

"Christian Nobleness"
Sermons on Subjects of the Day sermon 11
St. John Henry Newman
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"I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world seeth Me no more; but ye see Me." John xiv. 18, 19.

1 WHEN our Saviour was leaving His disciples, He told them that He would soon return to
2 them, that their sorrow might be turned into joy. He was going away, yet they were to
3 see Him, though the world saw Him not; for they were to be blessed with the presence
4 of Him who was equal to Him and one with Him, and would unite them to Him, the Third
5 Person in the Eternal Trinity, God the Holy Ghost.

6 He said that He was going away, and yet was coming again; for the Holy Ghost came,
7 and His coming was really the coming of Christ. Christ said that it was to be but a short
8 interval between His departure and His return; and such it was, ten days. He went on
9 Holy Thursday; He returns on the day of Pentecost.

10 But, though our Lord and Saviour sent His Holy Spirit to be with us on His going away,
11 still there was a difference between the Spirit's office, and that which He Himself
12 graciously fulfilled towards His disciples in the days of His flesh; for their wants were not
13 the same as before. Christ, while He was with them, had no occasion to console them
14 under affliction, to stand by them in trial as their Paraclete; for trial and affliction did not
15 visit them while He was with them; but, on the other hand, the Holy Spirit especially
16 came to give them joy in tribulation. Again, He came to teach them fully, what our Lord
17 had but in part revealed; and hence too it followed, that the consolation which the Spirit
18 vouchsafed differed from that which they had received from Christ, just as the
19 encouragements and rewards bestowed upon children, are far other than those which
20 soothe and stimulate grown men in arduous duties. And there were, moreover, other
21 circumstances, much to be dwelt upon, which altered the state of the Apostles' feelings
22 and ideas, after their Lord had died and risen again, and which made them need a
23 consolation different from that which His bodily presence gave them. There is no reason
24 for supposing that, while He was with them, they apprehended the awful truth, that He is
25 very God in our nature. "I am among you," He said, "as He that serveth." But on His
26 resurrection He revealed the mystery. St. Thomas adored Him in the words, "My Lord
27 and my God;" and He forthwith withdrew Himself from them, not living in their sight as
28 heretofore, and soon ascending into heaven. It is plain, that, after such a revelation, the
29 Apostles could not have returned to their easy converse with Him, even had He offered
30 it. What had been, could not be again; their state of childhood, ere "their eyes were
31 opened and they knew Him." Of necessity then, since they could not endure to see God
32 and live, did He "vanish out of their sight." And if, according to His promise, He was to
33 come to them again, it must be after a new manner, and with a higher consolation.

34 Accordingly, when the Spirit of Christ descended at the promised season, "He bowed
35 the heavens and came down, and it was dark under His feet." He came invisibly, and

36 invisibly hath He dwelt in the Church ever since. He does not manifest His glory to
37 mortal sense. We do not hear the whisperings of His still small voice, nor do our hearts
38 burn within us in token of His Presence. The truth is, we Christians know too much
39 concerning Him to endure the open manifestation of His greatness. It is in mercy that
40 He hides Himself from those who would be overcome by the sensible touch of the
41 Almighty Hand. Still it is plain that, after all, in spite of this considerate regard for our
42 frailness, His visitation cannot but be awful anyhow, to creatures who know what we
43 know, and are what we are. This cannot be avoided; the very secrecy of His coming has
44 its solemnity: is it not fearful to wait for Him, appalling to receive Him, a burden to have
45 held communion with Him? and though we joy, as well we may, yet we cannot joy with
46 the light hearts of children, who live by sight, but with the thoughtful gladness of grown
47 men, who are anxious, who feel difficulties, who look out for dangers, who, in St. John's
48 words, know both that "the whole world lieth in wickedness," and "that the Son of God is
49 come, and hath given us an understanding that we may know Him that is true," [John v.
50 19, 20.] and discover His real majesty and power.

51 And hence, as we might expect, the Apostles' fellowship with Christ through the Spirit,
52 after His ascension, was very different from their fellowship with Him on earth. Though
53 they waited continually on Him for His peace, "not as the world giveth," and continually
54 received it; yet, the history shows us, they feared the gift while they rejoiced in it.
55 Consider, too, our Saviour's own most overpowering words, to be fulfilled in the coming
56 of the Comforter,—"Whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be
57 forgiven Him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven
58 him." Does not this Scripture imply thus much, whatever else it implies,—that our
59 ascended Saviour, who is on God's right hand, and sends down from thence God's
60 Spirit, is to be feared greatly, even amid His gracious consolations? Hence St. Paul
61 says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling " and again, "Grieve not the
62 Holy Spirit of God;" and again, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the
63 Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God
64 destroy." [Matt. xii. 32. Phil. ii. 12. Eph. iv. 30. 1 Cor. iii. 16, 17.]

65 This great truth is impressed upon the whole course of that sacred fellowship with
66 Christ, which the Church provides for her children; in proportion as it is more high and
67 gracious than that first intercourse, which the Apostles enjoyed, so is it also more awful.
68 When He had once ascended, henceforth for unstudied speech there were solemn rites;
69 for familiar attendance there were mysterious ministrings; for questioning at will there
70 was silent obedience; for sitting at table there was bowing in adoration; for eating and
71 drinking there was fasting and watching. He who had taken his Lord and rebuked Him,
72 dared not speak to Him after His resurrection, when He saw and knew Him. He who had
73 lain in His bosom at supper, fell at His feet as dead. Such was the vision of the glorified
74 Saviour of man, returning to His redeemed in the power of the Spirit, with a Presence
75 more pervading because more intimate, and more real because more hidden. And as
76 the manner of His coming was new, so was His gift. It was peace, but a new peace, "not
77 as the world giveth;" not the exultation of the young, light-hearted, and simple, easily
78 created, easily lost: but a serious, sober, lasting comfort, full of reverence, deep in
79 contemplation.

80 And hence the keener, the more rapturous are the feelings of the Christian, the more
81 ardent his aspirations, the more glorious his visions; so much the graver, the more
82 subdued, the more serene must be his worship and his confession. Who was so
83 intoxicated with divine love as St. John? who so overcharged with the Spirit? yet what
84 language can be calmer than when He says, "Behold what manner of love the Father
85 hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God! ... When He shall
86 appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is"? [1 John iii. 1, 2.] And who
87 was possessed with a more burning zeal than St. Paul? yet observe his injunction to the
88 spiritually-gifted Corinthians—"Let all things be done unto edifying; the spirits of the
89 prophets are subject to the prophets; for God is not the author of confusion, but of
90 peace ... Let all things be done decently and in order." [1 Cor. xiv. 26, 32, 33, 40.] And in
91 like manner, in anticipation of Gospel perfection, we read of the impressive gravity and
92 saintly bearing of Samuel and his prophetic company, when Saul came to Ramah; while
93 Saul's extravagance when he came within the Divine Influence, prefigures to us the
94 wayward and unpeaceful behaviour of heretical sects in every age, who, in spite of
95 whatever tokens they may bear of the presence of a good spirit among them, yet,
96 whether they preach or pray, are full of tumult and violence, and cause wild alarm or
97 fierce ecstasy, and even strange affections of body, convulsions and cries, in their
98 converts or hearers.

99 But if gravity and sobriety were seen even in that time, when the heirs of promise were
100 under age, as children submitted to a schoolmaster, and when holy David "danced
101 before the Lord with all his might, leaping and dancing before the Lord;" [2 Sam. vi. 14,
102 16.] much more is the temper of the Christian Church high and heavenly, noble,
103 majestic, calm, and untroubled. For it is the state of heart imparted by the Divine
104 Paraclete, who stands by us to strengthen us and raise our stature, and, as it were, to
105 straighten our limbs, and to provide us with the wings of Angels, wherewith to mount
106 heavenward;—by Him who takes possession of us, and dwells in us, and makes us His
107 agents and instruments, nay, in a measure, His confidants and counsellors, till we
108 "comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height, and know the love of Christ,
109 which passeth knowledge, that we may be filled with all the fulness of God." [Eph. iii. 18,
110 19.] Religious men, knowing what great things have been done for them, cannot but
111 grow greater in mind in consequence. We know how power and responsibility change
112 men in matters of this world. They become more serious, more vigilant, more
113 circumspect, more practical, more decisive; they fear to commit mistakes, yet they dare
114 more, because they have a consciousness of liberty and of power, and an opportunity
115 for great successes. And thus the Christian, even in the way of nature, without speaking
116 of the influence of heavenly grace upon him, cannot but change from the state of
117 children to that of men, when he understands his own privileges. The more he knows
118 and fears the gift committed to him, so much the more reverent is he towards himself,
119 as being put in charge with it.

120 Consider the language in which our Lord and His Apostles describe the gift—"If a man
121 love Me," says Christ, shortly after the text, "he will keep My words, and My Father will
122 love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him." Again, in St.
123 Paul's words, "Ye are the temple of the Living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in

124 them and walk in them." Again, "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy
125 Ghost, which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?" And St. John,
126 "Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in
127 God." [2 Cor. vi. 16. 1 Cor. vi. 19. 1 John iv. 15.] Is it not plain, that such a doctrine as is
128 here declared will exceedingly raise the Christian above himself, and, without
129 impairing—nay, even while increasing his humility, will make him feel all things of earth
130 as little, and of small interest or account, and will preserve him from the agitations of
131 mind which they naturally occasion?

132 Alas! I am not speaking of ourselves in this degenerate time, when we seem well nigh to
133 have forfeited the Gospel gifts through our sins; but, without thinking of ourselves,
134 surely it is not without its use to consider the high Gospel tone of thought in itself. He
135 then, who believes that, in St. Paul's words, he is "joined to the Lord" as "one spirit,"
136 must necessarily prize his own blessed condition, and look down upon all things, even
137 the greatest things here below. "Ye are of God, little children," says the beloved disciple,
138 "and have overcome them; because greater is He that is in you than he that is in the
139 world. They are of the world; ... we are of God. He that knoweth God, heareth us; he
140 that is not of God, heareth not us." [1 John iv. 6.] Here is the language of saints; and
141 hence it is that St. Paul, as feeling the majesty of that new nature which is imparted to
142 us, addresses himself in a form of indignation to those who forget it. "What!" he says,
143 "what! know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost?" As if he said, "Can
144 you be so mean-spirited and base-minded as to dishonour yourselves in the devil's
145 service? Should we not pity the man of birth, or station, or character, who degraded
146 himself in the eyes of the world, who forfeited his honour, broke his word, or played the
147 coward? And shall not we, from mere sense of propriety, be ashamed to defile our
148 spiritual purity, the royal blood of the second Adam, with deeds of darkness? Let us
149 leave it to the hosts of evil spirits, to the haters of Christ, to eat the dust of the earth all
150 the days of their life. Cursed are they above all cattle, and above every beast of the
151 field; grovelling shall they go, till they come to their end and perish. But for Christians, it
152 is theirs to walk in the light, as children of the light, and to lift up their hearts, as looking
153 out for Him who went away, that He might return to them again."

154 For the same reason Christians are called upon to think little of the ordinary objects
155 which men pursue—wealth, luxury, distinction, popularity, and power. It was this
156 negligence about the world which brought upon them in primitive times the reproach of
157 being indolent. Their heathen enemies spoke truly; indolent and indifferent they were
158 about temporal matters. If the goods of this world came in their way, they were not
159 bound to decline them; nor would they forbid others in the religious use of them; but
160 they thought them vanities, the toys of children, which serious men let drop. Nay, St.
161 Paul betrays the same feeling as regards our temporal callings and states generally.
162 After discoursing about them, suddenly he breaks off as if impatient of the multitude of
163 words; "But this I Say, brethren," he exclaims, "the time is short."

164 Hence, too, the troubles of life gradually affect the Christian less and less, as his view of
165 his own real blessedness, under the Dispensation of the Spirit, grows upon him; and
166 even though persecuted, to take an extreme ease, he knows well that, through God's

167 inward presence, he is greater than those who for the time have power over him, as
168 Martyrs and Confessors have often shown.

169 And, in like manner, he will be calm and collected under all circumstances; he will make
170 light of injuries, and forget them from mere contempt of them. He will be undaunted, as
171 fearing God more than man; he will be firm in faith and consistent, as "seeing Him that
172 is invisible;" not impatient, as one who has no self-will; not soon disappointed, who has
173 no hopes; not anxious, who has no fears; nor dazzled, who has no ambition; nor open
174 to bribes, who has no desires.

175 And now, further, let it be observed, on the other hand, that all this greatness of mind
176 which I have been describing, which in other religious systems degenerates into pride,
177 is in the Gospel compatible—nay, rather intimately connected—with the deepest
178 humility. It is true, that, so great are the Christian privileges, there is serious danger lest
179 common men should be puffed up by them; but this will be when persons take them to
180 themselves who have no right to them. Did I not begin with saying, that the
181 Dispensation of the Spirit is one of awe, of "reverence and godly fear"? Surely, then,
182 they who pride themselves on the gift have forgotten the very elements of the Gospel of
183 Christ. They have forgotten that the gift is not only "a savour of life unto life," but "of
184 death unto death;" that it is possible to "do despite unto the Spirit of grace;" and that "it
185 is impossible for those who were once enlightened, if they shall fall away, to renew them
186 again unto repentance." [2 Cor. ii. 16. Heb. x. 29; vi. 4-6.] Again; if they do aught well,
187 "what have they which they have not received?" and how know they but He, by whom
188 their souls live, will withdraw that life—nay, will to a certainty withdraw it—if they take
189 that glory to themselves which is His? Why was it that Herod was smitten by the Angel?
190 O awful instance of the jealousy of God! "The people gave a shout, saying, It is the
191 voice of a god, and not of a man; and immediately the Angel of the Lord smote him,
192 because he gave not God the glory." [Acts xii. 22, 23.] He was smitten immediately:
193 suddenly and utterly does our strength, and our holiness, and our blessedness, and our
194 influence, depart from us, like a lamp that expires, or a weight that falls, as soon as we
195 rest in them, and pride ourselves in them, instead of referring them to the Giver. God
196 keep us in His mercy from this sin! St. Paul shows us how we should feel about God's
197 gifts, and how to boast without pride, when He first says, "I laboured more abundantly
198 than they all:" and then adds, "yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." [1
199 Cor. xv. 10.]

200 Accordingly, the self-respect of the Christian is no personal and selfish feeling, but
201 rather a principle of loyal devotion and reverence towards that Divine Master who
202 condescends to visit him. He acts, not hastily, but under restraint and fearfully, as
203 understanding that God's eye is over him, and God's hand upon him, and God's voice
204 within him. He acts with the recollection that his Omniscient Guide is also his future
205 Judge; and that while He moves him, He is also noting down in His book how he
206 answers to His godly motions. He acts with a memory laden with past infirmity and sin,
207 and a consciousness that he has much more to mourn over and repent of, in the years
208 gone by, than to rejoice in. Yes, surely, he has many a secret wound to be healed;
209 many a bruise to be tended; many a sore, like Lazarus; many a chronic infirmity; many a

210 bad omen of perils to come. It is one thing, not to trust in the world; it is another thing to
211 trust in one's self.

212 But, alas! I repeat it, how unreal in this age are such contemplations, when neither in
213 ourselves nor in the Church around us have they a fulfilment! How is it fit to speak of
214 thoughts and tempers which men of the day not only fail to cherish, but are eager to
215 reprobate! Yet perchance what is lost upon the many, may gain a hearing with the few;
216 what is lost today, may be recalled tomorrow; what is lost in fulness, may be retained in
217 portions; what fails to convince, may excite misgivings; what fails with the heart, may
218 create the wish. We must not grudge to speak, whether men will hear, or whether they
219 will forbear; knowing that "he that observeth the wind shall not sow, and he that
220 regardeth the clouds shall not reap." [Eccles. xi. 4.]

221 May we, one and all, set forward with this season, when the Spirit descended, that so
222 we may grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour! Let those who
223 have had seasons of seriousness, lengthen them into a life; and let those who have
224 made good resolves in Lent, remember them in Eastertide; and let those who have
225 hitherto lived religiously, learn devotion; and let those who have lived in good
226 conscience, learn to live by faith; and let those who have made a good profession, aim
227 at consistency; and let those who take pleasure in religious worship, aim at inward
228 sanctity; and let those who have knowledge, learn to love; and let those who meditate,
229 forget not mortification. Let not this sacred season leave us as it found us; let it leave
230 us, not as children, but as heirs and as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. For forty days
231 have we been hearing "the things pertaining to the kingdom of God." [Acts i. 3.] The
232 time may come, when we shall desire to see one of the days of the Son of man, and
233 see it not. Let us redeem the time while it is called today; "till we all come in the unity of
234 the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure
235 of the stature of the fulness of Christ." [Eph. iv. 13.]

236 Whitsuntide.