

Cardinal Newman's Message for Today

By Peter Dwan, B.A.

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[John Henry Newman, a convert from Anglicanism, delayed the final step until he could do so with a clear conscience. He was an intensely spiritual man. He died a Cardinal of the Catholic Church.]

If the implementation of the decrees of the Second Vatican Council is to proceed smoothly, Catholics need to adopt correct attitudes. Judging from the radicalism which has raised its ugly head, many stand in need of a model to guide them. Such assistance is available through a study of the life and teachings of Cardinal Newman.

John Henry Newman was born on the 21st of February, 1801, of Anglican parents, and was brought up as a member of the Church of England. It is worth noting here that the major influence in his spiritual life as an Anglican was the Bible, and this should prompt us to ask ourselves whether the Bible plays the part it should in our spiritual life.

Mind you, it must not be assumed that, unlike modern youth, Newman was without his crisis of faith. Like our modern generation he was exposed to anti-religious propaganda, particularly in Tom Paine's "Tract Against The Old Testament." This reading brought on a crisis of scepticism bordering on atheism. At that time Newman decided that he would be virtuous but not religious. Parents with children going through this crisis today should always remember Newman's marvellous recovery. Years afterwards Newman wrote in his private journal: "Your wonderful grace turned me right round when I was more like a demon than a wicked boy." Parents should also ask that such a blessing be granted to their children.

As Anglican Minister

Following a period of preparation for the ministry he was ordained in June, 1824. His period of curacy at St. Clement's was followed by his appointment to St. Mary's Littlemore in Oxford, where he was in charge of the University church. It was here that he did his major work as an Anglican minister and where he preached his major sermons. The sermons of 1831 provided what is perhaps the best indication of his thoughts at the time. They were concerned with obedience, especially with obedience to conscience as a path to the understanding of the truth, and obedience to God through putting His commandments into practice. The emphasis on conscience so sadly neglected in Catholic theology at that time was to receive striking endorsement in Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Liberty. Newman's emphasis on conscience which marked his Anglican days was to be prominent when as a Catholic he was to declare that although he would drink to the Pope he would always drink to conscience first.

Fortunately such an emphasis on conscience was coupled with an equally remarkable intellectual honesty which, under God, was to be a major factor in his reception of the gift of Faith. Even in 1827 he was to write: "Rome retains the true principles of Catholicism perverted, Popular Protestantism is wanting in the principle."

His study of history and its part in helping him to find the Faith has been so often discussed that this short quotation from his writings should prove adequate: "My stronghold was antiquity, now here in the middle of the fifth century, it seemed to me the Christendom of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries was reflected. I saw my face in that mirror and I was monophysite."

Prayed for Guidance

It was typical of Newman's greatness of soul that, following this swift illumination, he prayed for further guidance because he wished to consider the matter without emotion.

During this time he was taking a leading part in the Tractarian movement and with unswerving logic was pointing out the difficulty of reconciling the evangelical doctrine of regeneration with the teaching of the Thirty-nine Articles. The criticism brought about as a result of his statements came more from the motives imputed to Newman's making of them than from his opinions themselves. Even here he was experiencing the opposition of his contemporaries, an opposition which was to increase after he entered the Catholic Church, for his far-seeing mind provided him with a vision which was not shared by his contemporaries.

Side by side with his activities for the Tractarian movement went an intense spiritual life. He was given a copy of the Roman breviary by his friend; Froude. Newman hesitated to use the antiphons or the Blessed Virgin without permission, as it was not the custom of the Anglicans to address her directly and Newman hesitated to do so without authorization. Froude was also responsible for giving Newman a greater insight into Catholic doctrines, especially that of the Real Presence. Although Newman backed his study and prayer with a life of penance, having but one meal on the Wednesdays and Fridays of Lent, he always considered interior mortification more important than external mortification. This is a lesson we could all heed during these days when the Church has lessened the rigours of Lent and has permitted meat on Friday.

Delay Before Conversion

It might be wondered that, given all these things, what was keeping Newman out of the Church. The plain and sad truth is that it was what he regarded as the "corruptions" of Rome. The first thing he considered was the behaviour he saw around him. In the Anglican Church he was surrounded by evident signs of holiness, signs which he did not see in the Catholic Church until he met the saintly Passionist, Father Dominic Barberi [now Beatified]. At this time, as it happened, he was more ready to admit that the teachings of the Catholic Church might be true. Even here he was guided by sanctity, in this case through studying the life of St. Alphonsus Ligouri. St. Alphonsus's actions provided him with adequate proof of the unfairness of the charge of overstressing the role of Mary, and the Pope. Newman came to realize that they were not being used as substitutes for, but rather as means to approaching Christ. Further evidence of the care which he employed in weighing the evidence may be found in the fact that it was two years after resigning his living at Littlemore before he asked to be received into the Church. From this portion of his life we can learn the lessons that although the mills of God grind slowly they grind exceedingly fine and further that the statements by Vatican II that the behaviour of Catholics keeps many from the Church is indeed true and furthermore those kept from the Church may well be fine people.

Newman's entry into the Church can hardly be described more simply and more movingly than in the words of Father Dominic: "They made their profession of faith in the usual form in their private Oratory one after another, with such fervour and piety that I was almost outside of myself with joy."

The next day Newman with two of his companions who had been received into the Church with him, made his First Holy Communion. This was on the tenth of October, 1845.

Newman's Love of Christ

One needs to recognize that it was far more than intellectual conviction which drew Newman into the Church. The Love of Christ which Newman had developed through his knowledge of the New Testament had deepened over the years, and he had been prompted to seek a life of close union with Christ. He joined the Catholic Church when he was given the grace to recognize that it offered the easiest way to union with Christ, especially through the sacraments. His attitude should prompt us all to ask ourselves whether we consider our religion as a series of "do's and don'ts" or as a wonderful means of achieving close union with Christ . . .

Influence of Cardinal Wiseman

From then on the question was not so much what Newman's reaction to the Church would be but what would be the reaction of the Church to Newman. It is worth noting here the kindnesses which Newman received from Cardinal Wiseman at this time. The Cardinal confirmed Newman on the first of November, 1845, Newman taking the name of Mary. Of perhaps more interest and value to posterity is the fact that Wiseman generously agreed that Newman's "Essay on the Development of Doctrine" should not be censored before it was published. He realized that coming from one who recorded the principles of his mind and his deductions therefrom which had led him into the Catholic Church, it should be published exactly as it was written. Such testimonies even today provide valuable insight into the nature of the Church for both Catholics and Protestants.

Wiseman was a major factor in Newman's choice of a vocation. He encouraged Newman and his fellow converts to study for the priesthood and to organize themselves so that they would be able to participate in some form of intellectual apostolate.

It was decided that the group should undertake their studies for the priesthood in Rome. Newman was delighted with the plan, especially as it would provide him with an opportunity for an audience with the Pope. Pope Pius IX received them in audience and Newman was able to outline the needs and opportunities of the Church in England. Newman saw in the audience not only a privilege but more importantly an opportunity to serve the Church. Newman's view of himself as a servant is best borne out by the complaint he made that while at Propaganda he was treated more like a prince than a student. Newman's ideas about the serving Church were strikingly endorsed in the decrees of the Second Vatican Council.

Members of the Oratory

During this period he was concerned with the question of how he could best use his talents in the service of the Church. The position was further complicated by the fact that his fellow converts looked to him for leadership. Despite the inclination of Dalgairns to the Dominicans and St. John to the Jesuits, it was finally decided that their vocation was as members of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri. They decided this partly on the grounds of the adaptability of the Oratorian rule, which would enable it to be modified to suit the English conditions and partly on account of the fact that the Oratorian Order would enable them to have more contact with Protestants, and thus better fulfil what they considered as an important part of their mission. Newman was also enthusiastic about the Rule because it provided that, where necessary, schools could be staffed by the Oratorians and Newman recognized the crucial need for Catholic education in England at that time.

Ordination

In response to the Pope's wish that the group should make their noviciate in Rome under the direction of an Oratorian Father, Newman's fellow converts came to join him in Rome. Finally, on 1st June, 1847, Cardinal Fransoni ordained Newman and his confreres to the priesthood. The ordination was a conditional one, as Rome was still discussing the question of the validity of Anglican Orders. [Subsequently Pope Leo XIII declared definitively that Anglican Orders were not valid within the Catholic Church in his decree 'Apostolicae Curae'.]

On his return journey to England, Newman visited the Holy House of Loreto. Newman described his visit thus: "We went there (to Loreto) to get the Blessed Virgin's blessing on us. I have always been under her shadow, if I may say it: My College was St. Mary's, and my Church, and when I went to Littlemore, there, by my previous dispositions Our Blessed Lady was waiting for me. Nor did she do nothing for me in that lowly habitation of which I always think with pleasure."

The Oratory in England

Newman returned to London during the Christmas week, and said Mass in London on New Year's Day, 1848. Before Newman left London, Wiseman informed him of Father Faber's desire to join the Oratory. [Frederick Faber had also recently converted to Catholicism.] Although Newman was overjoyed at the news, when he wrote to Faber he was at pains to point out the differences between the Oratory and the community of which Faber was then a member. He stressed this because Faber's whole community intended becoming Oratorians along with Faber. The major differences which Newman insisted on were, firstly, that the Oratorians were not a very devotional Order, and furthermore; that the Oratorians were expected to work alone with less community life than Faber had been accustomed to. However, February 1848 saw the official setting up of the Oratory in England, together with the reception of Faber and his men.

Newman had hardly returned to England when he was surrounded with requests to preach. His simple preaching attracted both Catholics and Protestants. Typical of his dislike of singularity is the fact that although as an Anglican he had always read his sermons, he abandoned this practice when he discovered that it was not Catholic custom.

Difficulties Occur

However, the main work and certainly the most difficult undertaken by Newman at this time was the direction of the Oratorians. Difficulties arose because Faber's group was too emotional, confusing the emotional and the spiritual spheres. Newman endeavoured to end a whispering campaign which was being conducted against him, by reminding the Oratorians at a Chapter meeting that if they were dissatisfied with anything they should bring it to the attention of the person concerned, and not grumble to each other about it. Such were the difficulties Newman had foreseen. These difficulties were further aggravated by the fact that, as all the Oratorians were converts, they had not been brought up with the idea of religious obedience.

Converts Come

Despite difficulties with their own spiritual life, the Oratorians lost no time in beginning work for the souls of their neighbour. The week after the Oratory opened, instruction in the Faith started. Many came but Newman fully recognized the difficulties involved in helping the youngsters. As he told a friend: "The poor factory boys seem to have no prejudice against us - many of them literally profess no religion and numbers of them have not been baptized."

However, along with the hard work and trials went many blessings, the most remarkable of which were the cures which took place when the sick were blessed with the relics of St. Philip Neri.

Reclaimed by Love

Newman's apostolate included frequent contact with Protestants. He explained his attitude to Protestants by saying that they might not necessarily be heretics. Even if they were they were better reclaimed by love than repulsion. This attitude which distinguished between heresy and the attitude of mind of the one holding it and the urging of love was certainly revolutionary in his day.

Nevertheless this was the attitude recommended in the Second Vatican Council's "Decree on Ecumenism." In his public lectures, Newman used his humour to show how laughable many of the accusations made against Catholics really were.

His gift of oratory was a blessing for all his listeners. Catholics were awakened when Newman said such things as: "A lazy filthy beggar woman 'not overscrupulous about the truth' who believed in God and tried to fulfil her duties towards Him had a better chance of Heaven than the 'state's pattern man' who relied on himself." Everyone was equally shocked when he said that it was better for the sun to fall out of the sky than for a single sin to be committed. Newman's paradoxes on moral evil startled because the Gospel paradoxes had lost much of their impact. Here again he foreshadowed the Vatican Council which stressed the necessity of adapting the presentation of religion to the mentality of the people.

Vision of a University

A noteworthy aspect of Newman's life was his attempt to establish a Catholic University in Dublin. His vision of a university was an institution comprising people dedicated to the pursuit of truth. Now the degree to which such a vision was utopian is debatable. However it is a sobering thought to reflect that the failure of his plan was due to mundane factors. The Irish considered that the University should be for themselves alone, and expressed objections when they recognized that Newman envisaged a scheme whereby, though the rich English gentry would contribute to the University, the English would receive tremendous benefits from sending their sons there. Before lamenting their narrow pettiness, we should ask ourselves whether in our own lives we are as generous when it comes to causes in missionary countries as we are when the appeal is for local charities.

It was not only the idea that the majority of the finance for the project should be provided by the Irish gentry which raised the opposition, it was also the idea that the university should be staffed by laymen. Opposition mounted when Newman appointed lay professors and lecturers to the university. This idea was a foretaste of the ideas to be expressed in the Decree on the Laity. However we should reflect whether our ideas on the role of the laymen are really more enlightened than those of Newman's day, especially when we reflect that lay teachers in our Catholic schools appear sometimes to have little or no authority in the management of the school. Newman here presents the post-conciliar Church with the challenging question: "How will the layman be treated?"

His Critics

In the eyes of his critics Newman added insult to injury by the seeming lack of discipline with which he ran the University College. Students were allowed to smoke and he did not specify any particular study hours for them. People who thought that he was pampering the boys by providing

them with a club complete with billiard table, failed to realize that he was keeping the boys away from places of doubtful entertainment in the town.

Hand in hand with his concern for Dublin University went a more extensive concern for the intellectual apostolate, a form of apostolate the value of which was almost entirely unrecognized in his day. His contemporaries were all people who considered moral means sufficient to keep youth within the fold. Newman told them: "The influence of sanctity is greater in the long run, the influence of the intellect is greater at the moment." He clearly saw that young people soon lose their Faith unless those responsible for their spiritual care appeal to their intellect.

While on Newman's concern for the spiritual welfare of youth I wish to make a few observations about Newman's famous quotation: "It is the proud boast of the Catholic Church that it can keep a young heart pure because it gives it Jesus in the Eucharist to be the food of its soul and Mary Immaculate to be its nursing mother." The emphasis on the Eucharist does not require any further elaboration, but the Marian emphasis does. Newman here is doing what many refuse to do, "get down to tin tacks." The modern trend of running down Marian devotion comes partly from refusing to see Mary as a mother to be treated like any other mother.

Return to the Oratory

Like Newman we must now move from this university project back to his direction of the Oratorian community. During his absence a ferment had developed within the community. Dalgairns was allowing the Oratorians to shirk many of their duties while devoting themselves to sermons and intellectual pursuits. Newman's reaction was full of common sense. He saw to it that the community resumed their former duties. This is hardly to be wondered at given his definition of perfection. "Perfection is wholeness, a man is perfect when he is functioning in every part as he ought, and so to become perfect, nothing more - and nothing less - was necessary than 'to perform well the duties of the day.' This is a practical philosophy of life which all can adopt."

Further disappointment was Newman's lot when he was appointed supervisor for a new translation of the Bible. When he heard of his appointment he wrote to the hierarchy asking for the news to be confirmed, then proceeded to seek helpers for the work. However, the hierarchy when they were informed of the expenses involved decided that the project would have to be abandoned, but they took some time to pluck up courage to tell Newman of the decision. Their unwillingness to show foresight is more amazing when we know that Newman envisaged paying the expenses of the work by means of the royalties the new edition would bring in.

Newman, the Editor

Newman, far more than his contemporaries recognized the value of the Catholic press. When he accepted the editorship of the "Rambler" he followed a prudent policy including the introduction of a column for views for which the editor disclaimed responsibility. Furthermore, he read articles which had been accepted by the previous editor and toned down offensive remarks. While Newman was concerned with protecting the good reputation of others, his own articles involved him in a charge of unorthodoxy from Rome. This was unfortunate, more so because the article condemned was part of a series and within the context of the series it was not nearly as radical as it appeared when read in isolation.

It is worth mentioning that Newman's theological ideas were always moderate. For example, he was opposed to those who made excessive claims for papal infallibility. This was not something which

he acquired from his anti-papal background as an Anglican, but rather something which came naturally to him from his concept of the serving Church. This concept included the idea that the gifts which God gave the Church were those needed in order for the Church to serve men.

The Rights of Conscience

An important aspect of Newman's theological teaching which influenced the Second Vatican Council was his emphasis on the development of doctrine. The most striking example of this was to be seen in what proved to be the most controversial document of Vatican II, its "Declaration on Religious Freedom". The document was essentially the result of considering the implications of what the Church has always taught concerning the dignity of the human person. It could also be argued that the Council Fathers were influenced by Newman's insistence on the rights of conscience. One instance when Newman successfully appealed to the rights of conscience was when Catholic employees were being forced by Quaker employers to attend scripture readings. Newman approached them and pointed out that given their own beliefs concerning the right to freedom of conscience, such conduct was unjustifiable.

Newman did everything in his power to hasten the day of Christian unity. He recognized the Catholic Church as the home of all Christians but he had no illusions about the difficulties besetting efforts for unity. He was one of the few of his generation who recognized that preparation for unity was needed within the Catholic Church. This idea was certainly highlighted in our day when Pope John spoke of the aims of Vatican II.

Emphasized Scripture

Another way in which Newman anticipated Vatican II was in his emphasis on Scripture and historical studies. He was prominent in the Scripture revival movement, recognizing more clearly than many of his contemporaries that traditional Catholic exegesis created needless barriers when it came to discussing the Faith with others.

Though the period 1870-90 saw Newman suffering the effects of old age, it was a period which saw many honours being bestowed on Newman. Firstly he was appointed as a papal theologian to the First Vatican Council, an honour which he declined partly on account of his age and incapacity and partly on account of his reluctance to argue with ecclesiastical superiors. Then his old college, Trinity College, Oxford, made him an Honorary Fellow, an honour which Newman gratefully accepted when he was informed that it was permissible for an Oratorian to accept such an honour.

Appointed Cardinal

Of course, these honours pale into insignificance when compared with the great honour of being elevated to the Cardinalate by Pope Leo XIII. His appointment was not merely a personal honour, it was also a vindication of his principles. As Pope Leo commented years after to one of Newman's friends: "My Cardinal! It was not easy! It was not easy! They said he was too liberal, but I was determined to honour the Church by honouring Newman." Posterity recalls with gratitude the 13th of May, 1879, as the day Newman received his biretta.

There was great rejoicing when Newman returned to England. The Oratorians assembled to kiss his ring and to hear him preach. However, his working life was nearly over and the only famous sermon he preached after this was the Jubilee sermon on the power of prayer.

Death

Newman's last years were not marked by spectacular events. He was ill from the Christmas before his death and his health did not permit him to say Mass, his last Mass being Christmas Day, 1889. Naturally, everyone was anxious to see him recover, but Newman commented: "It is not kind to me to wish to keep me longer from God." On the 11th of August, 1890, the gentle soul of the great Cardinal returned to its Maker.

Bishop Clifford, preaching at the Requiem Mass, commented on the great change which had taken place in the attitude of the English people towards the Catholic Church during Newman's lifetime, and how much of that change was the result of Newman's work.

One can easily understand any reader who has drawn the tentative conclusion that the message of Newman is one of encouragement for the renewal envisaged and demanded by the Vatican Council. However, the message of Newman for our age is one more profound than mere encouragement (even though it is encouragement by action rather than by words). The limited success of many of his beneficial ventures stands out as a grim warning to those conservative Catholics who are disposed to block the true and intended implementing of the decrees of the Council.

Value of Prayer

Newman also stands out as an example to those who might be carried off by some of the radical tendencies which at this time are affecting the Church. For example, he is the antithesis of those who try to discredit devotion to Our Lady and also those who make light of the necessity and value of prayer. His Jubilee sermon on prayer merits this lengthy quote:

"The effect of prayer upon the Church is parallel to the case of a vessel keeping her course against the tide, an apparently extraordinary thing to happen. It is prayer against which the science of our day sets itself with extraordinary bitterness. People cannot allow that prayer has the effect it has, it has an effect beyond words and those who have lived long and have had much experience of life can bear witness that God is true and faithful and powerful and merciful."

Respect for Authority

Furthermore, his submissiveness to his religious superiors, even when they thwarted his plans, is inspiring. Surely, the modern Church can learn from such submission the necessity of waiting for official guidance on such controversial matters as "the pill." [This was written only months before the Church gave its ruling in July 1968 with the wonderfully life-affirming, dignity-respecting encyclical, 'Humanae Vitae'.] Admittedly, such obedience is not easy in some cases. Newman, however, highlights the means of obtaining the graces needed, namely prayer and trust in God. These sentiments were such an integral part of his character that they form the basis of two of his most famous hymns, "Firmly I Believe" and "Lead Kindly Light." In addition, Newman always stressed the importance of interior mortification which renders the mind and will more docile to authority. His careful searching and prayer before entering the Church should provide another reminder that no 'great decision can profitably be taken without much thought and prayer, something which those who criticize the slowness of the implementation of the decrees of the Vatican Council should always remember.

A Beacon

The post-conciliar difficulties through the actions of the radicals and the ultra conservatives bring about a certain sadness in the lives of some Catholics. Newman stands out as a beacon of encouragement that such difficulties often provide the seeds for future blessings. Nowhere is this

more apparent than in the circumstances surrounding the writing and publication of his "Apologia Pro Vita Sua". Following the serious attack on his reputation through the questioning of the motives which brought him into the Church, Newman wrote the book setting out the steps which led him into the Church and his reasoning and motives all along the way. The curiosity of the public meant that the book had to be written in instalments and published in a weekly. The publication of his work cleared his reputation and caused his literary earnings to rise from £95 to £1100 in a year. Thus, he was able to devote more money to his charitable work, and the whole incident provides a telling example of the truth of the old saying "when night is darkest, dawn is nearest."

His Message

Newman has a particular message for those whose present darkness is a crisis of faith. In commenting on the fact that he did not accept the doctrine of the Eucharist until he entered the Church, he made the wise observation that once one accepts the authority of the Church, everything else follows.

Newman's Cause for Beatification and Canonization has been introduced in Rome. Let us pray that this inspiring person may soon be raised to the honours of the altar.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Newman, J. H. : *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. Trevor, M. : *Newman - The Pillar Of The Cloud*. Trevor, M. : *Newman - Light in Winter*. Bouyer, L. : *Newman - An Intellectual and Spiritual Biography*.
