

"The Infidelity of the Future"
Faith and Prejudice sermon 9
St. John Henry Newman
Opening of St. Bernard's Seminary, October 2, 1873

1 It is no common occasion of thankfulness to the Giver of all good, the Divine
2 Head of the Church, that has led our Rt. Revd. Father, the Bishop of this
3 Diocese, to call us this morning from our several homes to this place. It is
4 with no common gladness, with no ordinary words of rejoicing and
5 congratulations on their lips, that so many of his priests and of his devout
6 laity have met him here today in consequence of his invitation. At length this
7 Seminary is completed and in occupation, which has been for so long a
8 course of years a vision before his mind, and the subject of his prayers and
9 exertions. Years and years ago I have heard him say, that he never could be
10 at rest, till he was enabled by God's mercy to accomplish this great work,
11 and God has heard his persevering prayers and blessed his unwearied
12 exertions. I might say with truth, that even before some of you, my dear
13 Brethren, were born, or at least from the time that you were in your cradles,
14 he, as the chief Pastor of this diocese, when as yet you knew him not, has
15 been engaged in that great undertaking, of which you, by God's inscrutable
16 grace, enjoy the benefits without your own labours.

17 It is indeed a great event in this diocese, a great event, I may say, in the
18 history of English Catholics, that at length the injunctions of Ecumenical
19 Councils, the tradition of the Church, the desire of the Sovereign Pontiff, are
20 fulfilled among us, and the Bishop's Throne is erected not merely in a
21 dwelling of brick or stone, in the midst of those in whom Christ is to be
22 formed by his teaching, that they in turn may be the edification and light
23 and strength of the generation which is to come after him.

24 This handing down of the truth from generation to generation is obviously
25 the direct reason for the institution of seminaries for the education of the
26 clergy. Christianity is one religious idea. Superhuman in its origin, it differs
27 from all other religions. As man differs from quadruped, bird or reptile, so
28 does Christianity differ from the superstitions, heresies, and philosophies
29 which are around it. It has a theology and an ethical system of its own. This
30 is its indestructible idea. How are we to secure and perpetuate in this world
31 that gift from above? How are we to preserve to the Christian people this
32 gift, so special, so divine, so easily hid or lost amid the imposing falsehoods
33 with which the world abounds?

34 The divine provision is as follows. Each circle of Christians has its own priest,
35 who is the representative of the divine idea to that circle in its theological

36 and ethical aspects. He teaches his people, he catechizes their children,
37 bringing them one and all into that form of doctrine, which is his own. But
38 the Church is made up of *many* such circles. How are we to secure that they
39 may *all* speak one and the same doctrine? and that the doctrine of the
40 Apostles? Thus: by the rule that their respective priests should in their turn
41 all be taught from one and the same centre, viz., their common Father, the
42 Bishop of the diocese. They are educated in one school, that is, in one
43 seminary; under the rule, by the voice and example of him who is the One
44 Pastor of all those collections or circles of Christians, of whom they all in
45 time to come are to be the teachers. Catholic doctrine, Catholic morals,
46 Catholic worship and discipline, the Christian character, life, and conduct, all
47 that is necessary for being a good priest, they learn one and all from this
48 religious school, which is the appointed preparation for the ministerial
49 offices. As youths are prepared for their secular calling by schools and
50 teachers who teach what their calling requires, as there are classical schools,
51 commercial schools, teachers for each profession, teachers of the several
52 arts and sciences, so the sacred ministers of the Church are made true
53 representatives of their Bishop when they are appointed to the charge of the
54 Christian people, because they come from one centre of education and from
55 the tutelage of one head.

56 Hence it is that St. Ignatius, the Martyr Bishop of Antioch, in the first
57 century of the Church, speaking of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, comparing
58 the union of the sacred orders with the Bishop, likens it to a harp which is in
59 perfect tune. He says in his Epistle to the Ephesians, "It becomes you to
60 concur in the mind of your Bishop, as indeed you do. For your estimable
61 body of clergy, worthy of God, is in exact harmony with your Bishop, as the
62 strings to the harp. Hence it is that in your unanimity and concordant charity
63 Jesus Christ is sung. And one by one you take your parts in the choir, so as
64 to sing with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father that He may hear
65 your petitions" (*ad Eph.* 4).

66 And if at all times this simple unity, this perfect understanding of the
67 members with the Head, is necessary for the healthy action of the Church,
68 especially is it necessary in these perilous times. I know that all times are
69 perilous, and that in every time serious and anxious minds, alive to the
70 honour of God and the needs of man, are apt to consider no times so
71 perilous as their own. At all times the enemy of souls assaults with fury the
72 Church which is their true Mother, and at least threatens and frightens when
73 he fails in doing mischief. And all times have their special trials which others
74 have not. And so far I will admit that there were certain specific dangers to
75 Christians at certain other times, which do not exist in this time. Doubtless,
76 but still admitting this, still I think that the trials which lie before us are such
77 as would appal and make dizzy even such courageous hearts as St.

78 Athanasius, St. Gregory I, or St. Gregory VII. And they would confess that
79 dark as the prospect of their own day was to them severally, ours has a
80 darkness different in kind from any that has been before it.

81 The special peril of the time before us is the spread of that plague of
82 infidelity, that the Apostles and our Lord Himself have predicted as the worst
83 calamity of the last times of the Church. And at least a shadow, a typical
84 image of the last times is coming over the world. I do not mean to presume
85 to say that this is the last time, but that it has had the evil prerogative of
86 being like that more terrible season, when it is said that the elect
87 themselves will be in danger of falling away. This applies to all Christians in
88 the world, but it concerns me at this moment, speaking to you, my dear
89 Brethren, who are being educated for our own priesthood, to see how it is
90 likely to be fulfilled in this country.

91 1. And first [[Note 1](#)] it is obvious that while the various religious bodies and
92 sects which surround us according to God's permission have done untold
93 harm to the cause of Catholic truth in their opposition to us, they have
94 hitherto been of great service to us in shielding and sheltering us from the
95 assaults of those who believed less than themselves or nothing at all. To
96 take one instance, the approved miracles of the Saints are not more
97 wonderful than the miracles of the Bible. Now the Church of England, the
98 Wesleyans, the Dissenters, nay the Unitarians have defended the miracles of
99 the Bible and thereby have given an indirect protection to the miracles of
100 ecclesiastical history. Nay, some of their divines have maintained certain
101 ecclesiastical miracles, as the appearance of the Cross to Constantine, the
102 subterranean fire in Julian's attempt to build the Jewish Temple, etc. And so
103 again the doctrines of the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, Atonement, etc.,
104 though as strange to the reason as those Catholic doctrines which they
105 reject, have been held by many of these bodies with more or less
106 distinctness, and thereby we have been unassailed when we have taught
107 them. But in these years before us it will be much if those outlying bodies
108 are able to defend their own dogmatic professions. Most of them, nearly all
109 of them, already give signs of the pestilence having appeared among them.
110 And as time goes on, when there will be a crisis and a turning point, with
111 each of them, then it will be found that, instead of their position being in any
112 sense a defence for us, it will be found in possession of the enemy. A
113 remnant indeed may be faithful to their light, as the great Novatian body
114 stood by the Catholics and suffered with them during the Arian troubles, but
115 we shall in vain look for that safeguard from what may be called the
116 orthodoxy of these Protestant communions, which we have hitherto profited
117 by.

118 2. Again another disadvantage to us will arise from our very growth in
119 numbers and influence in this country. The Catholic Religion, when it has a
120 free course, always must be a power in a country. This is the mere
121 consequence of its divine origin. While Catholics were few and oppressed by
122 disabilities, they were suffered and were at peace. But now that those
123 disabilities are taken off and Catholics are increasing in number, it is
124 impossible that they should not come in collision with the opinions, the
125 prejudices, the objects of a Protestant country, and that without fault on any
126 side, except that the country is Protestant. Neither party will understand the
127 other, and then the old grievances in history which this country has against
128 Rome will be revived and operate to our disadvantage. It is true that this
129 age is far more gentle, kind and generous than former ages, and
130 Englishmen, in their ordinary state, are not cruel, but they may easily be led
131 to believe that their generosity may be abused on our part, that they were
132 unwise in liberating those who are in fact their mortal enemies. And this
133 general feeling of fear of us may be such as, even with a show of reason, to
134 turn against us even generous minds, so that from no fault of ours, but from
135 the natural antagonism of a religion which cannot change with the new
136 political states into which the whole world is gradually moulding itself, may
137 place us in temporal difficulties, of which at present we have no anticipation.

138 And it cannot be denied that there is just now threatening the political world
139 such a calamity. There are many influential men who think that things are
140 not indeed ripe as yet for such a measure, but who look forward to the
141 times, when whether the one or the other great political party in the State
142 may make it their cry at the elections of a new Parliament, that they propose
143 to lessen the influence of Catholics and circumscribe their privileges. And
144 however this may be, two things, I think, are plain, that we shall become
145 more and more objects of distrust to the nation at large, and that our
146 Bishops and Priests will be associated in the minds of men with the political
147 acts of foreign Catholics, and be regarded as members of one extended
148 party in all countries, the enemies, as will be thought, of civil liberty and of
149 national progress. In this way we may suffer disadvantages which have not
150 weighed upon the Catholic Church since the age of Constantine.

151 3. I repeat, when Catholics are a small body in a country, they cannot easily
152 become a mark for their enemies, but our prospect in this time before us is
153 that we shall be so large that our concerns cannot be hid, and at the same
154 time so unprotected that we cannot but suffer. No large body can be free
155 from scandals from the misconduct of its members. In medieval times the
156 Church had its courts in which it investigated and set right what was wrong,
157 and that without the world knowing much about it. Now the state of things is
158 the very reverse. With a whole population able to read, with cheap
159 newspapers day by day conveying the news of every court, great and small

160 to every home or even cottage, it is plain that we are at the mercy of even
161 one unworthy member or false brother. It is true that the laws of libel are a
162 great protection to us as to others. But the last few years have shown us
163 what harm can be done us by the mere infirmities, not so much as the sins,
164 of one or two weak minds. There is an immense store of curiosity directed
165 upon us in this country, and in great measure an unkind, a malicious
166 curiosity. If there ever was a time when one priest will be a spectacle to men
167 and angels it is in the age now opening upon us.

168 4. Nor is this all. This general intelligence of every class of society, general
169 but shallow, is the means of circulating all through the population all the
170 misrepresentations which the enemies of the Church make of her faith and
171 her teaching. Most falsehoods have some truth in them; at least those
172 falsehoods which are perversions of the truth are the most successful. Again,
173 when there is no falsehood, yet you know how strange truth may appear to
174 minds unfamiliar with it. You know that the true religion must be full of
175 mysteries—and therefore to Catholicism, if to any profession, any body of
176 men at all, applies the proverb that a fool may ask a hundred questions
177 which a wise man cannot answer. It is scarcely possible so to answer
178 inquiries or objections on a great number of points of our faith or practice,
179 as to be intelligible or persuasive to them. And hence the popular antipathy
180 to Catholicism seems, and will seem more and more, to be based upon
181 reason, or common sense, so that first the charge will seem to all classes of
182 men true that the Church stifles the reason of man, and next that, since it is
183 impossible for educated men, such as her priests, to believe what is so
184 opposite to reason, they must be hypocrites, professing what in their hearts
185 they reject.

186 5. I have more to say on this subject. There are, after all, real difficulties in
187 Revealed Religion. There are questions, in answer to which we can only say,
188 "I do not know." There are arguments which cannot be met satisfactorily,
189 from the nature of the case—because our minds, which can easily enough
190 understand the objections, are not in their present state able to receive the
191 true answer. Nay, human language perhaps has not words to express it in.
192 Or again, perhaps the right answer is possible, and is set down in your books
193 of theology, and you know it. But things look very different in the abstract
194 and the concrete. You come into the world, and fall in with the living
195 objector and inquirer, and your answer you find scattered to the winds. The
196 objection comes to you now with the force of a living expositor of it,
197 recommended by the earnestness and sincerity with which he holds it, with
198 his simple conviction of its strength and accompanied by all the collateral or
199 antecedent probabilities, which he heaps around it. You are not prepared for
200 his objection being part of a system of thought, each part of which bears one
201 way and supports the other parts. And he will appeal to any number of men,

202 friends or others, who agree with him, and they each will appeal to him and
203 all the rest to the effect that the Catholic view and arguments simply cannot
204 be supported. Perhaps the little effect you produce by the arguments which
205 you have been taught is such that you are quite disheartened and despond.

206 6. I am speaking of evils, which in their intensity and breadth are peculiar to
207 these times. But I have not yet spoken of the root of all these falsehoods—
208 the root as it ever has been, but hidden; but in this age exposed to view and
209 unblushingly avowed—I mean, that spirit of infidelity itself which I began by
210 referring to as the great evil of our times, though of course when I spoke of
211 the practical force of the objections which we constantly hear and shall hear
212 made to Christianity, I showed it is from this spirit that they gain their
213 plausibility. The elementary proposition of this new philosophy which is now
214 so threatening is this—that in all things we must go by reason, in nothing by
215 faith, that things are known and are to be received so far as they can be
216 proved. Its advocates say, all other knowledge has proof—why should
217 religion be an exception? And the mode of proof is to advance from what we
218 know to what we do not know, from sensible and tangible facts to sound
219 conclusions. The world pursued the way of faith as regards physical nature,
220 and what came of it? Why, that till three hundred years ago they believed,
221 because it was the tradition, that the heavenly bodies were fixed in solid
222 crystalline spheres and moved round the earth in the course of twenty-four
223 hours. Why should not that method which has done so much in physics,
224 avail also as regards that higher knowledge which the world has believed it
225 had gained through revelation? There is no revelation from above. There is
226 no exercise of faith. Seeing and proving is the only ground for believing.
227 They go on to say, that since proof admits of degrees, a demonstration can
228 hardly be had except in mathematics; we never can have simple knowledge;
229 truths are only probably such. So that faith is a mistake in two ways. First,
230 because it usurps the place of reason, and secondly because it implies an
231 absolute assent to doctrines, and is dogmatic, which absolute assent is
232 irrational. Accordingly you will find, certainly in the future, nay more, *even*
233 *now, even now*, that the writers and thinkers of the day do not even believe
234 there is a God. They do not believe either the *object*—a God personal, a
235 Providence and a moral Governor; and secondly, what they *do* believe, viz.,
236 that there is some first cause or other, they do not believe with faith,
237 absolutely, but as a probability.

238 You will say that their theories have been in the world and are no new thing.
239 No. Individuals have put them forth, but they have not been current and
240 popular ideas. Christianity has never yet had experience of a world simply
241 irreligious. Perhaps China may be an exception. We do not know enough
242 about it to speak, but consider what the Roman and Greek world was when
243 Christianity appeared. It was full of superstition, not of infidelity. There was

244 much unbelief in all as regards their mythology, and in every educated man,
245 as to eternal punishment. But there was no casting off the idea of religion,
246 and of unseen powers who governed the world. When they spoke of Fate,
247 even here they considered that there was a great moral governance of the
248 world carried on by fated laws. Their first principles were the same as ours.
249 Even among the sceptics of Athens, St. Paul could appeal to the Unknown
250 God. Even to the ignorant populace of Lystra he could speak of the living
251 God who did them good from heaven. And so when the northern barbarians
252 came down at a later age, they, amid all their superstitions, were believers
253 in an unseen Providence and in the moral law. But we are now coming to a
254 time when the world does not acknowledge our first principles. Of course I
255 do not deny that, as in the revolted kingdom of Israel, there will be a
256 remnant. The history of Elias is here a great consolation for us, for he was
257 told from heaven that even in that time of idolatrous apostasy, there were
258 seven thousand men who had not bowed their knees to Baal. Much more it
259 may be expected now, when our Lord has come and the Gospel been
260 preached to the whole world, that there will be a remnant who belong to the
261 soul of the Church, though their eyes are not opened to acknowledge her
262 who is their true Mother. But I speak first of the educated world, scientific,
263 literary, political, professional, artistic—and next of the mass of town
264 population, the two great classes on which the fortunes of England are
265 turning: the thinking, speaking and acting England. My Brethren, you are
266 coming into a world, if present appearances do not deceive, such as priests
267 never came into before, that is, so far forth as you do go into it, so far as
268 you go beyond your flocks, and so far as those flocks may be in great
269 danger as under the influence of the prevailing epidemic.

270 That the discipline of a seminary is just that which is suited to meet the
271 present state of things, it does not become me to attempt to suggest to you
272 now—you, who have so much better, and so much more authoritative
273 advisers—but I may be allowed perhaps to follow up what I have said to
274 such conclusions as it seems to point to.

275 1. A seminary is the only true guarantee for the creation of the ecclesiastical
276 spirit. And this is the primary and true weapon for meeting the age, not
277 controversy. Of course every Catholic should have an intelligent appreciation
278 of his religion, as St. Peter says, but still controversy is not the instrument
279 by which the world is to be resisted and overcome. And this we shall see if
280 we study that epistle, which comes with an authority of its own, as being put
281 by the Holy Spirit into the mouth of him who was the chief of the Apostles.
282 What he addresses to all Christians, is especially suitable for priests. Indeed
283 he wrote it at a time when the duties of one and the other, as against the
284 heathen world, were the same. In the first place he reminds them of what
285 they really *were* as Christians, and surely we should take these words as

286 belonging especially to us ecclesiastics. "You are a chosen generation, a
287 kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people ..." (1 Pet. ii. 9).

288 In this ecclesiastical spirit, I will but mention a spirit of seriousness or
289 recollection. We must gain the habit of feeling that we are in God's presence,
290 that He sees what we are doing; and a liking that He does so, a love of
291 knowing it, a delight in the reflection, "Thou, God, seest me." A priest who
292 feels this deeply will never misbehave himself in mixed society. It will keep
293 him from over-familiarity with any of his people; it will keep him from too
294 many words, from imprudent or unwise speaking; it will teach him to rule his
295 thoughts. It will be a principle of detachment between him and even his own
296 people; for he who is accustomed to lean on the Unseen God, will never be
297 able really to attach himself to any of His creatures. And thus an elevation of
298 mind will be created, which is the true weapon which he must use against
299 the infidelity of the world. (Hence, what St. Peter says: 1, ii, 12, 15; iii, 16.)

300 Now this I consider to be the true weapon by which the infidelity of the world
301 is to be met.

302 2. And next, most important in the same warfare, and here too you will see
303 how it is connected with a Seminary, is a sound, accurate, complete
304 knowledge of Catholic theology. This, though it is not controversial, is the
305 best weapon (after a good life) *in* controversy. Any child, well instructed in
306 the catechism, is, without intending it, a real missionary. And why? Because
307 the world is full of doubtings and uncertainty, and of inconsistent doctrine—a
308 clear consistent idea of revealed truth, on the contrary, cannot be found
309 outside of the Catholic Church. Consistency, completeness, is a persuasive
310 argument for a system being true. Certainly if it be inconsistent, it is not
311 truth. [[Note 2](#)]

312 Notes

313 1. In the manuscript there is a note "about Infidelity first," and on delivery,
314 §6 (page 128) was inserted here. [[See Note 2—NR.](#)]

315 2. [Summary on the last page of the manuscript]

316 1 Infidelity—induction.

317 Why not by science?—if not science, so much the
318 worse for religious probability—

319 2 A persecuting infidelity, because it is *pure*

320 3 Fear

321 1. Here our very growth is against us.

322 It begins to *fear* us. Englishmen are cruel when

323 they are frightened.
324 2. Toleration is only when we go *half way*.
325 4 Hitherto Anglicans, etc., have acted as a shelter, but
326 this is going.
327 5 Cheap publications—popular arguments
328 6 And stories against Catholicism and scandals.