CELEBRATING JOHN HENRY NEWMAN 1801-1890

Blessed John Henry Newman was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in Birmingham on 19 September 2010. This article was written to celebrate the bicentenary on 21 February 2001 of the birth of Newman.

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Here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.

On 21 February 2001, we gave particular thanks to God for the life and example of John Henry Newman, who had been born exactly two hundred years earlier. Newman had indeed changed often, always ready to begin again, and his life had been a series of conversions, the most public of which took place half-way through his life, when he was received into the Roman Catholic Church at Littlemore, just outside Oxford, on 9 October 1845. Before that, as an Anglican priest and Fellow of Oriel College, he had been the inspiring genius of the Tractarian Movement. Afterwards he was to be ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood; to bring the Congregation of the Oratory to this country; and to be made a Cardinal in 1879 by Pope Leo XIII.

The 1845 conversion was the most public, but there had been other spiritual turning points in his life. The first was at the age of fifteen, when the young Newman, baptised in the Church of England and brought up along Calvinist lines, underwent an evangelical conversion while at school at Ealing. He was influenced at that time by two sayings in the writings of a Unitarian, Thomas Scott: ‘Holiness before peace’ and ‘Growth the only evidence of life’. It could be said that those two sayings became the tenets by which he lived his life. His quest for holiness was unrelenting, and he did a great service to the whole of the Church by demonstrating that doctrine can be developed, that the individual life must change and develop and grow.

The deep inner processes of the soul take time and require patience. Newman wrote: ‘Time is our best friend and champion.’¹ All the logic in the world would not have made me move faster toward Rome than I did. … Great acts take time.”² When he did make the move, it was no longer regarded by him as change: ‘I was not conscious to myself, on my conversion, of any change intellectual or moral, wrought in my mind … it was like coming into port after a rough sea.’³ Just as doctrine may be developed through an organic interaction between the idea of Christianity revealed in Jesus Christ and the very human history of the Church, so the individual life may develop and grow. When Charles Kingsley, an Anglican

² Apologia pro vita sua
³ ibid.
clergyman (famous as the author of *The Water Babies*), launched an attack in 1863 on the Roman clergy in general and on Newman in particular with regard to truth, Newman responded with his *Apologia pro vita sua*, a work which could perhaps be described as the theory of development applied to his own life and ideas. He had set himself to give a clear account of his life’s journey thus far in order to demonstrate that it was all of one piece and not mendacious. He had therefore to say what he owed to his Anglican inheritance, both evangelical and catholic. The *Apologia* had the effect of helping Newman’s former Anglican friends to understand the path he had taken; of increasing sympathy for Roman Catholicism; and furthermore, of helping him to understand himself better.

During a Mediterranean tour in 1833, Newman nearly died from typhus fever contracted in Sicily. On 16 June, while on the return voyage, he wrote a poem, with the title ‘The Pillar of the Cloud’, recalling the forty years of Israel’s journey through the wilderness. Later set to music as a hymn, it is better known by its opening words, ‘Lead, Kindly Light’. The illness had been a watershed in his life, and he was reflecting upon his experience. The words in the poem which are most characteristic of Newman come at the end of the first stanza:

I do not ask to see  
The distant scene—one step enough for me.  

This thought would always be at the heart of his spirituality, that we are given enough light to see what we have to do next, but often not more than that. He therefore had constant recourse to prayer for light and guidance. He never undertook any step or any new work without much prayer. This enabled him to see whatever trials came in consequence as God’s answer to prayer. He had a pure, naked faith which could be heroic. Even in the darkest hours, he trusted that a kindly, loving Providence was there, one which could be hidden in the ordinarness of daily life, where God’s graces were often concealed.

As part of the bicentennial celebrations, the Anglican Vicar of Littlemore, the Reverend Bernhard Schünemann, gave a talk which was broadcast on the World Service of the BBC. He spoke of Newman’s experience of deep loneliness during his illness and on the sea journey, and of his realisation that the future was in the hands of God. Fr Schünemann pointed out that a journey disturbs our lives and takes us to strange places. It can make us vulnerable and more open, more receptive to the call of God. It can help us to realise that, when nothing else is certain, it is God alone who sustains our life. ‘The Pillar of the Cloud’ is about being on a journey through much gloom and darkness, and the poet longs to learn to rely on God as guide. Christ, so much at the centre of Newman’s life, is not mentioned, but during his illness Newman had had repeated visions of Christ as light, the ‘kindly light’ of the poem. At the end of it, after suffering in deep darkness and being brought to the realisation of his need of God to guide him, the poet is bathed in new light. Fr. Bernhard described the experience, which for Newman is one of angels smiling, as the feeling of being loved:

The night is gone;  
And with the morn those angel faces smile  
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.

Asking whether Newman had anything to offer to our new century, Fr. Bernhard suggested that relying on God liberates us from the fear of failure, and in a culture which increasingly

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5 ibid.
denies death and views its onset as a failure of the medical profession, Newman can show us that our death is a homecoming. We can learn that our life is a journey and that our destination is Christ.

The parish of St Mary and St Nicholas, Littlemore adjoins the parish in which the Convent of the Incarnation is situated. Sister Judith and I were very glad to attend the Festival Eucharist at Littlemore on the evening of 21 February. The celebrant was the Bishop of Oxford, the Right Reverend Richard Harries, and Dr Petà Dunstan preached the sermon, which is included in this Chronicle. The post-communion anthem, the Littlemore Tractus by the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, had been specially commissioned for the occasion, at which he himself was present. He again heard the new work performed during Choral Evensong at Magdalen College on the following Saturday and on Sunday at Oriel College. It was also recorded by the BBC with the choir of St Martin in the Fields, London, and broadcast on the World Service programme. Sister Judith has written the following about this music:

That music has the power to touch us deeply and exert a great influence on our soul has been recognised from Plato through to the Communist governments of the past century—for this reason they have justified censoring and banning music, as the Soviet government banned Pärt’s music in Estonia in the 1970s. Anyone present at the service at Littlemore could vouch for the above statement. The silence which followed the music was so profound and attentive; we had all been led through the music to another realm—the music being rather like an icon, a door or window into heaven. The famous words (printed below) were taken from a sermon Newman preached in Littlemore on 19 February 1843.

Arvo Pärt is a deeply prayerful, humble Orthodox man—the sort of person you feel you have been blessed when you leave his company. His current style of musical composition is simple melody but rich, bare harmony. The rhythm is slow moving with repetitive phrases which give a lulling effect. Listening to his work is a stilling, contemplative experience which has you expectantly sitting on the edge of your seat and almost holding your breath so as not to disturb the beauty. Littlemore Tractus was no disappointment on that score. It is hard and pointless to describe music in words, music speaks for itself in its own language. I can only recommend that if Littlemore Tractus is ever recorded for commercial distribution you buy a copy and see for yourselves—I doubt any will be disappointed. Someone remarked after the service that it would be ideal for use at funerals, and indeed it would be, but you would need a very accomplished choir and organist to perform it.

Pärt is a very private man, and I do not know what, if any, his aims are in composing—but sitting listening to his music reminded me of a question put to me with some concern before my entry into community, ‘What about your violin? Your playing?’ My response was ‘the part that plays is the part that prays.’ Somehow Pärt’s music fuses the two so that the music is an expression of the prayer. Those of us who were privileged to hear and experience the music were transported into that realm of its prayer and were left awed and silent by it—proving Plato and all those who believe music has a power over the soul to be right.

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May He support us all the day long, till the shades lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done! Then in his mercy may He give us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last.

Another link with Estonia was a beautiful icon, also commissioned by Fr Schünemann, which arrived at the church with perfect timing immediately before the service began. Depicting Newman as a Cardinal, it was painted by the Estonian iconographer, Tiina Veisserik.

The full congregation included many who had travelled a considerable distance; among them were representatives of various Religious Communities, both Roman Catholic and Anglican. Whatever would Newman have made of it! He had so loved Littlemore. In his day it was attached to the University Church of St Mary’s of which he was Vicar. He had built the church at Littlemore in 1836, also taking over a row of stables and converting them into rooms, one of which he made into an oratory.6 At the end of October 1842 Newman withdrew to Littlemore, and it became a place of retreat for him as he faced the momentous step which he must take. For most of the next three years there were visitors or disciples who joined him for periods of varying length. The regular rhythm of prayer which he shared with them, including the early morning Eucharist, was a kind of starting point for the regular religious life within the Church of England. He preached his last Anglican sermon in the church at Littlemore on 25 September 1843, and just over two years later he was received at Littlemore into the Church of Rome by Blessed Dominic Barberi, an Italian Passionist from Viterbo. Newman left Littlemore on 23 February 1846 for Old Oscott near Birmingham. Leaving his ‘monastery’, with old friendships breaking as a result of his conversion, it was, as Newman described it, ‘like going on the open sea’. He was on a journey once more.

It did not take Newman long to find his new home. He was a priest through and through. In June 1824 as a newly ordained deacon and curate in the Anglican parish of St Clement’s, Oxford—which at that time numbered two thousand souls—he calculated that within the first ten days he had visited a third of his parishioners. A few weeks later he had gone through the whole parish, visiting house to house. When he was ordained deacon he felt that ‘I have the responsibility of souls to the day of my death’.7 He never lost sight of this. After a time of reflection following his move away from Littlemore, he went ahead with ordination to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church. During his ordination retreat in Rome in April 1847, he wrote: ‘... now I am much afraid of the priesthood, lest I should behave without due reverence to something so sacred.’8

He had decided after much reflection that the way ahead for him was to found a house of the Congregation of the Oratory, a group of secular priests who lived a corporate life under a rule, but without religious vows. The Congregation had been founded in the sixteenth century by St Philip Neri. It was he who provided Newman with his final model of priestly life. Newman founded an Oratory at Old Oscott, which after some years found its final home in

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6 These buildings, known as ‘Newman’s College’, have since 1987 been entrusted to the care of the Sisters of ‘The Work’, an international Roman Catholic Community of consecrated life with a particular attract to the doctrine and spirituality of Newman.
7 Autobiographical Writings
8 Ibid.
Edgbaston, Birmingham. I was born not far away, and grew up in Birmingham, living for
many years less than three miles from the Oratory Church. A school close to the one which I
attended in Edgbaston was the Cardinal Newman School; one of the colleges of education in
Birmingham is named after him. Newman was always there as I was growing up, and by a
process of osmosis I absorbed his spirituality and teaching from that period of his life. The
Roman Catholic Church to me in those days was Newman.

Newman wrote a number of hymns in honour of St Philip, which were sung at the
Oratory—and particularly at the time of the feast day of St Philip on 26 May. One verse in
particular still comes back to me:

This is the saint of gentleness and kindness,
   Cheerful in penance, and in precept winning;
   Patently healing of their pride and blindness
   Souls that are sinning.

Even though it was a hymn in honour of St Philip, the saint and his faithful disciple could
not really be separated. As Newman’s diocesan bishop, Bishop Illsley, had said:

Those who had seen and heard him and noticed the wonderful charm of his manner and
holy sweetness of his smile were struck with the idea that the beauty of holiness which he
had seen in St Philip had become part of his own nature, for holiness beamed throughout
his countenance and imparted sweetness and grace to all around him.

Newman showed at times a playful sense of humour—like St Philip the jester—and he
too had a profound respect for the mysterious dealings of God with particular souls. He wrote
various prayers addressed to the Saint and it is worth reproducing part of one here, because it
is in his prayers and meditations that Newman reveals most the beauties, secrets and deepest
aspirations of his soul:

Thou, Philip, hast no anxiety about thyself, for thou art already in heaven, therefore
thou canst afford to have a care for me. Watch over me, keep me from lagging behind,
gain for me the grace necessary to keep me up to my duty, so that I may make
progress in all virtues, in the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity; in the
four cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, justice, temperance; moreover in humility,
in chastity, in liberality, in meekness, and in truthfulness. Director of souls, Patron of
thine own, who didst turn so many hearts to God, pray for me.9

Humility, meekness, truthfulness, patience, the gift of a disciplined intellect, the desire to
grow in wisdom and grace, personal, intellectual and spiritual integrity: all these things
Newman possessed in great measure. His integrity had taken him on the journey from
evangelicalism, through the Anglican via media (which he ultimately ceased trying to justify)
between ‘popular Protestantism’ and ‘Romanism’ into the Roman Catholic Church. He
forged a link between conscience and faith: where intelligence doubts, conscience is sure. He
trusted peacefully in the final victory of truth: in the year 1876 he had chosen for his
memorial the words ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem, out of shadows and imaginings
into truth, or as the character Charles Reding expresses it in Newman’s Loss and Gain,
‘coming out of shadows into realities’.

York 1893, p. 378
At the Solemn Mass held at the Birmingham Oratory on 21 February at which Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Birmingham was the preacher, the following extract was read from a letter sent by Pope John Paul II to the Archbishop. The Pope quoted Newman:

God has created me to do him some definite service; he has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission—I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next... I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good. I shall do his work; I shall be a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep his commandments and serve him in my calling... O, my God, I will put myself without reserve into thy hands... What have I in heaven, and apart from thee, what want I upon earth? My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the God of my heart, and my portion for ever.¹⁰

Pope John Paul wrote that Newman had been born at a particular time, in a particular place and into a particular family, yet the particular mission entrusted to him ensured that he belonged to every time and place and people. He was born in troubled times when old certitudes were shaken, but he came eventually to a remarkable synthesis of faith and reason, like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth. Christ, the ‘kindly light’, was for him the light at the heart of every kind of darkness. Newman’s search, though, was shot through with pain. Once he had come to an unshakeable sense of the mission entrusted to him by God, he declared:

Therefore I will trust him. Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve him; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve him. My sickness, or perplexity, or sorrow may be necessary causes of some great end, which is beyond us. He does nothing in vain; he may prolong my life, he may shorten it; he knows what he is about. He may take away my friends, he may throw me among strangers, he may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide the future from me—still he knows what he is about.¹¹

Pope John Paul concluded:

In the end, therefore, what shines forth in Newman is the mystery of the Lord’s Cross: this was the heart of his mission, the absolute truth which he contemplated, the ‘kindly light’ which led him on. As we thank God for the gift of the Venerable John Henry Newman on the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth, we pray that this sure and eloquent guide in our perplexity will also become for us in all our needs a powerful intercessor before the throne of grace. Let us pray that the time will soon come when the Church can officially and publicly proclaim the exemplary holiness of Cardinal John Henry Newman, one of the most distinguished and versatile champions of English spirituality.¹²

Although the ideal of holiness may be elevated and lofty, the means of attaining to holiness are humble and mundane. Newman advised those seeking perfection to perform the duties of each day as perfectly as possible, beginning with getting up at the right time. The

¹⁰ _ibid._, pp. 400, 398-9
¹¹ _ibid._, pp. 400-1
¹² Vatican, 22 January 2001
self-denial which is pleasing to Christ consists not in great acts but in the little things. The veil between the natural things of daily life and the supernatural is very thin, and God is dwelling in the soul through grace.

In all circumstances, of joy or sorrow, hope or fear, let us aim at having him in our inmost heart; let us have no secret apart from him. Let us acknowledge him as enthroned within us at the very springs of thought and affection.\(^{13}\)

Those who met Newman were inspired by him. Lady Lothian, a new convert in 1851, was struck most by ‘his childlike sympathy and humility, and next to that the vivid clearness with which he gives an opinion’. Lord Chief Justice Coleridge wrote to a friend in 1882, ‘I cannot analyse it or explain it, but to this hour he awes me like no other man I ever saw. He is as simple and humble and playful as a child, and yet, I am with a being unlike anyone else. He lifts me up for a time and subdues me.’ Even after Newman had been made a Cardinal, he continued to live a life of great simplicity, completely dedicated to the day-to-day tasks of an Oratorian priest and to the pastoral care of those who sought him out at Birmingham Oratory. Despite his intellectual achievement, he was a true pastor and dedicated to the poor. He entered into vast correspondence with people of various religious persuasions, helping them with their religious and spiritual difficulties. When he became almost blind and could not read or write, he prayed the rosary constantly.

By his saintliness, his integrity and the profound spirituality of his writings, Newman had by the time of his death on 11 August 1890 won over many English people, so that the country had become far more favourably disposed towards the Roman Catholic Church. Fifteen to twenty thousand people lined the streets along the eight-mile funeral route from the Oratory at Edgbaston out to the Community’s house and graveyard in Rednal. On the next day, there was a long obituary in *The Times*, and a leader which said:

Of one thing we may be sure, that the memory of this pure and noble life, untouched by worldliness … will endure and that whether Rome canonises him or not he will be canonised in the thoughts of pious people of many creeds in England. The Saint… in him will survive.\(^{14}\)

This has been prophetic. But will Rome canonise him? The Diocesan Process for the canonisation of John Henry Newman was begun by Archbishop Grimshaw of Birmingham as long ago as 1956, and it ended in 1986. Newman was declared Venerable on 22 January 1991.

For the next steps, beatification and canonisation, evidence of a miracle is required, and this is not as yet forthcoming. It has been said that the reserved English have not prayed hard enough! Nevertheless, the miraculous influence which Newman has had on so many souls cannot be doubted. Perhaps he was too ‘English’ to favour the more flamboyant forms of miracles! As a tribute to Newman, on Good Friday this year Pope John Paul II read from Newman’s meditations and prayers, and there was speculation in *The Times* the following day as to whether the next step in the canonisation process could be imminent.

In any case, no single Church can claim Newman entirely for its own. On 13 August 1890, two days after Newman’s death, Dean Church of St Paul’s began the obituary in the *Guardian* with this:

\(^{13}\) *Parochial and Plain Sermons, V*
\(^{14}\) *The Times*, 12 August 1890
Cardinal Newman is dead, and we lose in him not only one of the very greatest masters of English style, not only a man of singular purity and beauty of character, not only an eminent example of personal sanctity, but the founder, we may almost say, of the Church of England as we see it. What the Church of England would have become without the Tractarian Movement we can faintly guess, and of the Tractarian Movement Newman was the living soul and the inspiring genius. Great as his services have been to the communion in which he died, they are as nothing by the side of those he rendered to the communion in which the most eventful years of his life were spent. All that was best in Tractarianism came from him—its reality, its depth, its low estimate of externals, its keen sense of the importance of religion to the individual soul. ... He will be mourned by many in the Roman Catholic Church, but their sorrow will be less than ours, because they have not the same paramount reason to be grateful to him.\(^{15}\)

Since that was written, Newman’s influence has spread ever more widely and deeply within the Roman Catholic Church, so much so that the Second Vatican Council has sometimes been referred to as ‘Newman’s Council’, because of the extent to which his writings, particularly on development of doctrine, were used for reference. Pope John Paul II gave an exhortation in a homily delivered in Coventry during his visit to England in 1982:

> Imitate his humility and his obedience to God; pray for a wisdom like his, a wisdom that can come from God alone.\(^{16}\)

We should do well to follow this injunction. John Henry Newman, pray for us.

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\(^{15}\) *The Guardian*, 13 August 1890