



Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time September 19, 2010 C

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN—1801-1890

This weekend, Pope Benedict will beatify John Henry Newman. Beatification is the final step toward canonization and is attained after two posthumous miracles attributed to the person have occurred. In the cause for Newman's beatification, the recipient of the second miracle was Deacon Jack Sullivan, a Boston court magistrate whose sudden healing from a debilitating back condition was deemed to have resulted from his prayers to Newman. Sullivan will be the deacon at the beatification Mass this Sunday in Birmingham, England.

Newman was born in London in 1801 and grew up in a home full of laughter and love. According to one of his biographers, he "learned to read perfectly by the age of five." He translated the Latin of Ovid and Virgil when he was nine, learned to play the violin, and was reading the New Testament in Greek by the age of twelve. During his lifetime, Newman was recognized as a masterful prose stylist, a brilliant scholar and an influential preacher.

First religious experience. By the age of fourteen, John had decided to be "virtuous but not religious." (Today, many say that they are interested in spirituality, but not in institutional religion.) John was drifting towards skepticism when an event occurred that changed his whole future life. In a boarding high school, he met an Evangelical minister who was more pious than brilliant. The minister encouraged young John to begin a serious study of Christianity. His intellectual quest was accompanied by a hunger for personal holiness and almost a mystical awareness of the presence of God in his life.

Oxford. In 1817, at the age of 16, Newman went to Trinity College at Oxford. He was elected an Oriel Fellow in 1822 and ordained an Anglican priest in 1825. Three years later, he was appointed vicar of St. Mary the Virgin, the university church at Oxford. Initially, only old ladies and college servants came to his services. But gradually, his Sunday evening prayer service filled with students and faculty.

Oxford Movement 1833. A high point of Newman's career in Oxford was his leadership role in what became known as the *Oxford Movement*. The movement consisted of a group of intellectuals who saw the Church of England as a middle ground between what they believed to be extreme and unfounded claims of the Catholic Church to authority and the extremes of Protestantism which led people to religious individualism.

As the Oxford Movement gained momentum, Newman began a serious study of the church in the early centuries. He was hoping to find historical support for the Anglican Church against the errors of Rome. His studies led him to write to a friend: "I am far more certain that England is in schism, and that the Roman additions to the primitive creed may not be a development arising out of a keen and vivid realization of the New Testament revelation." We would call this the role of Tradition in helping us understand the teachings of the New Testament. (For more on this, see Lesson Two of my Catechism articles.)

In September 1843, Newman gave his final sermon at St. Mary's. He resigned his position as vicar of his beloved church and went into seclusion as an Anglican layman for two years. Unlike the conversion of St. Paul, Newman's conversion did not come in a flash of light. Rather, it happened after years of soul-wrenching study and prayer. In 1844, a year before he was received into the Catholic Church, Newman wrote the following to a friend:

What possible reason of mere "preference" can I have for the Roman Church above our own? I hardly ever, even abroad, was at any of their services. I was scarcely ever, even for an hour, in the same room with a Roman Catholic in my life. I have had no correspondence with anyone.... My habits, taste, feelings are as different as can well be conceived from theirs....

To another friend, Newman wrote "I am setting my face absolutely towards the wilderness...." In March 1845, seven months before taking his final step, Newman wrote the following letter to his sister, Jemina:

At my time of life men love ease. I love ease myself. I am giving up a maintenance involving no duties, and adequate to all my wants. What in the world am I doing this for (I ask myself this), except that I think I am called to do so? I am making a large income by my sermons. I am, to say the very least, risking this; the chance is that my sermons will have no further sale at all, I have a good name with many; I am deliberately sacrificing it. I have a bad name with more; I am fulfilling all their worst wishes, and giving them their most coveted triumph. I am distressing all I love, unsettling all I have instructed or aided. I am going to those whom I do not know, and of whom I expect very little. I am making myself an outcast, and that at my age.

Reception into the Catholic Church. Some months prior to Newman's reception into the Church, an Italian priest, Fr. Dominic Barberi, had been moved to England to work as a missionary. He walked through the streets of industrial England preaching the Gospel in broken English to all who would listen. Some listened but others pelted him with mud. Newman asked to see Fr. Barberi, and on October 9, 1845, the two met. Of him, Newman wrote: "His very look had about it something holy. No wonder I became his convert and penitent." That evening, Newman knelt down and Fr. Barberi heard his confession and received him into the Catholic Church. Later, Newman described his entry into the Church as "coming into port after rough seas." He knew well the imperfection of the Church, but he had also come to believe that it was the true Church founded by Christ. About fifty of his companions joined him in becoming Catholic.

Newman's conversion shocked Victorian England and cost him his livelihood and his friends. It was as if a favorite son had left the fold.

Ordination to the priesthood. One year after his conversion, Newman went to Rome, entered the Seminary and was ordained a Catholic priest on June 1, 1847. While in Rome, he became acquainted with a community of priests called the Oratorians, founded by St. Philip Neri. He was attracted to their community life and their care for the poor. After his ordination, he returned to England and established the English Oratory of St. Philip Neri in Birmingham and dedicated himself to his new community of converts, to education and to service of the poor.

Appointment as rector of Catholic university in Ireland. At the request of the Archbishop of Cullen, Dublin, Fr. Newman became the rector of the only Catholic university in Ireland. For the next six years, he travelled between Dublin and Birmingham. At the university, he built a small chapel where, about 30 years

ago, I had the honor of presiding at my brother's marriage. It was the only time in my 38 years of priesthood that I celebrated Mass with my back to the congregation.

Sad to say, Newman's time in Dublin was painful for three reasons: 1) the Irish didn't like having an Englishman in such a prominent position; 2) the Church hierarchy opposed Newman's desire that the laity be given a larger role in the day-to-day administration of the university; and 3) conservative churchmen considered him a bit too liberal in his thinking.

During his time in Dublin, Newman wrote the *Idea of a University*, a remarkable treatise on what a university should be. He deeply believed in the relationship between higher learning and religious faith. He felt that the mind should be trained to judge well, and that the study of religion in the university was essential because of its importance in human experience. Newman saw faith and reason as two lungs breathing together in the search for truth. Today, Newman is honored as the father of Catholic higher education. Speaking about Newman, Pope Benedict says: "Newman belongs to the great teachers of the Church, because he both touches our hearts and enlightens our minds."

Desire for an educated laity. Newman wrote extensively of the high vocation of every believer, irrespective of status: "I want a laity who knows their creed so well that they can give an account if it, who knows so much history that they can defend it. I want an intelligent, well informed laity." Sadly, his ideas for the role of the laity in the Church would not be listened to until Vatican Council II.

Newman wrote *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine* which proved important as the Church sought to explain Catholic beliefs not explicitly stated in the Bible. He also wrote the essay *Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*. Newman's contribution to theology had a profound impact on many of the great theologians who were influential at Vatican II. His influence was so great that he was called an "invisible expert" at Vatican II which, among other things, spoke about the universal call of the laity to holiness.

The Cross. Jesus carried his cross and promised that all true disciples would also experience the cross especially as they sought to preach the truth of the Gospel. Newman suffered for his beliefs and writings before and after he became a Catholic.

After Newman's conversion, some of his sharpest criticism came from Monsignor George Talbot, a convert himself. Talbot recognized Newman's influence and so feared it that he called him "the most dangerous

man in England who “must be crushed.” Talbot believed that Newman was a troublemaker, responsible for inciting the laity to rebellion against Church authority.

In June 1862, an English newspaper reported that Newman had become a complete skeptic and given up the Catholic faith, and was living in Paris. Despite his position as rector of Ireland’s first Catholic University, the hierarchy failed to support him in other educational projects, as did the bishops of England.

Newman becomes a cardinal. For over thirty years of his life as a Catholic, Newman and his ideas were not well received. All too often, he was treated with suspicion by fellow Catholics, including priests, bishops and even the Cardinal of Westminster. The dark cloud was removed when a new pope in Rome, Leo XIII, made Newman a cardinal. Very rarely is a priest made a cardinal without first being a bishop. Newman accepted the honor, not because it was a high ecclesiastical office, but for what it represented—the enormous gifts and great love for the Church. He told his community at Birmingham: “The cloud is lifted from me forever.” He chose as his motto *Cor ad cor loquitur* (“Heart speaks to heart”), a phrase from St. Francis de Sales.

It would be another seventy years before his ideas were fully appreciated—at Vatican Council II—particularly his teachings on the role of the laity, the role of conscience in the search for truth and religious liberty, and the importance of Scripture.

Following are some of Newman’s writings:

On papal infallibility: a Pope is not *inspired*; he has no inherent gift of divine knowledge, but when he speaks *ex cathedra*, (from the chair—in his role as head of the church) he may say little or much, but he is simply protected from saying what is untrue.

I HAVE A MISSION

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 A 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 an angel of peace
A preacher of truth in my own place
While not intending it
If I do but keep his commandments
THEREFORE I WILL TRUST HIM
Whatever 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.
HE DOES NOTHING IN VAIN
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 my future from me—still
HE KNOWS WHAT HE IS ABOUT.

PRAYER TO RADIATE CHRIST

Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance
Everywhere I go:
Flood my soul with your spirit and life;
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly
that all my life may only be a radiance of yours.
Shine through me and be so in me
That every soul I come in contact with
May feel your presence in my soul
Let them look up and see no longer me,
But only Jesus! Amen

Newman’s most widely read book is his spiritual autobiography called *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (Defense of His Life). Many of his writings are available at www.newmanreader.org.

The Newman Association of America can be contacted through www.newmanassociationofAmerica.org.

Have a blessed week,

