

1 "The Secret Power of Divine Grace"
2 *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions* sermon 4
3 St. John Henry Newman
4 November 23, 1856

5 "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation; neither shall they say, Behold here,
6 or behold there. For lo, the kingdom of God is within you." Luke xvii. 20, 21.

7 WHAT our Lord announces in these words, came to pass: and we commemorate it to
8 this day, especially at this season of the year [Note]. The kingdom of God was
9 inaugurated by the Apostles, and spread rapidly. It filled the world: it took possession of
10 the high places of the earth; but it came and progressed without "observation." All other
11 kingdoms that ever were, have sounded a trumpet before them, and have challenged
12 attention. They have come out "with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield." They
13 have been the ravenous beast from the north, the swift eagle, or the swarming locusts.
14 In the words of the Prophet, "Before them a devouring fire, and behind them a burning
15 flame. The appearance of them has been as the appearance of horses, and they ran
16 like horsemen ... And the noise of their wings was as the noise of chariots and many
17 horses running to battle." Such has ever been the coming of earthly power; and a Day
18 will be, when that also will have a fulfilment and find its antitype in the history of heaven;
19 for, when our Lord comes again, He too will come "with the word of command, and with
20 the voice of an Archangel, and with the trumpet of God." This will be with observation;
21 so will He end; so did He not begin His Church upon earth; for it had been foretold of
22 Him, "He shall not contend nor cry out; neither shall any man hear His voice in the
23 streets. The bruised reed He shall not break, and smoking flax He shall not extinguish,
24 till He send forth judgment unto victory."

25 And that noiseless, unostentatious conquest of the earth, made by the Holy Apostles of
26 Christ, became, as regards the Jews, still more secret, from the circumstance that they
27 believed it would be with outward show, though He assured them of the contrary. The
28 Pharisees looked out for some sign from heaven. They would not believe that His
29 kingdom could come, unless they saw it come; they looked out for a prince with troops
30 in battle array; and since He came with twelve poor men and no visible pomp, He was
31 to them as a "thief in the night," because of their incredulity, and He was come and in
32 possession before they would allow that He was coming.

33 But the coming of His kingdom would anyhow have been secret, even though they had
34 not been resolved that it should not be so. And He tells us in the text the reason why.
35 "Neither shall they say, Behold here, or behold there. *For lo*, the kingdom of God is
36 within you." You see, He tells us why He came so covertly. It could not be otherwise,
37 because it was a conquest, not of the body, but of the heart. It was not an assault from
38 without, but it was an inward influence not subduing the outward man through the
39 senses, but, in the words of the Apostle, "bringing into captivity every understanding
40 unto the obedience of Christ." Kingdoms of this world spread in space and time; they
41 begin from a point, and they travel onwards, and range round. Their course may be
42 traced: first they secure this territory, then they compass that. They make their ground

43 good, as they go, and consolidate their power. Of course, the kingdom of Christ also, as
44 being *in* this world, has an outward shape, and fortunes, and a history, like institutions of
45 this world, though it be not *of* this world. It began from Jerusalem, and went forward to
46 Scythia and to Africa, to India and to Britain; and it has ranks and officers and laws; it
47 observes a strict discipline, and exacts an implicit obedience: but still this is not the full
48 account, or the true process, of its rise and establishment. "The weapons of its warfare
49 were not carnal;" it came by an inward and intimate visitation; by outward instruments,
50 indeed, but with effects far higher than those instruments; with preaching and argument
51 and discussion, but really by God's own agency. He who is Omnipotent and Omniscient,
52 touched many hearts at once and in many places. They forthwith, one and all, spoke
53 one language, not learning it one from the other so much as taught by Himself the
54 canticle of the Lamb: or, if by men's teaching too, yet catching and mastering it
55 spontaneously, almost before the words were spoken. For time and space, cause and
56 effect, are the servants of His will.

57 And so, voices broke out all at once into His praise, in the East and in the West, in the
58 North and in the South: and the perplexed world searched about in vain, whence came
59 that concord of sweet and holy sounds. Upon the first word of the preacher, upon a hint,
60 upon a mere whisper in the air, a deep response came from many lips,—a deep, full,
61 and ready harmony of many voices one and all proclaiming the Saviour of men. For the
62 Spirit of the Lord had descended and filled the earth; and there were thrilling hearts, and
63 tremulous pulses, and eager eyes, in every place. It was a time of visitation when the
64 weak were to become strong, and the last become first. It was the triumph of faith,
65 which delays not, but accepts generously and promptly,—according to the Scripture,
66 "The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thy heart; this is the word of faith which
67 we preach." And thus, as Nineveh and Babylon were surprised of old by the army of the
68 enemy, so was the world thus surprised by Him, who, in prophetic language, rode upon
69 a white horse and was called "Faithful and True"; and, as it befell Egypt at the first
70 Pasch, that there was not a house where there lay not one dead, so now, on this more
71 gracious Passage there was not a house where there was not one alive. For the
72 Highest had come down among them, and was everywhere; the Lord of Angels was
73 walking the earth; He was scattering His gifts freely, and multiplying His Image: and, in
74 this sense, as well as in that in which He spoke the words, "a man's enemies were they
75 of his own household." The despised, the hated influence insinuated itself everywhere;
76 the leaven spread, and none could stay it; and in the most unlikely places, in the family
77 of the haughty and fierce soldier, amid the superstitions of idolatry and the degradations
78 of slavery, the noblest, and the ablest, and the fairest, as well as the brutish and the
79 ignorant, one and all, by a secret power, became the prey of the Church and the
80 bondsmen of Christ. And thus a great and wide-spreading kingdom flushed into
81 existence all at once, like spring after winter, from within.

82 Such were the immediate concomitants of the first coming of Him, who was "the most
83 abject of men," and "acquainted with infirmity," and whose "look was as it were hidden
84 and despised," and "as one struck by God and afflicted." As the prophecy goes on to
85 say, "He divided the spoil of the strong"; and if you ask me, my Brethren, how it was that
86 He did this marvel? what was the way and the instrument of His grace in His dealings

87 with the spirits which He had created?—I answer in brief, by referring back to the past
88 history of our race. It is certain that man is not sufficient for his own happiness, that he
89 is not himself, is not at home with himself, without the presence within him of the grace
90 of Him who, knowing it, has offered that grace to all freely. When he was created, then
91 his Maker breathed into him the supernatural life of the Holy Spirit, which is his true
92 happiness; when he fell, he forfeited the divine gift, and with it his happiness also. Ever
93 since he has been unhappy; ever since he has felt a void in his breast, and does not
94 know how to satisfy it. He scarcely apprehends his own need; only the unstudied,
95 involuntary movement of his mind and heart show that he feels it, for he is either
96 languid, dull, or apathetic under this hunger, or he is feverish and restless, seeking first
97 in one thing, then in another, that blessing which he has lost. For a time, perhaps even
98 till old age comes, he continues to form to himself some idol on which he may feed, and
99 sustain some sort of existence, just as the weeds of the field or the innutritious earth
100 may allay the pangs of famine. One man determines to rise in life, another is wrapt up in
101 his family. Numbers get through the day and the year with the alternation of routine
102 business and holyday recreation. Rich men are lavish in pomp and show; poor men give
103 themselves to intemperance; the young give themselves up to sensual pleasures. They
104 cannot live without an object of life, though it be an object unworthy of an immortal spirit.

105 Is it wonderful then, that, when the True Life, the very supply of the need of mankind,
106 was again offered them in its fulness, that it should have carried power with it to
107 persuade them to accept it? Is it wonderful that its announcement should have startled
108 them, that its offer should have drawn them, that a first trial and a first fruit of the gift
109 should have made them desirous of further and larger measures of it? This, then, is the
110 secret of the triumph of the unearthly kingdom of God among the self-willed, self-wise
111 children of Adam. Soldiers of this world receive their bounty-money on enlisting. They
112 take it, and become the servants of an earthly prince; shall not they, much more, be
113 faithful, yes, even unto the death, who have received the earnest of the true riches, who
114 have been fed with "the hidden manna," who have, in the Apostle's words, "been once
115 illuminated, and tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come"?
116 And thus it is that the kingdom of God spreads externally over the earth, because it has
117 an internal hold upon us, because, in the words of the text, "it is within us," in the hearts
118 of its individual members. Bystanders marvel; strangers try to analyze what it is that
119 does the work; they imagine all manner of human reasons and natural causes to
120 account for it, because they cannot see, and do not feel, and will not believe, what is in
121 truth a supernatural influence; and they impute to some caprice or waywardness of
122 mind, or to the force of novelty, or to some mysterious, insidious persuasiveness, or to
123 some foreign enemy, or to some dark and subtle plotting, and they view with alarm, and
124 they fain would baffle, what is nothing else but the keen, vivid, constraining glance of
125 Christ's countenance. "The Lord, turning, looked on Peter:" and "as the lightning cometh
126 out of the east, and appeareth even unto the west," such is the piercing, soul-subduing
127 look of the Son of man. It is come, it is gone, it has done its work, its abiding work, and
128 the world is at fault to account for it. It sees the result; it has not perceived, it has not
129 eyes to see, the Divine Hand.

130 Nay, not the world only, but the Church herself, is oftentimes surprised, I may say, even
131 perplexed, at the operation of that grace which is without observation, and at the
132 miraculous multiplication of her children. The net of Peter seems about to break, from
133 the multitude of fishes, and is hard to draw to shore. So was it singularly in the first age,
134 in the issues of that glorious history of primitive conversion on which I have been
135 dwelling. "The Lord added daily to their society," says the text, "such as should be
136 saved." This process went on for three centuries; then came a most bitter and horrible
137 persecution; at length it ceased; and then with awful abruptness, rushing upon the
138 wings of the wind, the overwhelming news was heard, that the Lord of the earth, the
139 Roman Emperor, had become a Christian, and all his multitude of nations with him.
140 What an announcement! no human hand did it—no human instrument of it, preacher or
141 apologist, can be pointed out. It was not "Behold here, or behold there"—it was the
142 secret power of God acting directly without observation upon the hearts of men. All of a
143 sudden, when least expected, in the deep night of persecution, "as a thief," He came.
144 All of a sudden, the Rulers of the Church had upon their hands the gigantic task, to
145 which she alone was equal, that of bringing into shape and consistency a whole world.
146 The event, and the almost fearful grandeur of it, had been visibly described by prophecy
147 a thousand years before it. "Lift up thy eyes round about," was the word of promise to
148 the Church; "lift up thy eyes, and see. All these are gathered together, they are come to
149 thee. Thou shalt be clothed with all these as with an ornament, and as a bride thou shalt
150 put them about thee. The children of thy barrenness shall still say in thy ears, The place
151 is too strait for me, make me room to dwell in. And thou shalt say in thy heart, Who hath
152 begotten these? I was barren and brought not forth, led away, and captive, and who
153 hath brought up these? I was destitute and alone; and these, where were they? Thus
154 saith the Lord God, Behold I will lift up My hand to the Gentiles, and will set up My
155 standard to the people. And they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and carry thy
156 daughters upon their shoulders. And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and queens thy
157 nurses. They shall worship thee with their face towards the earth, and they shall lick up
158 the dust of thy feet."

159 My Brethren, you know our Lord spoke, when He went away, of coming back, not only
160 suddenly, but soon. Well, in the sense in which I have been speaking, He is ever
161 coming. Again and again He comes to His Church; He ever comes as a strong warrior,
162 bringing in with Him fresh and fresh captives of His arrows and His spear. That same
163 marvel of an inward work in the souls of men on a large scale, which He wrought at the
164 first, He is ever reiterating and renewing in the history of the Church down to this day.
165 Multitudes are ever pouring into her, as the fish into Peter's net, beyond her own
166 thought and her own act, by the immediate and secret operation of His grace. This is
167 emphatically the case now. It is seen on a large scale all over Christendom. Fifty years
168 ago religion seemed almost extinguished. To the eyes of man, it was simply declining
169 and wasting away all through the last century. There were indeed in that century saints
170 and doctors and zealous preachers and faithful populations, as heretofore, but these the
171 world could not see. The political power and social influence of religion was ever less
172 and less; and then at last a European revolution came, and in man's judgment all was
173 lost. But in its deepest misfortunes began its most wonderful rise; a reaction set in, and
174 steadily has it progressed, with every sign of progress still. And in its progress the same

175 phenomenon, I say, reveals itself which we read of in the history of former times; for
176 while the Holy Church has been praying and labouring on her own field, converts,
177 beyond that field, whom she was not contemplating, have been added to her from all
178 classes, as at the beginning. Germany and England, the special seats of her enemies,
179 are the very scenes of this spontaneous accession. To the surprise of all that know
180 them, often to their own surprise, those who fear the Church, or disown her doctrines,
181 find themselves drawing near to her by some incomprehensible influence year after
182 year, and at length give themselves up to her, and proclaim her sovereignty. Those who
183 never spoke to a Catholic Priest, those who have never entered a Catholic Church,
184 those even who have learned their religion from the Protestant Bible, have, in matter of
185 fact, by the overruling Providence of God, been brought through that very reading to
186 recognize the Mother of Saints. Her very name, her simple claim, constrains men to
187 think of her, to enquire about her, to wish her to be what she says she is, to submit to
188 her; not on any assignable reason, save the needs of human nature and the virtue of
189 that grace, which works secretly, round about the Church, without observation.

190 My Brethren, there are those who imagine that, when we use great words of the
191 Church, invest her with heavenly privileges, and apply to her the evangelical promises,
192 we speak merely of some external and political structure. They think we mean to spend
193 our devotion upon a human cause, and that we toil for an object of human ambition.
194 They think that we should acknowledge, if cross-examined, that our ultimate purpose
195 was the success of persons and parties, to whom we were bound in honour, or by
196 interest, or by gratitude; and that, if we looked to objects above the world or beyond the
197 grave, we did so with very secondary aims and faint perceptions. They fancy, as the
198 largest concession of their liberality, that we are working from the desire, generous, but
199 still human, of the praise of earthly superiors, and that, after all, in some way or other,
200 we are living on the breath, and basking in the smile, of man. But the text, and the train
201 of thought which I have been pursuing, remind us of the true view of the matter, were
202 we ever likely to forget it. The Church is a collection of souls, brought together in one by
203 God's secret grace, though that grace comes to them through visible instruments, and
204 unites them to a visible hierarchy. What is seen, is not the whole of the Church, but the
205 visible part of it. When we say that Christ loves His Church, we mean that He loves,
206 nothing of earthly nature, but the fruit of His own grace;—the varied fruits of His grace in
207 innumerable hearts, viewed as brought together in unity of faith and love and
208 obedience, of sacraments, and doctrine, and order, and worship. The object which He
209 contemplates, which He loves in the Church, is not human nature simply, but human
210 nature illuminated and renovated by His own supernatural power. If He has called the
211 visible Church His spouse, it is because she is the special seat of this divine gift. If He
212 loved Peter, it was not simply because he was His Apostle, but because Peter had that
213 intense, unearthly love of Him, and that faith which flesh and blood could not exercise,
214 which were the fitting endowments of an Apostle. If He loved John, it was not as merely
215 one of the Twelve, but because he again was adorned with the special gift of
216 supernatural chastity. If He loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, it was not only as His
217 friends and guests, but for their burning charity, and their pure contrition, and their self-
218 sacrificing devotion. So it is now: what He creates, what He contemplates, what He
219 loves, what He rewards, is (in St. Peter's words) "the hidden man of the heart," of which

220 the visible Church is the expression, the protection, the instrumental cause, and the
221 outward perfection.

222 And therefore, applying this great truth to our own circumstances, let us ever bear in
223 mind, my Brethren, that we in this place are only then really strong, when we are more
224 than we seem to be. It is not our attainments or our talents, it is not philosophy or
225 science, letters or arts, which will make us dear to God. It is not secular favour, or civil
226 position, which can make us worthy the attention and the interest of the true Christian. A
227 great University is a great power, and can do great things; but, unless it be something
228 more than human, it is but foolishness and vanity in the sight and in comparison of the
229 little ones of Christ. It is really dead, though it seems to live, unless it be grafted upon
230 the True Vine, and is partaker of the secret supernatural life which circulates through
231 the undecaying branches. "Unless the Lord build the House, they labour in vain that
232 build it." Idle is our labour, worthless is our toil, ashes is our fruit, corruption is our
233 reward, unless we begin the foundation of this great undertaking in faith and prayer, and
234 sanctify it by purity of life.

235 (28th Sunday after Pentecost, 1856. Preached in the University Church, Dublin.)

236 Note

237 The first pages of this Sermon are borrowed from the author's "Sermons on Subjects of
238 the Day," No. xxi.