notions only, is each of those propositions taken one by one, and that, not in the case of intellectual and thoughtful minds only, but of all religious minds whatever, in the case of a child or a peasant, as well as of a philosopher.

This is only one instance of a general principle which holds good in all such real apprehension as is possible to us, of God and His Attributes. Not only do we see Him at best only in shadows, but we cannot bring even those shadows together, for they flit to and fro, and are never present to us at once. We can indeed combine the various matters which we know of Him by an act of the intellect, and treat them theologically, but such theological combinations are no objects for the imagination to gaze upon. Our image of Him never is one, but broken into numberless partial aspects, independent each of each. As we cannot see the whole starry firmament at once, but have to turn ourselves from east to west, and then round to east again, sighting first one constellation and then another, and losing these in order to gain those, so it is, and much more, with such real apprehensions as we can secure of the Divine Nature. We know one truth about Him and another truth,—but we cannot image both of them together; we cannot bring them before us by one act of the mind; we drop the one while we turn to take up the other. None of them are fully dwelt on and enjoyed, when they are viewed in combination. Moreover, our devotion is tried and confused by the long list of propositions which theology is obliged to draw up, by the limitations, {132} explanations, definitions, adjustments, balancings, cautions, arbitrary prohibitions, which are imperatively required by the weakness of human thought and the imperfections of human languages. Such exercises of reasoning indeed do but increase and harmonize our notional apprehension of the dogma, but they add little to the luminousness and vital force with which its separate propositions come home to our imagination, and if they are necessary, as they certainly

are, they are necessary not so much for faith, as against unbelief.

Break a ray of light into its constituent colours, each is beautiful, each may be enjoyed; attempt to unite them, and perhaps you produce only a dirty white. The pure and indivisible Light is seen only by the blessed inhabitants of heaven; here we have but such faint reflections of it as its diffraction supplies; but they are sufficient for faith and devotion. Attempt to combine them into one, and you gain nothing but a mystery, which you can describe as a notion, but cannot depict as an imagination. And this, which holds of the Divine Attributes, holds also of the Holy Trinity in Unity. And hence, perhaps, it is that the latter doctrine is never spoken of as a Mystery in the sacred book, which is addressed far more to the imagination and affections than to the intellect. Hence, too, what is more remarkable, in the Creeds the dogma is not called a mystery; not in the Apostles' nor the Nicene, nor even in the Athanasian. The reason seems to be, that the Creeds have a place in the Ritual; they are devotional acts, and of the nature of prayers, addressed to God; and, in such addresses, to {133} speak of intellectual difficulties would be out of place. It must be recollected especially that the Athanasian Creed has sometimes been called the "*Psalmus Quicumque*." It is not a mere collection of notions, however momentous. It is a psalm or hymn of praise, of confession, and of profound, self-prostrating homage, parallel to the canticles of the elect in the Apocalypse. It appeals to the imagination quite as much as to the intellect. It is the war-song of faith, with which we warn, first ourselves, then each other, and then all those who are within its hearing, and the hearing of the Truth, who our God is, and how we must worship Him, and how vast our responsibility will be, if we know what to believe, and yet believe not. It is

"The Psalm that gathers in one glorious lay  
All chants that e'er from heaven to earth found way;  
Creed of the Saints, and Anthem of the Blest,  
And calm-breathed warning of the kindest love  
That ever heaved a wakeful mother's breast,"

For myself, I have ever felt it as the most simple and sublime, the most devotional formulary to which Christianity has given birth, more so even than the *Veni Creator* and the *Te Deum*. Even the antithetical form of its sentences, which is a stumbling-block to so many, as seeming to force, and to exult in forcing a mystery upon recalcitrating minds, has to my apprehension, even

notionally considered, a very different drift. It is intended as a check upon our reasonings, lest they rush on in one direction beyond the limits of the truth, and it turns them back into the opposite direction. Certainly it implies a glorying in the {134} Mystery; but it is not simply a statement of the Mystery for the sake of its mysteriousness.

What is more remarkable still, a like silence as to the mysteriousness of the doctrine is observed in the successive definitions of the Church concerning it. Confession after confession, canon after canon is drawn up in the course of centuries; Popes and Councils have found it their duty to insist afresh upon the dogma; they have enunciated it in new or additional propositions; but not even in their most elaborate formularies do they use the word "mystery," as far as I know. The great Council of Toledo pursues the scientific ramifications of the doctrine, with the exact diligence of theology, at a length four times that of the Athanasian Creed; the fourth Lateran completes, by a final enunciation, the development of the sacred doctrine after the mind of St. Augustine; the Creed of Pope Pius IV. prescribes the general rule of faith against the heresies of these latter times; but in none of them do we find either the word "mystery," or any suggestion of mysteriousness.

Such is the usage of the Church in its dogmatic statements concerning the Holy Trinity, as if fulfilling the maxim, "Lex orandi, lex credendi." I suppose it is founded on a tradition, because the custom is otherwise as regards catechisms and theological treatises. These belong to particular ages and places, and are addressed to the intellect. In them, certainly, the mysteriousness of the doctrine is almost uniformly insisted on. But, however this contrast of usage is {135} to be explained, the Creeds are enough to show that the dogma may be taught in its fulness for the purposes of popular faith and devotion without directly insisting on that mysteriousness, which is necessarily involved in the combined view of its separate propositions. That systematized whole is the object of notional assent, and its propositions, one by one, are the objects of real.

To show this in fact, I will enumerate the separate propositions of which the dogma consists. They are nine, and stand as follows:—

1. There are Three who give testimony in heaven, the Father, the Word or Son, and the Holy Spirit.

2. From the Father is, and ever has been, the Son.

3. From the Father and Son is, and ever has been, the Spirit.

4. The Father is the One Eternal Personal God. 5. The Son is the One Eternal Personal God. 6. The Spirit is the One Eternal Personal God.

7. The Father is not the Son. 8. The Son is not the Holy Ghost. 9. The Holy Ghost is not the Father.

Now I think it is a fact, that, whereas these nine propositions contain the Mystery, yet, taken, not as a whole, but separately, each by itself, they are not only apprehensible, but admit of a real apprehension.

Thus, for instance, if the proposition "There is One who bears witness of Himself," or "reveals Himself," would admit of a real assent, why does not also the proposition "There are Three who bear witness"?

Again, if the word "God" may create an image in {136} our minds, why may not the proposition "The Father is God"? or again, "The Son," or "The Holy Ghost is God"?

Again, to say that "the Son is other than the Holy Ghost," or "neither Son nor Holy Ghost is the Father," is not a simple negative, but also a declaration that Each of the Divine Three by Himself is complete in Himself, and simply and absolutely God as though the Other Two were not revealed to us.

Again, from our experience of the works of man, we accept with a real apprehension the proposition "The Angels are made by God," correcting the word "made," as is required in the case of a creating Power, and a spiritual work:—why then may we not in like matter refine and elevate the human analogy, yet keep the image, when a Divine Birth is set before us in terms which properly belong to what is human and earthly? If our experience enables us to apprehend the essential fact of sonship, as being a communication of being and of nature from one to another, why should we not thereby in a certain measure realize the proposition "The Word is the Son of God"?

Again, we have abundant instances in nature of the general law of one thing coming from another

or from others:—as the child issues in the man as his quasi successor, and the child and the man issue in the old man, like them both, but not the same, so different as almost to have a fresh personality distinct from each, so we may form some image, however vague, of the procession of the Holy Spirit from Father and Son. This is what I should say of the propositions which I {137} have numbered two and three, which are the least susceptible of a real assent out of the nine.

So much at first sight; but the force of what I have been saying will be best understood, by considering what Scripture and the Ritual of the Church witness in accordance with it. In referring to these two great store-houses of faith and devotion, I must premise, as when I spoke of the Being of a God, that I am not proving by means of them the dogma of the Holy Trinity, but using the one and the other in illustration of the action of the separate articles of that dogma upon the imagination, though the complex truth, in which, when combined, they issue, is not in sympathy or correspondence with it, but altogether beyond it; and next of the action and influence of those separate articles, by means of the imagination, upon the affections and obedience of Christians, high and low.

This being understood, I ask what chapter of St. John or St. Paul is not full of the Three Divine Names, introduced in one or other of the above nine propositions, expressed or implied, or in their parallels, or in parts or equivalents of them? What lesson is there given us by these two chief writers of the New Testament, which does not grow out of Their Persons and Their Offices? At one time we read of the grace of the Second Person, the love of the First, and the communication of the Third; at another we are told by the Son, "I will pray the Father, and He will send you another Paraclete;" and then, "All that the Father hath are Mine; the Paraclete shall receive of Mine." {138} Then again we read of "the foreknowledge of the Father, the sanctification of the Spirit, the Blood of Jesus Christ;" and again we are to "pray in the Holy Ghost, abide in the love of God, and look for the mercy of Jesus." And so, in like manner, to Each, in one passage or another, are ascribed the same titles and works: Each is acknowledged as Lord; Each is eternal; Each is Truth; Each is Holiness; Each is all in all; Each is Creator; Each wills with a supreme Will; Each is the Author of the new birth; Each speaks in His ministers; Each is the Revealer; Each is the Lawgiver; Each is the Teacher of the elect; in Each the elect have fellowship; Each leads them on; Each raises them from the dead. What is all this, but "the Father Eternal, the Son Eternal, and the Holy Ghost Eternal; the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost Omnipotent; the Father,

Son, and Holy Ghost God," of the Athanasian Creed? And if the New Testament be, as it confessedly is, so real in its teaching, so luminous, so impressive, so constraining, so full of images, so sparing in mere notions, whence is this but because, in its references to the Object of our supreme worship, it is ever ringing the changes (so to say) on the nine propositions which I have set down, and on the particular statements into which they may be severally resolved?

Take one of them as an instance, viz. the dogmatic sentence "The Son is God." What an illustration of the real assent which can be given to this proposition, and its power over our affections and emotions, is the first half of the first chapter of St. {139} John's gospel! or again the vision of our Lord in the first chapter of the Apocalypse! or the first chapter of St. John's first Epistle! Again, how burning are St. Paul's words when he speaks of our Lord's crucifixion and death! what is the secret of that flame, but this same dogmatic sentence, "The Son is God"? why should the death of the Son be more awful than any other death, except that He though man, was God? And so, again, all through the Old Testament, what is it which gives an interpretation and a persuasive power to so many passages and portions, especially of the Psalms and the Prophets, but this same theological formula, "The Messiah is God," a proposition which never could thus vivify in the religious mind the letter of the sacred text, unless it appealed to the imagination, and could be held with a much stronger assent than any that is merely notional.

This same power of the dogma may be illustrated from the Ritual. Consider the services for Christmas or Epiphany; for Easter, Ascension, and (I may say) pre-eminently Corpus Christi; what are these great Festivals but comments on the words, "The Son is God"? Yet who will say that they have the subtlety, the aridity, the coldness of mere scholastic science? Are they addressed to the pure intellect, or to the imagination? do they interest our logical faculty, or excite our devotion? Why is it that personally we often find ourselves so ill-fitted to take part in them, except that we are not good enough, that in our case the dogma is far too much a theological notion, far too {140} little an image living within us? And so again, as to the Divinity of the Holy Ghost: consider the breviary offices for Pentecost and its Octave, the grandest, perhaps in the whole year; are they created out of mere abstractions and inferences, or what are sometimes called metaphysical distinctions, or has not the categorical proposition of St. Athanasius, "The Holy Ghost is God," such a place in the imagination and the heart, as suffices to give birth to the noble Hymns, *Veni Creator*, and *Veni Sancte Spiritus*?

I sum up then to the same effect as in the preceding Section. Religion has to do with the real, and the real is the particular; theology has to do with what is notional, and the notional is the general and systematic. Hence theology has to do with the Dogma of the Holy Trinity as a whole made up of many propositions; but Religion has to do with each of those separate propositions which compose it, and lives and thrives in the contemplation of them. In them it finds the motives for devotion and faithful obedience; while theology on the other hand forms and protects them by virtue of its function of regarding them, not merely one by one, but as a system of truth.

One other remark is in place here. If the separate articles of the Athanasian Creed are so closely connected with vital and personal religion as I have shown them to be, if they supply motives on which a man may act, if they determine the state of mind, the special thoughts, affections, and habits, which he carries with him from this world to the next, is there cause to wonder, that the Creed should proclaim aloud, that { 141 } those who are not internally such as Christ, by means of it, came to make them, are not capable of the heaven to which He died to bring them? Is not the importance of accepting the dogma the very explanation of that careful minuteness with which the few simple truths which compose it are inculcated, are reiterated, in the Creed? And shall the Church of God, to whom "the dispensation" of the Gospel is committed, forget the concomitant obligation, "Woe is unto me if I preach not the Gospel"? Are her ministers by their silence to bring upon themselves the Prophet's anathema, "Cursed is he that doth the work of the Lord deceitfully"? Can they ever forget the lesson conveyed to them in the Apostle's protestation, "God is faithful, as our preaching which was among you was not Yea and Nay ... For we are a good odour of Christ unto God in them that are in the way of salvation, and in them that are perishing. For we are not as the many, who adulterate the word of God; but with sincerity, but as from God, in the presence of God, so speak we in Christ"?

*(Převzato z: <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/grammar/chapter5-2.html> . Text celého díla*

*An Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent zde: <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/grammar/> .*

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