

"The Visible Church an Encouragement to Faith"
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St. John Henry Newman
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"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." Heb. xii. 1.

1 THE warning and consolation given by the Apostle to the Hebrews, amid their sufferings
2 for the truth's sake, were as follows: they were to guard against unbelief, that easily-
3 besetting sin under temptation, chiefly, and above all, by "looking unto Jesus, the Author
4 and Finisher of faith;" but, besides this, a secondary stay was added. So glorious and
5 holy is our Lord, though viewed in His human nature, so perfect when He was tempted,
6 so heavenly even upon earth, that sinners, such as we are, cannot endure the sight of
7 Him at first. Like the blessed Apostle in the book of Revelation, we "fall at His feet as
8 dead." So, in mercy to us, without withdrawing His presence, He has included within it,
9 His Saints and Angels, a great company of created beings, nay, of those who once
10 were sinners, and subjects of His kingdom upon earth; that thus we may be encouraged
11 by the example of others before us to look unto Him and live. St. Paul, in the foregoing
12 chapter, enumerates many of the Ancient Saints who had run the course of faith; and
13 then he says in the text, "Wherefore, let us also, being compassed about with so great a
14 cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us,
15 and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." And presently he speaks in
16 still more high and glowing language of the Christian Church, that august assemblage
17 which Christ had formed of all that was holy in heaven and earth. "Ye are come unto
18 Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an
19 innumerable company of Angels, to the general assembly and Church of the first-born,
20 and to the spirits of the just made perfect, and to Jesus the Mediator of the New
21 Covenant."

22 And much is needed, in every age, as a remedy against unbelief, that support which St.
23 Paul suggested to the Hebrews in persecution, the vision of the Saints of God, and of
24 the Kingdom of Heaven. Much is it needed, in every age, by those who have set their
25 hearts to serve God, because they are few, and faint for company. We are told,
26 expressly, "Broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in
27 thereat." On the other hand, "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth
28 unto life, and few there be that find it." [Matt. vii. 13, 14.] Alas! is it not discouragement
29 enough to walk in a path of self-denial, to combat with our natural lusts and high
30 imaginations, to have the war of the flesh, that the war with the world must be added to
31 it? Is it not enough to be pilgrims and soldiers all our days, but we must hear the mutual
32 greetings, and exulting voices of those who choose the way of death, and must walk not
33 only in pain but in solitude? Where is the blessing upon the righteous, where the joy of
34 faith, the comfort of love, the triumph of self-mastery, in such dreariness and
35 desolateness? Who are to sympathize with us in our joys and sorrows, who are to spur

36 us on by the example of their own success? St. Paul answers us—the cloud of
37 witnesses of former days. Let us then consider our need and its remedy.

38 1. Certainly it cannot be denied that, if we surrender our hearts to Christ and obey God,
39 we shall be in the number of the few. So it has been in every age, so it will be to the end
40 of time. It is hard, indeed, to find a man who gives himself up honestly to his Saviour. In
41 spite of all the mercies poured upon us, yet in one way or other we are in danger of
42 being betrayed by our own hearts, and taking up with a pretence of religion instead of
43 the substance. Hence, in a country called Christian, the many live to the world. Nay, it
44 would seem that as Christianity spreads, its fruit becomes less; or, at least, does not
45 increase with its growth. It seems (some have said) as if a certain portion of truth were
46 in the world, a certain number of the elect in the Church, and, as you increased its
47 territory, you scattered this remnant to and fro, and made them seem fewer, and made
48 them feel more desolate.

49 "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves;" [Matt. x. 16.] what our Lord
50 addressed to His Apostles is fulfilled to this day in all those who obey Him. They are
51 sprinkled up and down the world; they are separated the one from the other, they are
52 bid quit each other's dear society, and sent afar off to those who are differently minded.
53 Their choice of profession and employment is not their own. Outward circumstances,
54 over which they have no control, determine their line of life; accidents bring them to this
55 place or that place, not knowing whither they go; not knowing the persons to whom they
56 unite themselves, they find, almost blindly, their home and their company. And in this,
57 moreover, differing from the Apostles, and very painfully; that the Apostles knew each
58 other, and could communicate one with another, and could form, nay, were bound to
59 form one body; but now, those honest and true hearts, in which the good seed has
60 profitably fallen, do not even know each other; nay, even when they think they can
61 single out their fellows, yet are they not allowed to form a separate society with them.

62 They do not know each other; they do not know themselves; they do not dare take to
63 themselves the future titles of God's elect, though they be really reserved for them; and
64 the nearer they are towards heaven, so much the more lowly do they think of
65 themselves. "Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldest come under my roof," [Matt. viii.
66 8.] was the language of him who had greater faith than any in Israel. Doubtless, they do
67 not know their own blessedness, nor can they single out those who are their fellows in
68 blessedness. God alone sees the heart; now and then, as they walk their way, they see
69 glimpses of God's work in others; they take hold of them awhile in the dark, but soon
70 lose them; they hear their voices, but cannot find them. Some few, indeed, are revealed
71 to them in a measure. Among those with whom their lot is cast, whom they see
72 continually, one or two, perhaps, are given them to rejoice in, but not many even of
73 these. For so it has pleased the Dresser of the Vineyard, who seems to have purposed
74 that His own should not grow too thick together; and if they seem to do so, He prunes
75 His vine, that, seeming to bear less, it may bear better. He plucks off some of the
76 promise of the vintage; and they who are left, mourn over their brethren whom God has
77 taken to Himself, not understanding that it is no strange providence, but the very rule of
78 His government, to leave His servants few and solitary.

79 And, even when they know each other (as far as man can know man), still, as I have
80 said, they may not form an exclusive communion together. Of course, every one will
81 naturally live most with those whom he likes most; but it is one thing to have a
82 preference, and quite another to draw a line of exclusion, and to form a select company
83 within the Church. The Visible Church of God is that one only company which Christians
84 know as yet; it was set up at Pentecost, with the Apostles for founders, their successors
85 for rulers, and all professing Christian people for members. In this Visible Church the
86 Church Invisible is gradually moulded and matured. It is formed slowly and variously by
87 the Blessed Spirit of God, in the instance of this man and that, who belong to the
88 general body. But all these blessed fulfilments of God's grace are as yet but parts of the
89 Visible Church; they grow from it; they depend upon it; they do not hang upon each
90 other; they do not form a body together; there is no Invisible Church yet formed; it is but
91 a name as yet; a name given to those who are hidden, and known to God only, and as
92 yet but half formed, the unripe and gradually ripening fruit which grows on the stem of
93 the Church Visible. As well might we attempt to foretell the blossoms which will at length
94 turn to account and ripen for the gathering, and then counting up all these and joining
95 them together in our minds, call them by the name of a tree, as attempt now to
96 associate in one the true elect of God. They are scattered about amid the leaves of that
97 Mystical Vine which is seen, and receive their nurture from its trunk and branches. They
98 live on its Sacraments and its Ministry; they gain light and salvation from its rites and
99 ordinances; they communicate with each other through it; they obey its rulers; they walk
100 together with its members; they do not dare to judge of this man or that man, on their
101 right hand or their left, whether or not he is absolutely of the number of those who shall
102 be saved; they accept all as their brethren in Christ, as partakers of the same general
103 promises, who have not openly cast off Christ—as really brethren, till death comes, as
104 those are who fulfil their calling most strictly.

105 Yet, at the same time, while in faith they love those, all around them, who are called by
106 Christ's name, and forbear to judge about their real state in God's sight, they cannot but
107 see much in many of them to hurt and offend them; they cannot but feel, most painfully,
108 the presence of that worldly atmosphere which, however originating, encircles them;
109 they feel the suffocation of those vapours in which the many are content to remain; and
110 while they cannot trace the evil to its real authors individually, they are sure that it is an
111 evil to be avoided and pointed out, and originating somewhere or other in the Church.
112 Hence, in their spheres, whether high or low, the faithful few are witnesses; they are
113 witnesses for God and Christ, in their lives, and by their protestations, without judging
114 others, or exalting themselves. They are witnesses in various degrees, to various
115 persons, more or less, as each needs it—differing from the multitude variously, as each
116 of that multitude, before whom they witness, is better or worse, and as they themselves
117 are more or less advanced in the truth; still, on the whole, they are witnesses, as light
118 witnesses against darkness by the contrast;—giving good and receiving back evil;
119 receiving back on themselves the contempt, the ridicule, and the opposition of the
120 world, mixed, indeed, with some praise and reverence, reverence which does not last
121 long, but soon becomes fear and hatred. And hence it is that religious men need some
122 consolation to support them, which the Visible Church seems, at first sight, not to
123 supply, when the overflowings of ungodliness make them afraid.

2. Now then, secondly, in such circumstances what shall we say? Are they but solitary witnesses, each in his place? Is the Church which they see really no consolation to them at all, except as contemplated by faith in respect of its invisible gifts? or does it, after all, really afford them some sensible stay, a vision of Heaven, of peace amid purity, antagonist to the world that now is, in spite of the evil which abounds in it, and overlays it? Through God's great mercy, it is actually, in no small degree, a present and a sensible consolation, as I proceed to show.

In truth, do what he will, Satan cannot quench or darken the light of the Church. He may incrust it with his own evil creations, but even opaque bodies transmit rays, and Truth shines with its own heavenly lustre, though "under a bushel." The Holy Spirit has vouchsafed to take up His abode in the Church, and the Church will ever bear, on its front, the visible signs of its hidden privilege. Viewed at a little distance, its whole surface will be illuminated, though the light really streams from apertures which might be numbered. The scattered witnesses thus become, in the language of the text, "a cloud," like the Milky Way in the heavens.

We have, in Scripture, the records of those who lived and died by faith in the old time, and nothing can deprive us of them. The strength of Satan lies in his being seen to have the many on his side; but, when we read the Bible, this argument loses its hold over us. There we find that we are not solitary; that others, before us, have been in our very condition, have had our feelings, undergone our trials, and laboured for the prize which we are seeking. Nothing more elevates the mind than the consciousness of being one of a great and victorious company. Does not the soldier exult in his commander, and consider his triumph as his own? He is but one, yet he identifies himself with the army, and the cause in which he serves, and dwells upon the thought of victories, and those who win them, more than on casual losses and defeats. Does not a native of a powerful country feel it a joy and boast to be so? Do we not hear men glory in being born Englishmen? And they go to and fro, gazing on the works of their own days, and the monuments of their forefathers, and say to themselves that their race is a noble one. Much more fully, much more reasonably is this the boast of a Christian, and without aught of arrogant or carnal feeling. He knows, from God's word, that he is "citizen of no mean city." He feels that his is no upstart line, but very ancient; Almighty God having purposed to bring many sons unto glory through His Son, and begetting them again, in their separate ages, to do Him service. He is one of a host, and all those blessed Saints he reads of are his brethren in the faith. He finds, in the history of the past, a peculiar kind of consolation, counteracting the influence of the world that is seen. He cannot tell who the Saints are now on earth; those yet unborn are known to God only; but the Saints of former times are sealed for heaven and are in their degree revealed to him. The spirits of the just made perfect encourage him to follow them. This is why it is a Christian's characteristic to look back on former times. The man of this world lives in the present, or speculates about the future; but faith rests upon the past and is content. It makes the past the mirror of the future. It recounts the list of faithful servants of God, to whom St. Paul refers in the text, and no longer feels sad as if it were alone. Abraham and the Patriarchs, Moses, Samuel, and the prophets, David and the kings who walked in his steps, these are the Christian's forefathers. By degrees he learns to have them as

168 familiar images before his mind, to unite his cause with theirs, and, since their history
169 comforts him, to defend them in his own day. Hence he feels jealous for their honour,
170 and when they are attacked he answers eagerly, so as to surprise those who are
171 contented with things as they are; but, truly, he is too grateful, too affectionate, too
172 much interested in the matter, to be complimentary and generous towards their
173 assailants. He had rather the present day should be proved captious, than a former day
174 mistaken.

175 But to return: what a world of sympathy and comfort is thus opened to us in the
176 Communion of Saints! The heathen, who sought truth most earnestly, fainted for want of
177 companions; every one stood by himself. They were tempted to think that all their best
178 feelings were but an empty name, and that it mattered not whether they served God or
179 disobeyed Him. But Christ has "gathered together the children of God that were
180 scattered abroad," and brought them near to each other in every time and place. Are we
181 young, and in temptation or trial? we cannot be in worse circumstances than Joseph.
182 Are we in sickness? Job will surpass us in sufferings as in patience. Are we in
183 perplexities and anxieties, with conflicting duties and a bewildered mind, having to
184 please unkind superiors, yet without offending God; so grievous a trial as David's we
185 cannot have, when Saul persecuted him. Is it our duty to witness for the truth among
186 sinners? No Christian can at this day be so hardly circumstanced as Jeremiah. Have we
187 domestic trials? Job, Jacob, and David, were afflicted in their children. It is easy indeed
188 to say all this, and many a man may hear it said, and not feel moved by it, and conceive
189 it is a mere matter of words, easy and fitting indeed to say, but a cold consolation in
190 actual suffering. And I will own that a man cannot profit by these considerations all at
191 once. A man, who has never thought of the history of the Saints, will gain little benefit
192 from it on first taking up the subject when he comes into trouble. He will turn from it
193 disappointed. He may say, "My pain or my trial is not the less because another had it a
194 thousand years since." But the consolation in question comes not in the way of
195 argument but by habit. A tedious journey seems shorter when gone in company, yet, be
196 the travellers many or few, each goes over the same ground.

197 Such is the Christian's feeling towards all Saints, but it is especially excited by the
198 Church of Christ and by all that belong to it. For what is that Church but a pledge and
199 proof of God's never-dying love and power from age to age? He set it up in mercy to
200 mankind, and its presence among us is a proof that in spite of our sins He has not yet
201 forsaken us;—"Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." He set it up on the foundation of His
202 Twelve Apostles, and promised that the gates of hell should not prevail against it; and
203 its presence among us is a proof of His power. He set it up to succeed to the four
204 monster kingdoms which then were; and it lived to see those kingdoms of the earth
205 crumble into dust and come to nought. It lived to see society new formed upon the
206 model of the governments which last to this day. It lives still, and it is older than them all.
207 Much and rightly as we reverence old lineage, noble birth, and illustrious ancestry, yet
208 the royal dynasty of the Apostles is far older than all the kingly families which are now
209 on the earth. Every Bishop of the Church whom we behold, is a lineal descendant of St.
210 Peter and St. Paul after the order of a spiritual birth;—a noble thought, if we could
211 realize it! True it is that at various times the Bishops have forgotten their high rank and

212 acted unworthily of it. So have kings and princes, yet noble they were by blood in spite
213 of their personal errors, and the line of their family is not broken or degraded thereby.
214 And in like manner, true though it be that the descendants of the Apostles have before
215 now lived to this world, have fancied themselves of this world, have thought their office
216 secular and civil, or if religious, yet at least "of men and by man," not "by Jesus Christ,"
217 have judged it much to have riches, or to sit in high places, or to have rank and
218 consideration, or to have the fame of letters, or to be king's counsellors, or to live in
219 courts—yet, granting the utmost, for all this they are not the less inspiring an object to a
220 believing mind, which sees in each of them the earnest of His promise, "I will never
221 leave thee nor forsake thee." He said, He would be with His Church: He has continued it
222 alive to this day. He has continued the line of His Apostles onwards through every age
223 and all troubles and perils of the world. Here then, surely, is somewhat of
224 encouragement for us amid our loneliness and weakness. The presence of every
225 Bishop suggests a long history of conflicts and trials, sufferings and victories, hopes and
226 fears, through many centuries. His presence at this day is the fruit of them all. He is the
227 living monument of those who are dead. He is the promise of a bold fight and a good
228 confession and a cheerful martyrdom now, if needful, as was instanced by those of old
229 time. We see their figures on our walls, and their tombs are under our feet; and we trust,
230 nay, we are sure, that God will be to us in our day what He was to them. In the words of
231 the Psalmist, "The Lord hath been mindful of us; He will bless us; He will bless the
232 house of Israel; He will bless the house of Aaron." [Psalm cxv. 12.]

233 And more especially does the sight of our living Apostles bring before our thoughts the
234 more favoured of their line, who, at different times, have fought the good fight of faith
235 valiantly and gloriously. Blessed be God, He has given us to know them as if we had
236 lived in their day and enjoyed their pattern and instructions. Alas! in spite of the variety
237 of books now circulated among all classes of the community, how little is known about
238 the Saints of past times! How is this? has Christ's Church failed in any age? or have His
239 witnesses betrayed their trust? are they not our bone and our flesh? Have they not
240 partaken the same spiritual food as ourselves and the same spiritual drink, used the
241 same prayers, and confessed the same creed? If a man merely looks into the Prayer-
242 book, he will meet there with names, about which, perhaps, he knows and cares nothing
243 at all. A prayer we read daily is called the prayer of St. Chrysostom; a creed is called the
244 creed of St. Athanasius; another creed is called the Nicene Creed; in the Articles we
245 read of St. Augustine and St. Jerome; in the Homilies of many other such besides. What
246 do these names mean? Sad it is, you have no heart to inquire after or celebrate those
247 who are fellow-citizens with you, and your great benefactors! Men of this world spread
248 each other's fame—they vaunt loudly;—you see in every street the names and the
249 statues of the children of men, you hear of their exploits in speeches and histories; yet
250 you care not to know concerning those to whom you are indebted for the light of Gospel
251 truth. Truly they were in their day men of God; they were rulers and teachers in the
252 Church; they had received by succession of hands the power first given to the Apostles
253 and now to us. They laboured and suffered and fainted not, and their writings remain to
254 this day. Now a person who cultivates this thought, finds therein, through God's mercy,
255 great encouragement. Say he is alone, his faith counted a dream, and his efforts to do
256 good a folly, what then? He knows there have been times when his opinions were those

257 of the revered and influential, and the opinions now in repute only not reprobated
258 because they were not heard of. He knows that present opinions are the accident of the
259 day, and that they will fall as they have risen. They will surely fall even though at a
260 distant date! He labours for that time; he labours for five hundred years to come. He can
261 bear in faith to wait five hundred years, to wait for an era long, long after he has
262 mouldered into dust. The Apostles lived eighteen hundred years since; and as far as the
263 Christian looks back, so far can he afford to look forward. There is one Lord, one faith,
264 one baptism, one God and Father of all, from first to last.

265 I referred just now to our Sacred Services; these, again, may be made to furnish a
266 support to our faith and hope. He who comes to Church to worship God, be he high or
267 low, enters into that heavenly world of Saints of which I have been speaking. For in the
268 Services of worship we elicit and realize the invisible. I know, indeed, that Christ is then
269 especially present, and vouchsafes to bless us; but I am speaking all along of the help
270 given to us by sensible objects, and, even in this lower view, doubtless much is done for
271 us in the course of divine worship. We read from the Bible of the Saints who have gone
272 before us, and we make mention of them in our prayers. We thank God for them, we
273 praise God with them, we pray God to visit us in mercy as He visited them. And every
274 earthly thought or principle is excluded. The world no longer rules as it does abroad; no
275 longer teaches, praises, blames, scoffs, wonders, according to its own false standard. It
276 is merely spoken of as one of the three great enemies whom we are sworn to resist; it
277 holds its proper place; and its doom is confidently predicted, the final victory of the
278 Church over it. And, further, it is much more impressive to hear and to see, than to read
279 in a book. When we read the Bible and religious books in private, there is great comfort;
280 but our minds are commonly more roused and encouraged in Church, when we see
281 those great truths displayed and represented which Scripture speaks of. There we see
282 "Jesus Christ, evidently set forth, crucified among us." The ordinances which we behold,
283 force the unseen truth upon our senses. The very disposition of the building, the
284 subdued light, the aisles, the Altar, with its pious adornments, are figures of things
285 unseen, and stimulate our fainting faith. We seem to see the heavenly courts, with
286 Angels chanting, and Apostles and Prophets listening, as we read their writings in due
287 course. And thus, even attendance on a Sunday may, through God's mercy, avail even
288 in the case of those who have not given themselves up to Him—not to their salvation
289 (for no one can be saved by one or two observances merely, or without a life of faith),
290 but so far as to break in upon their dream of sin, and give them thoughts and notions
291 which may be the germ of future good. Even to those, I say, who live to the world, the
292 mere Sunday attendance at Church is a continual memento on their conscience, giving
293 them a glimpse of things unseen, and rescuing them in a measure from the servitude of
294 Mammon or of Belial. And therefore it is, that Satan's first attempt, when he would ruin a
295 soul, is to prevail upon him to desecrate the Lord's Day. And if such is the effect of
296 coming to Church once a week, even to an undecided or carnal mind, how much more
297 impressive and invigorating are the Services to serious men who come daily or
298 frequently! Surely such attendance is a safeguard, such as amulets were said to be, a
299 small thing to all appearance, but effectual. I say it with confidence, he who observes it,
300 will grow in time a different man from what he was, God working in him. His heart will be
301 more heavenly and aspiring; the world will lie under his feet; he will be proof against its

302 opinions, threats, blandishments, ridicule. His very mode of viewing things, his very
303 voice, his manner, gait, and countenance, will speak of Heaven to those who know him
304 well, though the many see nothing in him.

305 The many understand him not, and even in St. Paul or St. John would see but ordinary
306 men. Yet at times such a one will speak effectually even to the many. In seasons of
307 unusual distress or alarm, when men's minds faint for fear, then he will have a natural
308 power over the world, and will seem to speak, not as an individual, but as if in him was
309 concentrated all the virtue and the grace of those many Saints who have been his life-
310 long companions. He has lived with those who are dead, and he will seem to the world
311 as one coming from the dead, speaking in the name of the dead, using the language of
312 souls dead to things that are seen, revealing the mysteries of the heavenly world, and
313 aweing and controlling those who are wedded to this. What slight account did the
314 centurion and the crew make of St. Paul, till a tempest had long time "lain on them," and
315 "all hope that they should be saved was then taken away!" But then, though he had
316 done no miracle, "he stood forth in the midst," exhorted and encouraged them, bade
317 them take meat, acted as their priest, giving thanks to God and breaking bread in the
318 presence of them all, and so made them "of good cheer." Such is the gift, deeply lodged
319 and displayed at times, of those who have ascended into the third heaven. One living
320 Saint, though there be but one, is a pledge of the whole Church Invisible. Let this
321 thought console us as it ought to do; let it have its full influence in us, and possess us.
322 Let us "lift up our hearts," let us "lift them up unto the Lord!"