

1 "Wisdom and Innocence"  
2 *Sermons on Subjects of the Day* - sermon 20  
3 Saint John Henry Newman  
4 February 19, 1843

5 "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as  
6 serpents, and harmless as doves." Matt. x. 16.

7 SHEEP are defenceless, wolves are strong and fierce. How prompt, how frightful, how  
8 resistless, how decisive, would be the attack of a troop of wolves on a few straggling  
9 sheep which fell in with them! and how lively, then, is the image which our Lord uses to  
10 express the treatment which His followers were to receive from the world! He Himself  
11 was the great Exemplar of all such sufferings. When He was in the hands of His  
12 enemies, surrounded by a mad multitude, gazed on by relentless enemies, jeered at,  
13 struck, hurried along, tormented by rude soldiers, and at length nailed to the cross, what  
14 was He emphatically but a sheep among wolves? "He is brought as a lamb to the  
15 slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth."  
16 And what He foretold of His followers, that the Psalmist had declared of them at an  
17 earlier time, and His Apostle applies it to them on its fulfilment. "As it is written," says St.  
18 Paul, "For Thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the  
19 slaughter." [Rom. viii. 36.] Such was the Church of Christ in its beginnings, and such  
20 has it been in every age in proportion to its purity. The purer it has been, the more  
21 defenceless; whenever it has been pure, it has, in one way or another, been  
22 defenceless. The less worldly it has been, and the more it has cultivated its proper gifts,  
23 and the less it has relied upon sword and bow, chariots and horses, and arm of man,  
24 the more it has been exposed to ill-usage; the more it has invited oppression, the more  
25 it has irritated the proud and powerful. This, I say, is exemplified in every age. Seasons  
26 of peace, indeed, have been vouchsafed to it from the first, and in the most fearful  
27 times; but not an age of peace. A reign of temporal peace it can hardly enjoy, except  
28 under the reign of corruption, and in an age of faithlessness. Peace and rest are future.

29 Now, then, what is it natural to suppose will be the conduct of those who are helpless  
30 and persecuted, as the Holy Spouse of Christ? Pain and hardship and disrepute are  
31 pleasant to no man: and though they are to be gloried in when they are undergone, yet  
32 they will rather, if possible, be shunned or averted. Such avoidance is sanctioned, nay,  
33 commanded, by our Lord. When trials are inevitable, we must cheerfully bear them; but  
34 when they can be avoided without sin, we ought to prevent them. But how were  
35 Christians to prevent them when they might not fight? I answer, they were allowed the  
36 arms, that is, the arts, of the defenceless. Even the inferior animals will teach us how  
37 wonderfully the Creator has compensated to the weak their want of strength, by giving  
38 them other qualities which may avail in their struggle with the strong. They have the gift  
39 of fleetness; or they have a certain make and colour; or certain habits of living; or some  
40 natural cunning, which enables them either to elude or even to destroy their enemies.  
41 Brute force is countervailed by flight, brute passion by prudence and artifice. Instances  
42 of a similar kind occur in our own race. Those nations which are destitute of material  
43 force, have recourse to the arts of the unwarlike; they are fraudulent and crafty; they

44 dissemble, negotiate, procrastinate, evading what they cannot resist, and wearing out  
45 what they cannot crush. Thus is it with a captive, effeminate race, under the rule of the  
46 strong and haughty. So is it with slaves; so is it with ill-used and oppressed children;  
47 who learn to be cowardly and deceitful towards their tyrants. So is it with the subjects of  
48 a despot, who encounter his axe or bowstring with the secret influence of intrigue and  
49 conspiracy, the dagger and the poisoned cup. They exercise the unalienable right of  
50 self-defence by such methods as they best may; only, since human nature is  
51 unscrupulous, guilt or innocence is all the same to them, if it works their purpose.

52 Now, our Lord and Saviour did not forbid us the exercise of that instinct of self-defence  
53 which is born with us. He did not forbid us to defend ourselves, but He forbade  
54 certain *modes* of defence. All sinful means, of course, He forbade, as is plain without  
55 mentioning. But, besides these, He forbade us what is not sinful, but allowable by nature,  
56 though not in that more excellent and perfect way which He taught—He forbade us to  
57 defend ourselves by force, to return blow for blow. "Ye have heard," He says, "that it  
58 hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth; but I say unto you, That ye  
59 resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other  
60 also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy  
61 cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain." Thus the  
62 servants of Christ are forbidden to defend themselves by violence; but they are not  
63 forbidden other means; direct means are not allowed them, but others are even  
64 commanded. For instance, *foresight*; "beware of men:" [Matt. x. 17.] *avoidance*, "when  
65 they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another:" *prudence and skill*, as in the text,  
66 "be ye wise as serpents."

67 Here we are reminded of the awful history with which the sacred volume opens. In the  
68 beginning, "the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God  
69 had made." First, observe then, our Lord in the text sanctions that very reference which  
70 I have been making to the instincts and powers of the inferior animals, and puts them  
71 forth as our example. As we are to learn industry from the ant, and reliance on Him from  
72 the ravens, so the dove is our pattern of innocence, and the serpent our pattern of  
73 wisdom. But, moreover, considering that the serpent was chosen by the Enemy of  
74 mankind, as the instrument of his temptations in Paradise, it is very remarkable that  
75 Christ should choose it as the pattern of wisdom for His followers. It is as if He appealed  
76 to the whole world of sin, and to the bad arts by which the feeble gain advantages here  
77 over the strong. It is as if He set before us the craft, the treachery, the perfidy of the  
78 captive and the slave, and bade us extract a lesson even from so great an evil. It is as if  
79 the more we are forbidden violence, the more we are exhorted to prudence; as if it were  
80 our bounden duty to rival the wicked in endowments of mind, and to excel them in their  
81 exercise. And He makes a reference of this very kind in one of His parables, where "the  
82 lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely; for the children of  
83 this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." "Be ye wise as  
84 serpents," He said; then, knowing how dangerous such wisdom is, especially in times of  
85 temptation, if a severe conscientiousness is not awake, He added, "and harmless as  
86 doves." "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise  
87 as serpents, and harmless as doves."

88 It needs very little knowledge of the history of the Church, to understand how  
89 remarkably this exhortation to wisdom has been fulfilled in it. If there be one reproach  
90 more than another which has been cast upon it, it is that of fraud and cunning—cast  
91 upon it, even from St. Paul's day, whose word was accused of being "yea and nay;" [2  
92 Cor. i. 17.] and himself of "walking in craftiness, and handling the word of God  
93 deceitfully;" [2 Cor. iv. 2.] of being a "deceiver," though he was "true;" [2 Cor. vi. 8.] of  
94 "terrifying by letters;" [2 Cor. x. 9.] and of "being crafty," and "catching" his converts  
95 "with guile." [2 Cor. xii. 16.] Nay, cast upon it in the person of our Lord, who was called  
96 "a deceiver," and said to "deceive the people." Priestcraft has ever been considered the  
97 badge, and its imputation is a kind of note of the Church; and in part, indeed, truly,  
98 because the presence of powerful enemies, and the sense of their own weakness, has  
99 sometimes tempted Christians to the abuse, instead of the use of Christian wisdom, to  
100 be wise without being harmless; but partly—nay, for the most part—not truly, but  
101 slanderously, and merely because the world called their wisdom craft, when it was  
102 found to be a match for its own numbers and power. Christians were called crafty,  
103 because "they were, in fact, so strong, though professing to be weak." And next, in  
104 mere consistency, they were called hypocritical, because "they were, forsooth, so crafty,  
105 professing to be innocent." And thus whereas they have ever, in accordance with our  
106 Lord's words, been wise and harmless, they have ever been called instead crafty and  
107 hypocritical. The words "craft" and "hypocrisy" are but the version of "wisdom" and  
108 "harmlessness," in the language of the world.

109 It is remarkable, however, that not only is harmlessness the corrective of wisdom,  
110 securing it against the corruption of craft and deceit, as stated in the text; but innocence,  
111 simplicity, implicit obedience to God, tranquillity of mind, contentment, these and the like  
112 virtues are themselves a sort of wisdom;—I mean, they produce the same results as  
113 wisdom, because God works for those who do not work for themselves; and thus  
114 Christians especially incur the charge of craft at the hands of the world, because they  
115 pretend to so little, yet effect so much. This circumstance admits dwelling on.

116 By innocence, or harmlessness, is meant simplicity in act, purity in motive, honesty in  
117 aim; acting conscientiously and religiously, according to the matter in hand, without  
118 caring for consequences or appearances; doing what appears one's duty, and being  
119 obedient for obedience' sake, and leaving the event to God. This is to be innocent as  
120 the dove; yet this conduct is the truest wisdom; and this conduct accordingly has pre-  
121 eminently the appearance of craft.

122 It appears to be craft, and is wisdom, in many ways.

123 1. First: sobriety, self-restraint, control of word and feeling, which religious men  
124 exercise, have about them an appearance of being artificial, because they are not  
125 natural; and of being artful, because artificial. I do not deny there is something very  
126 engaging in a frank and unpremeditating manner; some persons have it more than  
127 others; in some persons it is a great grace. But it must be recollected that I am speaking  
128 of times of persecution and oppression to Christians, such as the text foretells; and then  
129 surely frankness will become nothing else than indignation at the oppressor, and

130 vehemence of speech, if it is permitted. Accordingly, as persons have deep feelings, so  
131 they will find the necessity of self-control, lest they should say what they ought not. All  
132 this stands to reason, without enlarging upon it. And to this must be added, that those  
133 who would be holy and blameless, the sons of God, find so much in the world to  
134 unsettle and defile them, that they are necessarily forced upon a strict self-restraint, lest  
135 they should receive injury from such intercourse with it as is unavoidable; and this self-  
136 restraint is the first thing which makes holy persons seem wanting in openness and  
137 manliness.

138 2. Next let it be considered that the world, the gross, carnal, unbelieving world, is blind  
139 to the peculiar feelings, objects, hopes, fears, affections of religious people. It cannot  
140 understand them. Religious men are a mystery to it; and, being a mystery, they will be  
141 called by the world, in mere self-defence, mysterious, dark, subtle, designing; and that  
142 the more, because, as living to God, they are at no pains to justify themselves to the  
143 world, or to open their hearts, or account to it for their conduct. The world will impute  
144 motives, either because it cannot find any, or because it simply will not believe those  
145 motives to be the real ones which are such, and are avowed as such. It cannot believe  
146 that men will deliberately sacrifice this life to the next; and when they profess to do so, it  
147 thinks that of necessity there must be something behind which they do not divulge. And,  
148 again, all the reasons which religious men allege, seem to the world unreal, and all the  
149 feelings fantastical and strained; and this strengthens it in its idea that it has not  
150 fathomed them, and that there is some secret to be found out. And indeed it has not  
151 fathomed them, and there is a secret; but it is the power of Divine grace, their state of  
152 heart, which is the secret; not their motives or their ends, which the world is told to the  
153 full. Here is a second reason why the dove seems but a serpent. Christians give up  
154 worldly advantages; they sacrifice rank or wealth; they prefer obscurity to station; they  
155 do penance rather than live delicately; and the world says, "Here are effects without  
156 causes sufficient for them; here is craft."

157 3. Further, let this be considered. The precept given us is, that "we resist not evil;" that  
158 we yield to worldly authority, and "give place unto wrath." This the early Christians did in  
159 an especial way. But it is very difficult to make the world understand the difference  
160 between an outward obedience, and an interior assent. When the Christians obeyed the  
161 heathen magistrate in all things not sinful, it was not that they thought the heathen right;  
162 they knew them to be idolaters. There are a multitude of cases, and very various, where  
163 it is our duty to obey those who nevertheless have no power over our belief or  
164 conviction. When, however, religious men outwardly conform, on the score of duty, to  
165 "the powers that be," the world is easily led into the mistake that they have renounced  
166 their opinions as well as submitted their actions; and it feels or affects surprise, to learn  
167 that their opinions remain; and this it considers or calls an inconsistency, or a duplicity.  
168 It argues that they are breaking promise, cherishing what they disown, or resuming what  
169 they professed to abandon. And thus the very fact that they are so harmless, so  
170 inoffensive, that they do so much in the way of compliance, becomes a ground of  
171 complaint against them, that they do not do more—that they do not do more than they  
172 have a right to do. They yield outwardly; to assent inwardly would be to betray the faith;

173 yet they are called deceitful and double-dealing, because they do as much as they can,  
174 and not more than they may.

175 4. Again: the cheerfulness, contentment, and readiness with which religious men resign  
176 their cause into God's hands, and are well-pleased that the world should seem to  
177 triumph over them, have still further an appearance of craft and deceit. For why should  
178 they be so satisfied to give up their wishes, unless they knew something which others  
179 did not know, or were really gaining while they seemed to lose? Other men make a  
180 great clamour and lamentation over their idols; there is no mistaking that they have lost  
181 them, and that they have no hope. But Christians resign themselves. They are silent;  
182 silence itself is suspicious—even silence is mystery. Why do they not speak out? why  
183 do they not show a natural, an honest indignation? The submitting to calumny is a proof  
184 that it is too true. They would set themselves right, if they could. Still more strange and  
185 suspicious is the confidence which religious men show, in spite of apparent weakness,  
186 that their cause will triumph. The boldness, decisiveness, calmness of speech, which  
187 are necessarily the result of Christian faith and hope, lead the world to the surmise of  
188 some hidden reliance, some secret support, to account for them; as if God's word, when  
189 received and dwelt on, were not a greater encouragement to the lonely combatant than  
190 any word of man, however powerful, or any conspiracy, however far-spreading.

191 5. And still stronger is this delusion on the part of the world, when the event justifies the  
192 confidence of religious men. The truest wisdom is to stand still and trust in God, and to  
193 the world it is also the strongest evidence of craft. God fights for those who do not fight  
194 for themselves; such is the great truth, such is the gracious rule, which is declared and  
195 exemplified in the Gospel: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves," says St. Paul, "but  
196 rather give place unto wrath, for it is written, Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, saith the  
197 Lord." [Rom. xii. 19.] Do nothing, and you have done every thing. The less you do, the  
198 more God will do for you. The more you submit to the violence of the world, the more  
199 powerfully will He rise against the world, who is irresistible. The less you ward off the  
200 world's blows from you, the more heavy will be His blows upon the world, if not in your  
201 cause, at least in His own. When, then, the world at length becomes sensible that it is  
202 faring ill, and receiving more harm than it inflicts, yet is unwilling to humble itself under  
203 the mighty hand of God, what is left but to attribute its failure to the power of those who  
204 seem to be weak? that is, to their craft, who pretend to be weak when really they are  
205 strong.

206 6. To this must be added, that the truth has in itself the gift of spreading, without  
207 instruments; it makes its way in the world, under God's blessing, by its own  
208 persuasiveness and excellence; "So is the kingdom of God," says our Lord, "as if a man  
209 should cast seed into the ground, and should sleep, and rise night and day, and the  
210 seed should spring and grow up, he *knoweth not* how." [Mark iv. 26, 27.] The Word,  
211 when once uttered, runs its course. He who speaks it has done his work in uttering it,  
212 and cannot recall it if he would. It runs its course; it prospers in the thing whereunto God  
213 sends it. It seizes many souls at once, and subdues them to the obedience of faith. Now  
214 when bystanders see these effects and see no cause, for they will not believe that the  
215 Word itself is the cause, which is to them a dead-letter—when it sees many minds

216 moved in one way in many places, it imputes to secret management that uniformity  
217 which is nothing but the echo of the One Living and True Word.

218 7. And of course all this happens to the surprise of Christians as well as of the world;  
219 they can but marvel and praise God, but cannot account for it more than the world.  
220 "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Sion," says the Psalmist, "then were we  
221 like unto them that dream." [Ps. cxxvi. 1.] Or as the Prophet says of the Church, "Thine  
222 heart shall fear and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted  
223 unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee," [Isa. lx. 5.] and here again  
224 the Christian's true wisdom looks like craft. It is true wisdom to leave the event to God;  
225 but when they are prospered, it looks like deceit to show surprise, and to disclaim the  
226 work themselves. Moreover, meekness, gentleness, patience, and love, have in  
227 themselves a strong power to melt the heart of those who witness them. Cheerful  
228 suffering, too, leads spectators to sympathy, till, perhaps, a reaction takes place in the  
229 minds of men, and they are converted by the sight, and glorify their Father which is in  
230 heaven. But it is easy to insinuate, when men are malevolent, that those who triumph  
231 through meekness have affected the meekness to secure the triumph.

232 8. Here a very large subject opens upon us, to which I shall but allude. Those who  
233 surrender themselves to Christ in implicit faith are graciously taken into His service; and,  
234 "as men under authority," they do great things without knowing it, by the Wisdom of their  
235 Divine Master. They act on conscience, perhaps in despondency, and without foresight;  
236 but what is obedience in them, has a purpose with God, and they are successful, when  
237 they do but mean to be dutiful. But what duplicity does the world think it, to speak of  
238 conscience, or honour, or propriety, or delicacy, or to give other tokens of personal  
239 motives, when the event seems to show that a calculation of results has been the  
240 actuating principle at bottom! It is God who designs, but His servants seem designing;  
241 and that the more, should it so happen that they really do themselves catch glimpses of  
242 their own position in His providential course. For then what they do from the heart,  
243 approves itself to their reason, and they are able to recognize the expedience of  
244 obedience.

245 How frequently is this remark in point in the history—nay, in the very constitution of the  
246 Church! Jacob, for instance, is thought worldly-wise in his dealings with Laban, whereas  
247 he was a "plain man," simply obedient to the Angel who "spake unto him in a dream,"  
248 who took care of his worldly interests for him, and protected him against his avaricious  
249 kinsman. Moses, again, is sometimes called sagacious and shrewd in his measures or  
250 his laws, as if wise acts might not come from the Source of wisdom, and provisions  
251 were proved to be human, when they could be shown to be advisable. And so, again, in  
252 the Christian Church, bishops have been called hypocritical in submitting and yet  
253 opposing themselves to the civil power, in a matter of plain duty, if a popular movement  
254 was the consequence; and then hypocritical again, if they did their best to repress it.  
255 And in like manner, theological doctrines or ecclesiastical usages are styled politic if  
256 they are but salutary; as if the Lord of the Church, who has willed her sovereignty, might  
257 not effect it by secondary causes. What, for instance, though we grant that sacramental  
258 confession and the celibacy of the clergy do tend to consolidate the body politic in the

259 relation of rulers and subjects, or, in other words, to aggrandize the priesthood? for how  
260 can the Church be one body without such relation, and why should not He, who has  
261 decreed that there should be unity, take measures to secure it? Marks of design are not  
262 elsewhere assumed as disproofs of His interference. Why should not the Creator, who  
263 has given us the feeling of hunger that we may eat and not die, and sentiments of  
264 compassion and benevolence for the welfare of our brethren, when He would form a  
265 more integral power than mankind had yet seen, adopt adequate means, and use His  
266 old world to create a new one? and why must His human instruments set out with a  
267 purpose, because they accomplish one? Nothing is safe in Revelation on such an  
268 interpretation. As the expedience of its provisions is made an objection to their honesty,  
269 so the beauty of its facts becomes an argument against their truth. The narratives in the  
270 Gospels have lately been viewed as mythical representations from their very perfection;  
271 as if a Divine work could not be most beautiful on the one hand and most expedient on  
272 the other.

273 The reason is this: men do not like to hear of the interposition of Providence in the  
274 affairs of the world; and they invidiously ascribe ability and skill to His agents, to escape  
275 the thought of an Infinite Wisdom and an Almighty Power. They will be unjust to their  
276 brethren, that they may not be just to Him; they will be wanton in their imputations,  
277 rather than humble themselves to a confession.

278 But for us, let us glory in what they disown; let us beg of our Divine Lord to take to Him  
279 His great power, and manifest Himself more and more, and reign both in our hearts and  
280 in the world. Let us beg of Him to stand by us in trouble, and guide us on our dangerous  
281 way. May He, as of old, choose "the foolish things of the world to confound the wise,  
282 and the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty"! May He  
283 support us all the day long, till the shades lengthen, and the evening comes, and the  
284 busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done! Then in His  
285 mercy may He give us safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last!