

1 "The Humiliation of the Eternal Son"  
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3 St. John Henry Newman  
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5 "Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with  
6 strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard  
7 in that He feared, though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which  
8 He suffered." Hebrews v. 7, 8.

9 THE chief mystery of our holy faith is the humiliation of the Son of God to temptation  
10 and suffering, as described in this passage of Scripture. In truth, it is a more  
11 overwhelming mystery even than that which is involved in the doctrine of the Trinity. I  
12 say, more overwhelming, not greater—for we cannot measure the more and the less in  
13 subjects utterly incomprehensible and divine; but with more in it to perplex and subdue  
14 our minds. When the mystery of the Trinity is set before us, we see indeed that it is  
15 quite beyond our reason; but, at the same time, it is no wonder that human language  
16 should be unable to convey, and human intellect to receive, truths relating to the  
17 incommunicable and infinite essence of Almighty God. But the mystery of the  
18 Incarnation relates, in part, to subjects more level with our reason; it lies not only in the  
19 manner how God and man is one Christ, but in the very fact that so it is. We think we  
20 know of God so much as this, that He is altogether separate from imperfection and  
21 infirmity; yet we are told that the Eternal Son has taken into Himself a creature's nature,  
22 which henceforth became as much one with Him, as much belonged to Him, as the  
23 divine attributes and powers which He had ever had. The mystery lies as much in what  
24 we think we know, as in what we do not know. Reflect, for instance, upon the language  
25 of the text. The Son of God, who "had glory with the Father" from everlasting, was  
26 found, at a certain time, in human flesh, offering up prayers and supplications to Him,  
27 crying out and weeping, and exercising obedience in suffering! Do not suppose, from  
28 my thus speaking, that I would put the doctrine before you as a hard saying, as a  
29 stumbling-block, and a yoke of bondage, to which you must perforce submit, however  
30 unwillingly. Far be it from us to take such unthankful account of a dispensation which  
31 has brought us salvation! Those who in the Cross of Christ see the Atonement for sin,  
32 cannot choose but glory in it; and its mysteriousness does but make them glory in it the  
33 more. They boast of it before men and Angels, before an unbelieving world, and before  
34 fallen spirits; with no confusion of face, but with a reverent boldness they confess this  
35 miracle of grace, and cherish it in their creed, though it gains them but the contempt and  
36 derision of the proud and ungodly.

37 And as the doctrine of our Lord's humiliation is most mysterious, so the very surface of  
38 the narrative in which it is contained is mysterious also, as exciting wonder, and  
39 impressing upon us our real ignorance of the nature, manner, and causes of it. Take, for  
40 instance, His temptation. Why was it undergone at all, seeing our redemption is  
41 ascribed to His death, not to it? Why was it so long? What took place during it? What  
42 was Satan's particular object in tempting Him? How came Satan to have such power  
43 over Him as to be able to transport Him from place to place? and what was the precise

44 result of the temptation? These and many other questions admit of no satisfactory  
45 solution. There is something remarkable too in the period of it, being the same as that of  
46 the long fasts of Moses and Elijah, and of His own abode on earth after His resurrection.  
47 A like mystery again is cast around that last period of His earthly mission. Then He was  
48 engaged we know not how, except that He appeared, from time to time, to His Apostles;  
49 of the forty days of His temptation we know still less, only that "He did eat nothing," and  
50 "was with the wild beasts." [Luke iv. 2. Mark i. 13.]

51 Again, there is something of mystery in the connection of His temptation with the  
52 descent of the Holy Ghost upon Him on His baptism. After the voice from heaven had  
53 proclaimed, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," "*immediately*," as St.  
54 Mark says, "the Spirit *driveth* Him into the wilderness." As if there were some  
55 connection, beyond our understanding, between His baptism and temptation, the first  
56 act of the Holy Spirit is forthwith to "drive Him" (whatever is meant by the word) into the  
57 wilderness. Observe, too, that it was almost from this solemn recognition, "This is My  
58 beloved Son," that the Devil took up the temptation, "*If* Thou be the Son of God,  
59 command that these stones be made bread;" [Matt. iv. 3.] yet what his thoughts and  
60 designs were we cannot even conjecture. All we see is a renewal, apparently, of Adam's  
61 temptation, in the person of the "second Man."

62 In like manner, questions might be asked concerning His descent into hell, which could  
63 as little be solved, with our present limited knowledge of the nature and means of His  
64 gracious Economy.

65 I bring together these various questions in order to impress upon you our depth of  
66 ignorance on the entire subject under review. The Dispensation of mercy is revealed to  
67 us in its great and blessed result, our redemption, and in one or two other momentous  
68 points. Upon all these we ought to dwell and enlarge, mindfully and thankfully, but with  
69 the constant recollection that after all, as regards the Dispensation itself, only one or two  
70 partial notices are revealed to us altogether of a great Divine Work. Enlarge upon them  
71 we ought, even because they are few and partial, not slighting what is given us,  
72 because it is not all (like the servant who buried his lord's talent), but giving it what  
73 increase we can. And as there is much danger of the narrow spirit of that slothful  
74 servant at the present day, in which is strangely combined a profession of knowing  
75 everything, with an assertion that there is nothing to know concerning the Incarnation, I  
76 propose now, by God's blessing, to set before you the Scripture doctrine concerning it,  
77 as the Church Catholic has ever received it; trading with the talent committed to us, so  
78 that when our Lord comes He may receive His own with usury.

79 Bearing in mind, then, that we know nothing truly about the manner or the ultimate ends  
80 of the humiliation of the Eternal Son, our Lord and Saviour, let us consider what that  
81 humiliation itself was.

82 The text says, "though He were a Son." Now, in these words, "the Son of God," much  
83 more is implied than at first sight may appear. Many a man gathers up, here and there,  
84 some fragments of religious knowledge. He hears one thing said in Church, he sees

85 another thing in the Prayer-book; and among religious people, or in the world, he gains  
86 something more. In this way he gets possession of sacred words and statements,  
87 knowing very little about them really. He interprets them, as it may happen, according to  
88 the various and inconsistent opinions which he has met with, or he puts his own  
89 meaning upon them, that is, the meaning, as must needs be, of an untaught, not to say  
90 a carnal and irreverent mind. How can a man expect he shall discern and apprehend  
91 the real meaning and language of Scripture, if he has never approached it as a learner,  
92 and waited on the Divine Author of it for the gift of wisdom? By continual meditation on  
93 the sacred text, by diligent use of the Church's instruction, he will come to understand  
94 what the Gospel doctrines are; but, most surely, if all the knowledge he has be gathered  
95 from a sentence caught up here, and an argument heard there, even when he is most  
96 orthodox in word, he has but a collection of phrases, on which he puts, not the right  
97 meaning, but his own meaning. And the least reflection must show you what a very poor  
98 and unworthy meaning, or rather how false a meaning "the natural man" will put upon  
99 "the things of the Spirit of God." I have been led to say this from having used the words,  
100 "The Son of God," which, I much fear, convey, to a great many minds, little or no idea,  
101 little or nothing of a high, religious, solemn idea. We have, perhaps, a vague general  
102 notion that they mean something extraordinary and supernatural; but we know that we  
103 ourselves are called, in one sense, sons of God in Scripture. Moreover we have heard,  
104 perhaps (and even though we do not recollect it, yet may retain the impression of it),  
105 that the Angels are sons of God. In consequence, we collect just thus much from the  
106 title as applied to our Lord, that He came from God, that He was the well-beloved of  
107 God, and that He is much more than a mere man. This is all that the words convey to  
108 many men at the most; while many more refer them merely to His human nature. How  
109 different is the state of those who have been duly initiated into the mysteries of the  
110 kingdom of heaven! How different was the mind of the primitive Christians, who so  
111 eagerly and vigorously apprehended the gracious announcement, that in this title, "The  
112 Son of God," they saw and enjoyed the full glories of the Gospel doctrine! When times  
113 grew cold and unbelieving, then indeed, as at this day, public explanations were  
114 necessary of those simple and sacred words; but the first Christians needed none. They  
115 felt that in saying that Christ was the Son of God, they were witnessing to a thousand  
116 marvellous and salutary truths, which they could not indeed understand, but by which  
117 they might gain life, and for which they could dare to die.

118 What, then, is meant by the "Son of God?" It is meant that our Lord is the very or true  
119 Son of God, that is, His Son by nature. We are but *called* the sons of God—we are  
120 adopted to be sons—but our Lord and Saviour is the Son of God, really and by birth,  
121 and He alone is such. Hence Scripture calls Him the Only-begotten Son. "Such  
122 knowledge is too excellent for" us; yet, however high it be, we learn as from His own  
123 mouth that God is not solitary, if we may dare so to speak, but that in His own  
124 incomprehensible essence, in His perfection of His one indivisible and eternal nature,  
125 His Dearly-beloved Son has ever existed with Him, who is called the Word, and, being  
126 His Son, is partaker in all the fulness of His Godhead. "In the beginning was the Word,  
127 and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Thus when the early Christians  
128 used the title, "The Son of God," they meant, after the manner of the Apostles when  
129 they use it in Scripture, all we mean in the Creed, when, by way of explaining ourselves,

130 we confess Him to be "God from God, Light from Light, Very or True God from True  
131 God." For in that He is the Son of God, He must be whatever God is, all-holy, all-wise,  
132 all-powerful, all-good, eternal, infinite; yet since there is only one God, He must be at  
133 the same time not separate from God, but ever one with and in Him, one indivisibly; so  
134 that it would be as idle language to speak of Him as separated in essence from His  
135 Father, as to say that our reason, or intellect, or will, was separate from our minds—as  
136 rash and profane language to deny to the Father His Only-begotten Word, in whom He  
137 has ever delighted, as to deny His Wisdom or Goodness, or Power, which also have  
138 been in and with Him from everlasting.

139 The text goes on to say: "Though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the  
140 things which He suffered." Obedience belongs to a servant, but accordance,  
141 concurrence, co-operation, are the characteristics of a Son. In His eternal union with  
142 God there was no distinction of will and work between Him and His Father; as the  
143 Father's life was the Son's life, and the Father's glory the Son's also, so the Son was the  
144 very Word and Wisdom of the Father, His Power and Co-equal Minister in all things, the  
145 same and not the same as He Himself. But in the days of His flesh, when He had  
146 humbled Himself to "the form of a servant," taking on Himself a separate will and a  
147 separate work, and the toil and sufferings incident to a creature, then what had been  
148 mere concurrence became obedience. This, then, is the force of the words, "Though He  
149 was a Son, yet had He experience of *obedience*." He took on Him a lower nature, and  
150 wrought in it towards a Will higher and more perfect than it. Further, "He learned  
151 obedience amid *suffering*," and, therefore, amid temptation. His mysterious agony under  
152 it is described in the former part of the text; which declares that "in the days of His  
153 flesh," He "offered up prayers and supplications, with strong crying and tears, unto Him  
154 that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared." Or, in the  
155 words of the foregoing chapter, He "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without  
156 sin."

157 I am only concerned here in setting before you the sacred truth itself, not how it was, or  
158 why, or with what result. Let us, then, reverently consider what is implied in it. "The  
159 Word was made flesh;" by which is meant, not that He selected some particular existing  
160 man and dwelt in him (which in no sense would answer to the force of those words, and  
161 which He condescends to do continually in the case of all His elect, through His Spirit),  
162 but that He became what He was not before, that He took into His own Infinite Essence  
163 man's nature itself in all its completeness, creating a soul and body, and, at the moment  
164 of creation, making them His own, so that they never were other than His, never existed  
165 by themselves or except as in Him, being properties or attributes of Him (to use  
166 defective words) as really as His divine goodness, or His eternal Sonship, or His perfect  
167 likeness to the Father. And, while thus adding a new nature to Himself, He did not in  
168 any respect cease to be what He was before. How was that possible? All the while He  
169 was on earth, when He was conceived, when He was born, when He was tempted, on  
170 the cross, in the grave, and now at God's right hand—all the time through, He was the  
171 Eternal and Unchangeable Word, the Son of God. The flesh which He had assumed  
172 was but the instrument through which He acted for and towards us. As He acts in  
173 creation by His wisdom and power, towards Angels by His love, towards devils by His

174 wrath, so He has acted for our redemption through our own nature, which in His great  
175 mercy He attached to His own Person, as if an attribute, simply, absolutely, indissolubly.  
176 Thus St. Paul speaks—as in other places, of the love of God, and the holiness of God—  
177 so in one place expressly of "the blood of God," if I may venture to use such words out  
178 of the sacred context. "Feed the Church of God," he says to the elders of Ephesus,  
179 "which He hath purchased with *His own blood*." [Acts xx. 28.] Accordingly, whatever our  
180 Lord said or did upon earth was strictly and literally the word and deed of God Himself.  
181 Just as we speak of seeing our friends, though we do not see their souls but merely  
182 their bodies, so the Apostles, Disciples, Priests, and Pharisees, and the multitude, all  
183 who saw Christ in the flesh, saw, as the whole earth will see at the last day, the Very  
184 and Eternal Son of God.

185 After this manner, then, must be understood His suffering, temptation, and obedience,  
186 not as if He ceased to be what He had ever been, but, having clothed Himself with a  
187 created essence, He made it the instrument of His humiliation; He acted in it, He  
188 obeyed and suffered through it. Do not we see among men, circumstances of a peculiar  
189 kind throw one of our own race out of himself, so that he, the same man, acts as if his  
190 usual self were not in being, and he had fresh feelings and faculties, for the occasion,  
191 higher or lower than before? Far be it from our thoughts to parallel the incarnation of the  
192 Eternal Word with such an accidental change! but I mention it, not to explain a Mystery  
193 (which I relinquished the thought of from the first), but to facilitate your *conception* of  
194 Him who is the subject of it, to help you towards contemplating Him as God and man at  
195 once, as still the Son of God though He had assumed a nature short of His original  
196 perfection. That Eternal Power, which, till then, had thought and acted as God, began to  
197 think and act as a man, with all man's faculties, affections, and imperfections, sin  
198 excepted. Before He came on earth, He was infinitely above joy and grief, fear and  
199 anger, pain and heaviness; but afterwards all these properties and many more were His  
200 as fully as they are ours. Before He came on earth, He had but the perfections of God,  
201 but afterwards He had also the virtues of a creature, such as faith, meekness, self-  
202 denial. Before He came on earth He could not be tempted of evil; but afterwards He had  
203 a man's heart, a man's tears, and a man's wants and infirmities. His Divine Nature  
204 indeed pervaded His manhood, so that every deed and word of His in the flesh  
205 savoured of eternity and infinity; but, on the other hand, from the time He was born of  
206 the Virgin Mary, he had a natural fear of danger, a natural shrinking from pain, though  
207 ever subject to the ruling influence of that Holy and Eternal Essence which was in Him.  
208 For instance, we read on one occasion of His praying that the cup might pass from Him;  
209 and, at another, when Peter showed surprise at the prospect of His crucifixion, He  
210 rebuked him sharply, as if for tempting Him to murmur and disobey.

211 Thus He possessed at once a double assemblage of attributes, divine and human. Still  
212 he was all-powerful, though in the form of a servant; still He was all-knowing, though  
213 seemingly ignorant; still incapable of temptation, though exposed to it; and if any one  
214 stumble at this, as not a mere mystery, but in the very form of language a contradiction  
215 of terms, I would have him reflect on those peculiarities of human nature itself, which I  
216 just now hinted at. Let him consider the condition of his own mind, and see how like a  
217 contradiction it is. Let him reflect upon the faculty of memory, and try to determine

218 whether he does or does not know a thing which he cannot recollect, or rather, whether  
219 it may not be said of him, that one self-same person, that in one sense he knows it, in  
220 another he does not know it. This may serve to appease his imagination, if it startles at  
221 the mystery. Or let him consider the state of an infant, which seems, indeed, to be  
222 without a soul for many months, which seems to have only the senses and functions of  
223 animal life, yet has, we know, a soul, which may even be regenerated. What, indeed,  
224 can be more mysterious than the Baptism of an infant? How strange is it, yet how  
225 transporting a sight, what a source of meditation is opened on us, while we look upon  
226 what seems so helpless, so reason-less, and know that at that moment it has a soul so  
227 fully formed, as on the one hand, indeed, to be a child of wrath; and, on the other  
228 (blessed be God), to be capable of a new birth through the Spirit! Who can say, if we  
229 had eyes to see, in what state that infant soul is? Who can say it has not its energies of  
230 reason and of will in some unknown sphere, quite consistently with the reality of its  
231 insensibility to the external world? Who can say that all of us, or at least all who are  
232 living in the faith of Christ, have not some strange but unconscious life in God's  
233 presence all the while we are here, seeing what we do not know we see, impressed yet  
234 without power of reflection, and this, without having a double self in consequence, and  
235 with an increase to us, not a diminution, of the practical reality of our earthly sojourn and  
236 probation? Are there not men before now who, like Elisha, when his spirit followed  
237 Gehazi, or St. Peter, when he announced the coming of Sapphira's bearers, or St. Paul,  
238 when his presence went before him to Corinth [2 Kings v. 26. Acts v. 9. 1 Cor. iv. 19; v.  
239 3.], seem to range beyond themselves, even while in the flesh? Who knows where he is  
240 "in visions of the night?" And this being so, how can we pronounce it to be any  
241 contradiction that, while the Word of God was upon earth, in our flesh, compassed  
242 within and without with human virtues and feelings, with faith and patience, fear and joy,  
243 grief, misgivings, infirmities, temptations, still He was, according to His Divine Nature, as  
244 from the first, passing in thought from one end of heaven even to the other, reading all  
245 hearts, foreseeing all events, and receiving all worship as in the bosom of the Father?  
246 This, indeed, is what He suggests to us Himself in those surprising words addressed to  
247 Nicodemus, which might even be taken to imply that even His human nature was at that  
248 very time in heaven while He spoke to him. "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but  
249 He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man, which *is in heaven*." [John iii.  
250 13.]

251 To conclude, if any one is tempted to consider such subjects as the foregoing, abstract,  
252 speculative, and unprofitable, I would observe, in answer, that I have taken it on the  
253 very ground of its being, as I believe, especially practical. Let it not be thought a strange  
254 thing to say, though I say it, that there is much in the religious belief, even of the more  
255 serious part of the community at present, to make observant men very anxious where it  
256 will end. It would be no very difficult matter, I suspect, to perplex the faith of a great  
257 many persons who believe themselves to be orthodox, and, indeed, are so, according to  
258 their light. They have been accustomed to call Christ God, but that is all; they have not  
259 considered what is meant by applying that title to One who was really a man, and from  
260 the vague way in which they use it, they would be in no small danger, if assailed by a  
261 subtle disputant, of being robbed of the sacred truth in its substance, even if they kept it  
262 in name. In truth, until we contemplate our Lord and Saviour, God and man, as a really

263 existing being, external to our minds, as complete and entire in His personality as we  
264 show ourselves to be to each other, as one and the same in all His various and contrary  
265 attributes, "the same yesterday, today, and for ever," we are using words which profit  
266 not. Till then we do not realize that Object of faith, which is not a mere name on which  
267 titles and properties may be affixed without congruity and meaning, but has a personal  
268 existence and an identity distinct from everything else. In what true sense do we "know"  
269 Him, if our idea of Him be not such as to take up and incorporate into itself the manifold  
270 attributes and offices which we ascribe to Him? What do we gain from words, however  
271 correct and abundant, if they end with themselves, instead of lighting up the image of  
272 the Incarnate Son in our hearts? Yet this charge may too surely be brought against the  
273 theology of late centuries, which, under the pretence of guarding against presumption,  
274 denies us what is revealed; like Ahaz, refusing to ask for a sign, lest it should tempt the  
275 Lord.

276 Influenced by it, we have well-nigh forgotten the sacred truth, graciously disclosed for  
277 our support, that Christ is the Son of God in His Divine nature, as well as His human; we  
278 have well-nigh ceased to regard Him, after the pattern of the Nicene Creed, as "God  
279 from God, and Light from Light," ever one with Him, yet ever distinct from Him. We  
280 speak of Him in a vague way as God, which is true, but not the whole truth; and, in  
281 consequence when we proceed to consider His humiliation, we are unable to carry on  
282 the notion of His personality from heaven to earth. He who was but now spoken of as  
283 God, without mention of the Father from whom He is, is next described as if a creature;  
284 but how do these distinct notions of Him hold together in our minds? We are able  
285 indeed to continue the idea of a Son into that of a servant, though the descent was  
286 infinite, and, to our reason, incomprehensible; but when we merely speak first of God,  
287 then of man, we seem to change the Nature without preserving the Person. In truth, His  
288 Divine Sonship is that portion of the sacred doctrine on which the mind is providentially  
289 intended to rest throughout, and so to preserve for itself His identity unbroken. But when  
290 we abandon this gracious help afforded to our faith, how can we hope to gain the one  
291 true and simple vision of Him? how shall we possibly look beyond our own words, or  
292 apprehend, in any sort, what we say? In consequence we are too often led, as a matter  
293 of necessity, in discoursing of His words and works, to distinguish between the Christ  
294 who lived on earth and the Son of God Most High, speaking of His human nature and  
295 His Divine nature so separately as not to feel or understand that God is man and man is  
296 God. I am speaking of those of us who have learned to reflect, reason, and dispute, to  
297 inquire and pursue their thoughts, not of the incurious or illiterate, who are not exposed  
298 to the temptation in question; and of the former I fear I must say (to use the language of  
299 ancient theology), that they begin by being Sabellians, that they go on to be Nestorians,  
300 and that they tend to be Ebionites and to deny Christ's Divinity altogether. Meanwhile,  
301 the religious world little thinks whither its opinions are leading; and will not discover that  
302 it is adoring a mere abstract name or a vague creation of the mind for the Ever-living  
303 Son, till the defection of its members from the faith startle it, and teach it that the so-  
304 called religion of the heart, without orthodoxy of doctrine, is but the warmth of a corpse,  
305 real for a time, but sure to fail.

306 How long will that complicated Error last under which our Church now labours? How  
307 long are human traditions of modern date to obscure, in so many ways, the majestic  
308 interpretations of Holy Writ which the Church Catholic has inherited from the age of the  
309 Apostles? When shall we be content to enjoy the wisdom and the pureness which Christ  
310 has bequeathed to His Church as a perpetual gift, instead of attempting to draw our  
311 Creed, each for himself, as he best may, from the deep wells of truth? Surely in vain  
312 have we escaped from the superstitions of the middle ages, if the corruptions of a rash  
313 and self-trusting philosophy spread over our faith!

314 May God, even the Father, give us a heart and understanding to realize, as well as to  
315 confess that doctrine into which we were baptized, that His Only-begotten Son, our  
316 Lord, was conceived by the Holy Ghost, was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered, and was  
317 buried, rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven, from whence He shall come  
318 again, at the end of the world, to judge the quick and the dead.