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"Christian Sympathy"
Parochial and Plain Sermons vol. V sermon 9
St. John Henry Newman
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"For verily He took not on Him the nature of Angels, but He took on Him the seed of Abraham." Heb. ii. 16.

WE are all of one nature, because we are sons of Adam; we are all of one nature, because we are brethren of Christ. Our old nature is common to us all, and so is our new nature. And because our old nature is one and the same, therefore is it that our new nature is one and the same. Christ could not have taken the nature of every one of us, unless every one of us had the same nature already. He could not have become our brother, unless we were all brethren already; He could not have made us His brethren, unless by becoming our Brother; so that our brotherhood in the first man is the means towards our brotherhood in the second.

I do not mean to limit the benefits of Christ's atoning death, or to dare to say that it may not effect ends infinite in number and extent beyond those expressly recorded. But still so far is plain, that it is by taking our nature that He has done for us what He has done for none else; that, by taking the nature of Angels, He would not have done for us what He has done; that it is not only the humiliation of the Son of God, but His humiliation in our nature, which is our life. He might have humbled Himself in other natures besides human nature; but it was decreed that "the Word" should be "made flesh." "Forasmuch as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same." And, as the text says, "He took not hold of Angels, but He took hold of the seed of Abraham."

And since His taking on Him our nature is a necessary condition of His imparting to us those great benefits which have accrued to us from His death, therefore, as I have said, it was necessary that we should, one and all, have the same original nature, in order to be redeemed by Him; for, in order to be redeemed, we must all have that nature which He the Redeemer took. Had our natures been different, He would have redeemed one and not another. Such a common nature we have, as being one and all children of one man, Adam; and thus the history of our fall is connected with the history of our recovery.

Christ then took our nature, when He would redeem it; He redeemed it by making it suffer in His own Person; He purified it, by making it pure in His own Person. He first sanctified it in Himself, made it righteous, made it acceptable to God, submitted it to an expiatory passion, and then He imparted it to us. He took it, consecrated it, broke it, and said, "Take, and divide it among yourselves."

And moreover, He raised the condition of human nature, by submitting it to trial and temptation; that what it failed to do in Adam, it might be able to do in Him. Or, in other words, which it becomes us rather to use, He condescended, by an ineffable mercy, to be tried and tempted in it; so that, whereas He was God from everlasting, as the Only-

41 begotten of the Father, He took on Him the thoughts, affections, and infirmities of man,
42 thereby, through the fulness of His Divine Nature, to raise those thoughts and
43 affections, and destroy those infirmities, that so, by God's becoming man, men, through
44 brotherhood with Him, might in the end become as gods.

45 There is not a feeling, not a passion, not a wish, not an infirmity, which we have, which
46 did not belong to that manhood which He assumed, except such as is of the nature of
47 sin. There was not a trial or temptation which befalls us, but was, in kind at least,
48 presented before Him, except that He had nothing within Him, sympathizing with that
49 which came to Him from without. He said upon His last and greatest trial, "The Prince of
50 this world cometh and hath nothing in Me;" yet at the same time we are mercifully
51 assured that "we have not a High Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our
52 infirmities, but" one, who "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." And
53 again, "In that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that
54 are tempted." [Heb. iv. 15; ii. 18.]

55 But what I would today draw attention to, is the thought with which I began, viz. the
56 comfort vouchsafed to us in being able to contemplate Him whom the Apostle calls "the
57 man Christ Jesus," the Son of God in our flesh. I mean, the thought of Him, "the
58 beginning of the creation of God," "the firstborn of every creature," binds us together by
59 a sympathy with one another, as much greater than that of mere nature, as Christ is
60 greater than Adam. We were brethren, as being of one nature with him, who was "of the
61 earth, earthy;" we are now brethren, as being of one nature with "the Lord from heaven."
62 All those common feelings, which we have by birth, are far more intimately common to
63 us, now that we have obtained the second birth. Our hopes and fears, likes and dislikes,
64 pleasures and pains, have been moulded upon one model, have been wrought into one
65 image, blended and combined unto "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."
66 What they become, who have partaken of "the Living Bread, which came down from
67 heaven," the first converts showed, of whom it is said that they "had all things common;"
68 that "the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul;" as having
69 "one body, and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and
70 Father of all." [Acts ii. 44; iv. 32. Eph. iv. 4-6.] Yes, and one thing needful; one narrow
71 way; one business on earth; one and the same enemy; the same dangers; the same
72 temptations; the same afflictions; the same course of life; the same death; the same
73 resurrection; the same judgment. All these things being the same, and the new nature
74 being the same, and from the Same, no wonder that Christians can sympathise with
75 each other, even as by the power of Christ sympathising in and with each of them.

76 Nay, and further, they sympathise together in those respects too, in which Christ has
77 not, could not have, gone before them; I mean in their common sins. This is the
78 difference between Christ's temptation and ours: His temptations were without sin, but
79 ours with sin. Temptation with us almost certainly involves sin. We sin, almost
80 spontaneously, in spite of His grace. I do not mean, God forbid, that His grace is not
81 sufficient to subdue all sin in us; or that, as we come more and more under its influence,
82 we are not less and less exposed to the involuntary impression of temptation, and much
83 less exposed to voluntary sin; but that so it is, our evil nature remains in us in spite of

84 that new nature which the touch of Christ communicates to us; we have still earthly
85 principles in our souls, though we have heavenly ones, and these so sympathise with
86 temptation, that, as a mirror reflects promptly and of necessity what is presented to it, so
87 the body of death which infects us, when the temptations of this world assail it,—when
88 honour, pomp, glory, the world's praise, power, ease, indulgence, sensual pleasure,
89 revenge are offered to it,—involuntarily responds to them, and sins—sins because
90 it *is* sin; sins before the better mind can control it, because it exists, because its life is
91 sin; sins *till* it is utterly subdued and expelled from the soul by the gradual growth of
92 holiness and the power of the Spirit. Of all this, Christ had nothing. He was "born of a
93 pure Virgin," the immaculate Lamb of God; and though He was tempted, yet it was by
94 what was good in the world's offers, though unseasonable and unsuitable, and not by
95 what was evil in them. He overcame what it had been unbecoming to yield to, while he
96 felt the temptation. He overcame also what was sinful, but He felt no temptation to it.

97 And yet it stands to reason, that though His temptations differed from ours in this main
98 respect, yet His presence in us makes us sympathise one with another, even in our sins
99 and faults, in a way which is impossible without it; because, whereas the grace in us is
100 common to us all, the sins against that grace are common to us all also. We have the
101 same gifts to sin against, and therefore the same powers, the same responsibilities, the
102 same fears, the same struggles, the same guilt, the same repentance, and such as
103 none can have but we. The Christian is one and the same, wherever found; as in Christ,
104 who is perfect, so in himself, who is training towards perfection; as in that righteousness
105 which is imputed to him in fulness, so in that righteousness which is imparted to him
106 only in its measure, and not yet in fulness.

107 This is a consideration full of comfort, but of which commonly we do not avail ourselves
108 as we might. It is one comfortable thought, and the highest of all, that Christ, who is on
109 the right hand of God exalted, has felt all that we feel, sin excepted; but it is very
110 comfortable also, that the new and spiritual man, which He creates in us, or creates us
111 into,—that is, the Christian, as he is naturally found everywhere,—has everywhere the
112 same temptations, and the same feelings under them, whether innocent or sinful; so
113 that, as we are all bound together in our Head, so are we bound together, as members
114 of one body, in that body, and believe, obey, sin, and repent, all in common.

115 I do not wish to state this too strongly. Doubtless there are very many differences
116 between Christian and Christian. Though their nature is the same, and their general
117 duties, hindrances, helps, privileges, and rewards the same, yet certainly there are
118 great differences of character, and peculiarities belonging either to individuals or to
119 classes. High and low, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, man and woman, bond and free,
120 learned and unlearned, though equal in the Gospel, do in many respects differ, so that
121 descriptions of what passes in the mind of one will often appear strange and new to the
122 other. Their temptations differ, and their diseases of mind. And the difference becomes
123 far greater, by the difficulty persons have of expressing exactly what they mean, so that
124 they convey wrong ideas to one another, and offend and repel those who really do feel
125 what they feel, though they would express themselves otherwise.

126 Again, of course there is this great difference between Christians, that some are
127 penitents, and some have never fallen away since they were brought near to God; some
128 have fallen for a time, and grievously; others for long years, yet perhaps only in lesser
129 matters. These circumstances will make real differences between Christian and
130 Christian, so as sometimes even to remove the possibility of sympathy almost
131 altogether. Sin certainly does contrive this victory in some cases, to hinder us being
132 even fellows in misery; it separates us while it seduces, and, being the broad way, has
133 different lesser tracks marked out upon it.

134 But still, after all such exceptions, I consider that Christians, certainly those who are in
135 the same outward circumstances, are very much more like each other in their
136 temptations, inward diseases, and methods of cure, than they at all imagine. Persons
137 think themselves isolated in the world; they think no one ever felt as they feel. They do
138 not dare to expose their feelings, lest they should find that no one understands them.
139 And thus they suffer to wither and decay what was destined in God's purpose to adorn
140 the Church's paradise with beauty and sweetness. Their "mouth is not opened," as the
141 Apostle speaks, nor their "heart enlarged;" they are "straitened" in themselves, and
142 deny themselves the means they possess of at once imparting instruction and gaining
143 comfort.

144 Nay, instead of speaking out their own thoughts, they suffer the world's opinion to hang
145 upon them as a load, or the influence of some system of religion which is in vogue. It
146 very frequently happens that ten thousand people all say what not any one of them
147 feels, but each says it because every one else says it, and each fears not to say it lest
148 he should incur the censure of all the rest. Such are very commonly what are called the
149 opinions of the age. They are bad principles or doctrines, or false notions or views,
150 which live in the mouths of men, and have their strength in their public recognition. Of
151 course by proud men, or blind, or carnal, or worldly, these opinions which I speak of are
152 really felt and entered into; for they are the natural growth of their own evil hearts. But
153 very frequently the same are set forth, and heralded, and circulated, and become
154 current opinions, among vast multitudes of men who do not feel them. These
155 multitudes, however, are obliged to receive them by what is called the force of public
156 opinion; the careless of course, carelessly, but the better sort superstitiously. Thus ways
157 of speech come in, and modes of thought quite alien to the minds of those who give in
158 to them, who feel them to be unreal, unnatural, and uncongenial to themselves, but
159 consider themselves obliged, often from the most religious principles, not to confess
160 their feelings about them. They dare not say, they dare not even realize to themselves
161 their own judgments. Thus it is that the world cuts off the intercourse between soul and
162 soul, and substitutes idols of its own for the one true Image of Christ, in and through
163 which only souls can sympathise. Their best thoughts are stifled, and when by chance
164 they hear them put forth elsewhere, as may sometimes be the case, they feel as it were
165 conscious and guilty, as if some one were revealing something against them, and they
166 shrink from the sound as from a temptation, as something pleasing indeed but
167 forbidden. Such is the power of false creeds to fetter the mind and bring it into captivity;
168 false views of things, of facts, of doctrines, are imposed on it tyrannically, and men live
169 and die in bondage, who were destined to rise to the stature of the fulness of Christ.

170 Such, for example, I consider to be, among many instances, the interpretation which is
171 popularly received among us at present, of the doctrinal portion of St. Paul's Epistles, an
172 interpretation which has troubled large portions of the Church for a long three hundred
173 years.

174 But, I repeat, we are much more like each other, even in our sins, than we fancy. I do
175 not of course mean to say, that we are one and all at the same point in our Christian
176 course, or have one and all had the same religious history in times past; but that, even
177 taking a man who has never fallen from grace, and one who has fallen most grievously
178 and repented, even they will be found to be very much more like each other in their view
179 of themselves, in their temptations, and feelings upon those temptations, than they
180 might fancy beforehand. This we see most strikingly instanced when holy men set about
181 to describe their real state. Even bad men at once cry out, "This is just our case," and
182 argue from it that there is no difference between bad and good. They impute all their
183 own sins to the holiest of men, as making their own lives a sort of comment upon the
184 text which his words furnish, and appealing to the appositeness of their own
185 interpretation in proof of its correctness. And I suppose it cannot be denied, concerning
186 all of us, that we are generally surprised to hear the strong language which good men
187 use of themselves, as if such confessions showed them to be more like ourselves, and
188 much less holy than we had fancied them to be. And on the other hand, I suppose, any
189 man of tolerably correct life, whatever his positive advancement in grace, will seldom
190 read accounts of notoriously bad men, in which their ways and feelings are described,
191 without being shocked to find that these more or less cast a meaning upon his own
192 heart, and bring out into light and colour lines and shapes of thought within him, which,
193 till then, were almost invisible. Now this does not show that bad and good men are on a
194 level, but it shows this, that they are of the same nature. It shows that the one has within
195 him in tendency, what the other has brought out into actual existence; so that the good
196 has nothing to boast of over the bad, and while what is good in him is from God's grace,
197 there is an abundance left, which marks him as being beyond all doubt of one blood
198 with those sons of Adam who are still far from Christ their Redeemer. And if this is true
199 of bad and good, much more is it true in the case of which I am speaking, that is of good
200 men one with another; of penitents and the upright. They understand each other far
201 more than might at first have been supposed. And whereas their sense of the
202 heinousness of sin rises with their own purity, those who are holiest will speak of
203 themselves in the same terms as impure persons use about themselves; so that
204 Christians, though they really differ much, yet as regards the power of sympathising with
205 each other will be found to be on a level. The one is not too high or the other too low.
206 They have common ground; and as they have one faith and hope, and one Spirit, so
207 also they have one and the same circle of temptations, and one and the same
208 confession.

209 It were well if we understood all this. Perhaps the reason why the standard of holiness
210 among us is so low, why our attainments are so poor, our view of the truth so dim, our
211 belief so unreal, our general notions so artificial and external is this, that we dare not
212 trust each other with the secret of our hearts. We have each the same secret, and we
213 keep it to ourselves, and we fear that, as a cause of estrangement, which really would

214 be a bond of union. We do not probe the wounds of our nature thoroughly; we do not lay
215 the foundation of our religious profession in the ground of our inner man; we make clean
216 the outside of things; we are amiable and friendly to each other in words and deeds, but
217 our love is not enlarged, our bowels of affection are straitened, and we fear to let the
218 intercourse begin at the root; and, in consequence, our religion, viewed as a social
219 system, is hollow. The presence of Christ is not in it.

220 To conclude. If it be awful to tell to another in our own way what we are, what will be the
221 awfulness of that Day when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed! Let us ever bear
222 this in mind when we fear that others should know what we are really:—whether we are
223 right or wrong in hiding our sins now, it is a vain notion if we suppose they will always be
224 hidden. The Day shall declare it; the Lord will come in Judgment; He "will bring to light
225 the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts." [1
226 Cor. iv. 5.] With this thought before us, surely it is a little thing whether or not man
227 knows us here. *Then* will be knowledge without sympathy: then will be shame with
228 everlasting contempt. Now, though there be shame, there is comfort and a soothing
229 relief; though there be awe, it is greater on the side of him who hears than of him who
230 makes avowal.