

# Grammar of Assent Chapter V

by Peter Trahan

**Dogma** = a proposition which stands for a notion or a thing. To give a real assent is an act of religion, to give a notional assent is an act of theology. The religious habit of mind and the theological habit of mind are distinct, but each realm of thought uses the other just as it is with intellect and imagination.

- ⤴ **Real apprehension and assent = religion (imagination)**
- ⤴ **Notional apprehension and assent = theology (intellect)**

Newman is here solely focused on assent, and not inference. He does not propose to set forth arguments, but to investigate what the mind does when it believes doctrine or makes an act of faith. He is not considering the question that there is a God, but rather what God is.

He continues his emphasis on the “vital” and “personal” power of the real over the notional. It is the real that “motivates” a man to action, devotion and faithful obedience.

## Is a Real Apprehension of God Possible?

- ⤴ "Can I attain to a more vivid assent to the Being of a God, than that which is given merely to notions of the intellect?" Yes.
- ⤴ "How can I assent as if I saw, unless I have seen?"  
(no one in this life can see God)

## “Seeing” God through conscience

Conscience as the voice of God. Conscience is a connecting principle between the creator and the creature. (? compare to C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, book 1: Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe)

Conscience is not taste or sentiment. Conscience has an intimate bearing on our affections which sets it apart from taste or moral sense.

With a bad conscience we experience shame and remorse; with a good conscience, peace and lightness of heart. These emotions are distinct from other intellectual senses such as taste and honor. We feel responsible to an **external master**. These emotions are the **real act of witness** in which we see the unseen.

Some children have a religious instinct of an Invisible Being who is Sovereign Lawgiver and Judge, present everywhere, who is heart-reading and heart-changing. They have that within which actually vibrates, responds, and gives a deep meaning to the lessons of their first teachers about the will and the providence of God. This vibration is a real apprehension of God.

This vivid apprehension (the universal religious sense, or natural religion) is independent of revelation or teaching.

### **Belief in The Holy Trinity**

1. Can the notional doctrine of the Trinity become the object of real apprehension? Can it be held in the imagination, or is it just a theory?

Taken one by one (as in the Athanasian Creed) we can imagine Father, Son, Spirit. As such, we can have real apprehension of each.

2. Can there be a real assent to the Mystery of the Trinity as a complex whole?

No. We cannot picture it. We picture God bit by bit, never in toto.

Any exercise of reasoning which attempts to harmonize our notional apprehension of this dogma add little to the vital force of our imagination. Such reasoning is done, not so much for faith as against unbelief, protecting each one within a system of truth.

### **Belief in Dogmatic Theology**

**The Arian heresy:** Was the insertion of the scientific term, “consubstantial” into the Creed a bad precedent insofar as it introduces notional articles into what is otherwise expressive of concrete objects of real apprehension accessible to devotion?

Are the articles of faith too difficult to understand? How can the average person of the laity be asked to assent to such difficult and abstract theological notions? A man cannot believe what he cannot understand. But “even what he cannot understand, at least he can believe to be true; and he believes it to be true because he believes in the Church.”

### **The Rationale for Unlearned Devotion**

Once one believes that the Catholic Church is the infallible oracle of Truth, all doctrines, documents and confessions of the Church which together compose the deposit of faith are thereby necessarily assented to.

Apprehension of said doctrines and documents is not required for a real assent to their veracity.

[Note: This follows from the last sentence of the section on "Profession" in chapter 4, just before the section on "Credence" where Newman reminds us of what he demonstrated in an earlier chapter where he shows how an assertion can be converted to an assent by making the assertion the subject of a proposition, and predicating of the proposition that it is true.\*]

\*Modern philosophers strongly disagree with this position. For further investigation, see Frege, Ramsey, Ayer, and Quine. Objections have been developed under titles such as “Redundancy Theory of Truth” and what is called the “Deflationary Theory of Truth”