

1 "The Mysteriousness of our Present Being"  
2 *Parochial and Plain Sermons* vol. IV sermon 19  
3 St. John Henry Newman  
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5 "I will praise Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvellous are Thy works,  
6 and that my soul knoweth right well." Psalm cxxxix. 14.

7 IN the very impressive Psalm from which these words are taken, this is worth noticing  
8 among other things,—that the inspired writer finds in the mysteries without and within  
9 him, a source of admiration and praise. "I will *praise* Thee, *for* I am fearfully and  
10 wonderfully made; *marvellous* are Thy works." When Nicodemus heard of God's  
11 wonderful working, he said, "How can these things be?" But holy David glories in what  
12 the natural man stumbles at. It awes his heart and imagination, to think that God sees  
13 him, wherever he is, yet without provoking or irritating his reason. He has no proud  
14 thoughts rising against what he cannot understand, and calling for his vigilant control.  
15 He does not submit his reason by an effort, but he bursts forth in exultation, to think that  
16 God is so mysterious. "Such knowledge," he says, "is too wonderful for me; it is high, I  
17 cannot attain unto it." Again, "How precious are Thy thoughts unto me, O God!"

18 This reflection is suitable on the Festival which we are at present engaged in  
19 celebrating, on which our thoughts are especially turned to the great doctrine of the  
20 Trinity in Unity. It is my intention now to make some remarks upon it; not however  
21 explanatory of the doctrine itself, which we have today confessed in the Athanasian  
22 Creed as fully and explicitly as it can be set forth in human words; but I will endeavour  
23 from the text to show, that the difficulty which human words have in expressing it, is no  
24 greater than we meet with when we would express in human words even those earthly  
25 things of which we actually have experience, and which we cannot deny to exist,  
26 because we witness them: so that our part evidently lies in using the mysteries of  
27 religion, as David did, simply as a means of impressing on our minds the  
28 inscrutableness of Almighty God. Mysteries in religion are measured by the proud  
29 according to their own comprehension, by the humble, according to the power of God;  
30 the humble glorify God for them, the proud exalt themselves against them.

31 The text speaks of earthly things,—"I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Now, let us  
32 observe some of the mysteries which are involved in our own nature.

33 1. First, we are made up of soul and body. Now, if we did not know this, so that we  
34 cannot deny it, what notion could our minds ever form of such a mixture of natures, and  
35 how should we ever succeed in making those who go only by abstract reason take in  
36 what we meant? The body is made of matter; this we see; it has a certain extension,  
37 make, form, and solidity; by the soul we mean that invisible principle which thinks. We  
38 are conscious we are alive, and are rational; each man has his own thoughts, feelings,  
39 and desires; each man is one to himself, and he knows himself to be one and  
40 indivisible,—one in such sense, that while he exists, it were an absurdity to suppose he  
41 can be any other than himself; one in a sense in which no material body which consists

42 of parts can be one. He is sure that he is distinct from the body, though joined to it,  
43 because he is one, and the body is not one, but a collection of many things. He feels  
44 moreover that he is distinct from it, because he uses it; for what a man can use, to that  
45 he is superior. No one can by any possibility mistake his body for himself. It is *his*; it is  
46 not he. This principle, then, which thinks and acts in the body, and which each person  
47 feels to be himself, we call the soul. We do not know what it is; it cannot be reached by  
48 any of the senses; we cannot see it or touch it. It has nothing in common with extension  
49 or form; to ask what shape the soul is, would be as absurd as to ask what is the shape  
50 of a thought, or a wish, or a regret, or a hope. And hence we call the soul spiritual and  
51 immaterial, and say that it has no parts, and is of no size at all. All this seems  
52 undeniable. Yet observe, if all this be true, what is meant by saying that it is *in* the body,  
53 any more than saying that a thought or a hope is in a stone or a tree? *How* is it joined to  
54 the body? what keeps it one with the body? what keeps it in the body? what prevents it  
55 any moment from separating from the body? when two things which we see are united,  
56 they are united by some connexion which we can understand. A chain or cable keeps a  
57 ship in its place; we lay the foundation of a building in the earth, and the building  
58 endures. But what is it which unites soul and body? how do they touch? how do they  
59 keep together? how is it we do not wander to the stars or the depths of the sea, or to  
60 and fro as chance may carry us, while our body remains where it was on earth? So far  
61 from its being wonderful that the body one day dies, how is it that it is made to live and  
62 move at all? how is it that it keeps from dying a single hour? Certainly it is as  
63 incomprehensible as any thing can be, how soul and body can make up one man; and,  
64 unless we had the instance before our eyes, we should seem in saying so to be using  
65 words without meaning. For instance, would it not be extravagant and idle to speak of  
66 time as deep or high, or of space as quick or slow? Not less idle, surely, it perchance  
67 seems to some races of spirits to say that thought and mind have a body, which in the  
68 case of man they have, according to God's marvellous will. It is certain, then, that  
69 experience outstrips reason in its capacity of knowledge; why then should reason  
70 circumscribe faith, when it cannot compass sight?

71 2. Again: the soul is not only one, and without parts, but moreover, as if by a great  
72 contradiction even in terms, it is in every part of the body. It is no where, yet every  
73 where. It may be said, indeed, that it is especially in the brain; but, granting this for  
74 argument's sake, yet it is quite certain, since every part of his body belongs to him, that  
75 a man's self is in every part of his body. No part of a man's body is like a mere  
76 instrument, as a knife, or a crutch might be, which he takes up and may lay down. Every  
77 part of it is part of himself; it is collected into one by his soul, which is one. Supposing  
78 we take stones and raise a house, the building is not *really* one; it is composed of a  
79 number of separate parts, which viewed as collected together, we call one, but which  
80 are not one except in our notion of them. But the hands and feet, the head and trunk,  
81 form one body under the presence of the soul within them. Unless the soul were in  
82 every part, they would not form one body; so that the soul is in every part, uniting it with  
83 every other, though it consists of no parts at all. I do not of course mean that there is  
84 any real contradiction in these opposite truths; indeed, we know there is not, and cannot  
85 be, because they *are* true, because human nature is a fact before us. But the state of  
86 the case is a contradiction *when put into words*; we cannot so express it as not to

87 involve an apparent contradiction; and then, if we discriminate our terms, and make  
88 distinctions, and balance phrases, and so on, we shall seem to be technical, artificial  
89 and speculative, and to use words without meaning.

90 Now, this is precisely our difficulty, as regards the doctrine of the Ever-blessed Trinity.  
91 We have never been in heaven; God, as He is in Himself, is hid from us. We are  
92 informed concerning him by those who were inspired by Him for the purpose, nay by  
93 One who "knoweth the Father," His Co-eternal Son Himself, when He came on earth.  
94 And, in the message which they brought to us from above, are declarations concerning  
95 his nature, which seem to run counter the one to the other. He is revealed to us as One  
96 God, the Father, One indivisible Spirit; yet there is said to exist in Him from everlasting  
97 His Only-begotten Son, the same as He is, and yet distinct, and from and in Them both,  
98 from everlasting and indivisibly, exists the Co-equal Spirit. All this, put into words,  
99 seems a contradiction in terms; men have urged it as such; then Christians, lest they  
100 should seem to be unduly and harshly insisting upon words which clash with each other,  
101 and so should dishonour the truth of God, and cause hearers to stumble, have guarded  
102 their words, and explained them; and then for doing this they have been accused of  
103 speculating and theorizing. The same result, doubtless, would take place in the parallel  
104 case already mentioned. Had we no bodies, and were a revelation made us that there  
105 was a race who had bodies as well as souls, what a number of powerful objections  
106 should we seem to possess against that revelation! We might plausibly say, that the  
107 words used in conveying it were arbitrary and unmeaning. What (we should ask) was  
108 the meaning of saying that the soul had no parts, yet was in every part of the body?  
109 what was meant by saying it was every where and no where? how could it be one, and  
110 yet repeated, as it were, ten thousand times over in every atom and pore of the body,  
111 which it was said to exist in? how could it be confined to the body at all? how did it act  
112 upon the body? How happened it, as was pretended, that, when the soul did but will, the  
113 arm moved, or the feet walked? how can a spirit which cannot touch any thing, yet avail  
114 to move so large a mass of matter, and so easily as the human body? These are some  
115 of the questions which might be asked, partly on the ground that the alleged fact was  
116 impossible, partly that the idea was self-contradictory. And these are just the kind of  
117 questions with which arrogant and profane minds do assail the revealed doctrine of the  
118 Holy Trinity.

119 3. Further consider what a strange state we are in when we dream, and how difficult it  
120 would be to convey to a person who had never dreamed what was meant by  
121 dreaming. *His* vocabulary would contain no words to express any middle idea between  
122 perfect possession and entire suspension of the mind's powers. He would understand  
123 what it was to be awake, what it was to be insensible; but a state between the two he  
124 would neither have words to describe, nor, if he were self-confident and arrogant,  
125 inclination to believe, however well it was attested by those who ought to know. I do not  
126 say there is no conceivable accumulation of evidence that would subdue such a man's  
127 reason, since we see sometimes men's reason subdued by the evidences of the  
128 Gospel, whose hearts are imperfectly affected; but I mean, that this earthly  
129 mystery *might* be brought before a man with about that degree of evidence in its favour  
130 which the Gospel actually has, not ordinarily overpowering, but constituting a *trial* of his

131 heart, a trial, that is, whether the mysteries contained in it do or do not rouse his pride.  
132 Dreaming is not a fiction, but a real state of the mind, though only one or two in the  
133 whole world ever dreamed; and if these one or two or a dozen men, spoke to the rest of  
134 the world, and unanimously witnessed to the existence of that mysterious state, many  
135 doubtless would resist their report, as they do the mysteries of the Gospel, on the  
136 ground of its being unintelligible; yet in that case they would be resisting a truth, and  
137 would be wrong (not indeed blameably so, compared with those who on a like account  
138 reject the Gospel, which comes to us as a practical, not a mere abstract matter), yet  
139 they would undeniably be considering a thing false which was true.

140 It is no great harm to be wrong in a matter of opinion; but in matters which influence  
141 conduct, which bear upon our eternal interests, such as Revealed Religion, surely it is  
142 most hazardous, most unwise, though it is so common, to stumble at its mysteries,  
143 instead of believing and acting upon its threats and promises. Instead of embracing  
144 what they can understand, together with what they cannot, men criticize the wording in  
145 which truths are conveyed, which came from heaven. The inspired Apostles taught  
146 them to the first Christian converts, and they, according to the capacities of human  
147 language, whether their own or the Apostles', partly one and partly the other, preserved  
148 them; and we, instead of thanking them for the benefit, instead of rejoicing that they  
149 should have handed on to us those secrets concerning God, instead of thanking Him for  
150 His condescension in allowing us to hear them, have hearts cold enough to complain of  
151 their mysteriousness. Profane minds ask, "Is God one, or three?" They are answered,  
152 He is One, and He is also Three. They reply "He cannot be One in the same sense in  
153 which He is Three." It is in reply allowed to them, "He is Three in one sense, One in  
154 another." They ask, "In what sense? what is that sense in which He is Three Persons,—  
155 what is that sense of the word Person, such that it neither stands for one separate  
156 Being, as it does with men, nor yet comes short of such a real and sufficient sense as  
157 the word requires?" We reply that we do *not know* that intermediate sense; we cannot  
158 reconcile, we confess, the distinct portions of the doctrine; we can but take what is given  
159 us, and be content. They rejoin, that, if this be so, we are using words without meaning.  
160 We answer, No, not without meaning in themselves, but without meaning which we fully  
161 apprehend. God understands His own words, though human. God, when He gave the  
162 doctrine, put it into words, and the doctrine, as we word it, is the doctrine as the  
163 Apostles worded it; it is conveyed to us with the same degree of meaning in it,  
164 intelligible to us, with which the Apostles received it; so that it is no reason for giving it  
165 up that in part it is not intelligible. This we say; and they insist in reply, as if it were a  
166 sufficient answer, that the doctrine, as a whole, *is* unintelligible to us (which we grant);  
167 that the words we use have very little meaning (which is not true, though we may not  
168 see the full meaning); and so they think to excuse their rejection of them.

169 But surely all this, I say, is much the same as what might take place in any discussion  
170 about dreaming, in a company where one or two persons had experienced it, and the  
171 multitude not. It might be said to those who told us of it, Do you mean that it is a state of  
172 waking or insensibility? is it one or the other? what is that sense in which we are not  
173 insensible in dreaming, and yet are not awake and ourselves? Now if we have  
174 mysteries even about ourselves, which we cannot even put into words accurately, much

175 more may we suppose, even were we not told it, that there are mysteries in the nature  
176 of Almighty God; and so far from its being improbable that there should be mysteries,  
177 the declaration that there are, even adds some probability to the revelation which  
178 declares them. On the other hand, still more unreasonable is disbelief, if it be grounded  
179 on the mysteriousness of the revelation; because, if we cannot put into consistent  
180 human language human things, if the state of dreaming, which we experience  
181 commonly, must be described in words either vague or contradictory, much less is there  
182 to surprise us if human words are insufficient to describe heavenly things.

183 These are a few, out of many remarks which might be made concerning our own  
184 mysterious state,—that is, concerning things in us which we know to *be* really and truly,  
185 yet which we cannot accurately reflect upon and contemplate, cannot describe, cannot  
186 put into words, and cannot convey to another's comprehension who does not  
187 experience them. But this is a very large subject. Let a man consider how hardly he is  
188 able and how circuitously he is forced to describe the commonest objects of nature,  
189 when he attempts to substitute reason for sight, how difficult it is to define things, how  
190 impracticable it is to convey to another any complicated, or any deep or refined feeling,  
191 how inconsistent and self-contradictory his own feelings seem, when put into words,  
192 how he subjects himself in consequence to misunderstanding, or ridicule, or triumphant  
193 criticism; and he will not wonder at the impossibility of duly delineating in earthly words  
194 the first Cause of all thought, the Father of spirits, the One Eternal Mind, the King of  
195 kings and Lord of lords, who only hath immortality, dwelling in light unapproachable,  
196 whom no man hath seen nor can see, the incomprehensible infinite God.

197 To conclude. One objection only, as it seems to me, can be made to these reflections,  
198 and that is soon answered. It may be said that, though there be, as there well may be,  
199 ten thousand mysteries about the Divine Nature, yet why should they be disclosed in  
200 the Gospel? because the very circumstance that they *cannot* be put into words is a  
201 reason why this should not be attempted. But this surely is a very bold and  
202 presumptuous way of speaking, not to say more about it; as if we had any means of  
203 knowing, as if we had any right to ask, why God does what He does in the very way He  
204 does it; as if sinners, receiving a great and unmerited favour, were not very unthankful  
205 and acting almost madly, in saying, Why was it given us in this way, not in that? Is God  
206 obliged to take us into counsel, and explain to us the reason for every thing He does; or  
207 is it our plain duty to take what is given us, and feed upon it in faith? And to those who  
208 do thus receive the blessed doctrine under consideration, it will be found to produce  
209 special and singular practical effects on them, on the very ground of its mysteriousness.  
210 There is nothing, according as we are given to see and judge of things, which will make  
211 a greater difference in the temper, character, and habits of an individual, than the  
212 circumstance of his holding or not holding the Gospel to be mysterious. Even then, if we  
213 go by its influence on our minds, we might safely pronounce that the doctrine of the  
214 Holy Trinity, and of other like mysteries, cannot be unimportant. If it be true (as we hold  
215 it to be), it must be of consequence; for it tends to draw the mind in one particular  
216 direction, and to form it on a different mould from theirs who do not believe in it. And  
217 thus what we actually are given to see, does go a certain way in confirming to us what  
218 Scripture and the Church declare to us, that belief in this doctrine is actually necessary

219 to salvation, by showing us that such belief has a moral effect on us. The temper of true  
220 faith is described in the text,—"Marvellous are Thy works; and that my soul knoweth  
221 right well." A religious mind is ever marvelling, and irreligious men laugh and scoff at it  
222 because it marvels. A religious mind is ever looking out of itself, is ever pondering God's  
223 words, is ever "looking into" them with the Angels, is ever realizing to itself Him on  
224 whom it depends, and who is the centre of all truth and good. Carnal and proud minds  
225 are contented with self; they like to remain at home; when they hear of mysteries, they  
226 have no devout curiosity to go and see the great sight, though it be ever so little out of  
227 their way; and when it actually falls in their path, they stumble at it. As great then as is  
228 the difference between hanging upon the thought of God and resting in ourselves, lifting  
229 up the heart to God and bringing all things in heaven and earth down to ourselves,  
230 exalting God and exalting reason, measuring things by God's power and measuring  
231 them by our own ignorance, so great is the difference between him who believes in the  
232 Christian mysteries and him who does not. And were there no other reason for the  
233 revelation of them, but this gracious one, of raising us, refining us, making us reverent,  
234 making us expectant and devout, surely this would be more than a sufficient one.

235 Let us then all, learned and unlearned, gain this great benefit from the mystery of the  
236 Ever-Blessed Trinity. It is calculated to humble the wise in this world with the thought of  
237 what is above them, and to encourage and elevate the lowly with the thought of  
238 Almighty God, and the glories and marvels which shall one day be revealed to them. In  
239 the Beatific Vision of God, should we through His grace be found worthy of it, we shall  
240 comprehend clearly what we now dutifully repeat and desire to know, how the Father  
241 Almighty is truly and by Himself God, the Eternal Son truly and by Himself God, and the  
242 Holy Ghost truly and by Himself God, and yet not three Gods but one God.

243 Trinity Sunday.