

What would Newman say?

The Art of Evangelization today

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On the 13 October 2019 Pope Francis canonised the English cardinal, John Henry Newman. Firmly anchored in the faith confessions of the early centuries and of the Fathers of the Church, Newman understood how to argue, realise and transmit the contents of Christianity in a context marked by illuminism and scientific rationalism. Convinced of “the growth and singular witness of life”, he mapped out new ways to evangelise. An expert on Newman, the author of this article taught dogmatic theology for 20 years at the Pontifical University of Maynooth (Ireland) and up until recently was the spiritual director at the Irish College in Rome.

When Pope Leo XIII named Fr John Henry Newman a cardinal in 1879, it fell to the English Oratorian priest to choose the customary motto. He selected a phrase from St Francis de Sales, ‘*Cor ad cor loquitur*: Heart speaks to heart’. In the homily on the occasion of Fr John Henry’s beatification in 2010 another Pope, Benedict XVI, commented on the significance of that choice. The motto ‘gives us an insight into his understanding of the Christian life as a call to holiness, expressed as the profound desire of the human heart to enter into intimate communion with the Heart of God. He reminds us that faithfulness to prayer gradually transforms us into the divine likeness.’¹

It was more than six decades earlier, however, that Newman made the decision that set him on the road of faith and the adventure of love. He tells the story in the autobiography, the *Apologia pro vita sua*, now listed as a classic of English literature. Two of his teachers in secondary school loaned certain books to the teenager for the summer vacation of 1816. These were destined to impact him powerfully and, as history verifies, lastingly. He found in one of these authors, Thomas Scott, two mottos which inspired his life as polar stars, ‘Holiness rather than peace,’ and, ‘Growth, the only evidence of life.’ Scott thus became an

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Mass of Beatification of John Henry Newman, Birmingham 2010.

instrument of his conversion, or, as one might say in today's terminology, his 'evangelization.' The young Newman had been evangelized. (The only proof in fact that a person has heard the Gospel consists in his desire to communicate the Gospel.)

Scott and others such as the Principal of his School, Walter Mayers, were of the Anglican faith, but not untouched by Calvinism. The young Newman became an Evangelical, but not of the conventional style. The Scriptures were of first importance for him as words of light and life, words capable of changing lives. 'He drew up painstaking lists of Scripture texts in support of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and others for each verse of the Athanasian Creed. He would study to the full the Revealed Religion which he had now made his own.'² In the pursuit of his mottoes 'his unfolding mind was captured by the Christian Revelation, and his heart by the Christian ideal of holiness.'³ The God revealed in Jesus Christ had become the ideal of his life.

In 1817 the young Londoner went up to Oxford. There he encountered eminent university men, such as Hurrell Froude, Edward Pusey and John Keble. All were concerned by the religious and cultural character of the times. In a particular fashion they realized the challenge to faith posed by the Enlightenment. They set out, gradually but decisively, to propose the biblical faith and to anchor the Anglican Church in the early Creeds, the great Fathers and the Anglican Divines of the seventeenth century. In that fashion, the 'Oxford Movement' was born. It proposed a middle way, a *Via Media*, between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Newman was destined to become its leader and, in the process, to take on 'a remarkable mission, the revival of so much of the revealed religion of Christianity.'⁴

It was as an Anglican priest that John Henry Newman began to impact the University of Oxford, indeed, to draw and thrill the graduates who went in increasing numbers to listen to his sermons in the Church of St Mary. His preaching came down like a fresh revelation on his hearers. What was his secret? Was it his oratory? Or his persona? No: it was his message.

That message was clear. 'True Christianity is the Presence of Persons - to know Christ and through him, the Father. Obedience, not a frame of mind is the test.'⁵ He explained further, 'The whole duty and work of a Christian is made up of these two parts, Faith and Obedience: 'looking unto Jesus', the Divine Object as well as Author of our faith, and acting according to His will.'⁶

Enabling his hearers to make the choice of God as the ideal of one's life was the aim of Fr John Henry's exceptional preaching in Oxford. The historian of the Oxford Movement, Dean

² Charles Stephen Dessain, *John Henry Newman*, London 1966, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶ *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, I, 153-4.

Church, puts the point with compelling clarity. 'Evangelical theology had dwelt on the work of Christ, and laid comparatively little stress on his example, or the picture left us of His Personality and Life.' With Newman, however, there was a seismic shift. 'The great Name stood no longer for an abstract symbol of doctrine, but for a Living Master, who could teach as well as save...It was a change in the look and use of Scripture, which some can still look back to as an epoch in their religious history.'⁷

Principal Themes and Topics

The coming of the eternal Son of God in human flesh and into human history made real and attainable the loving care of God for each and every person. Newman explains in this passage, 'It is difficult, in spite of the revelation made us in the Gospel, to master the idea of this particular providence of God. If we allow ourselves to float down the current of the world, living as other men, gathering up our notions of religion here and there, as it may be, we have little or no comprehension of a particular Providence; we conceive that Almighty God works on a large plan; but we cannot realize the wonderful truth that he sees and thinks of individuals.' Newman impressed on his hearers the reality of the Lord's personal presence and living guidance. He stressed for his congregations the fact that 'the most winning property of our Savior's mercy, (if it is right so to speak of it), is its dependence on time and place, person and circumstance; in other words, its tender discrimination.'⁸ Little wonder, then, that his cardinalatial motto bonds the Savior's heart with the human heart! The divine Heart desires to speak to each and every heart!

The primacy of Easter

With his gradually growing realization of the fullness and attractiveness of the mystery of Christ, Newman places supreme emphasis on the mystery of Easter. In and through the resurrection, Christ's 'divine Essence streamed forth (so to say) on every side, and environed His Manhood, as in a cloud of glory.'⁹ In these and in similar texts one encounters the Fathers of the Church who were his special paradise of delight. They in fact made him a Catholic when in 1845 he asked St Dominic Barberi CP to receive him into the Catholic Church.

The gracious economy of the Lord's Incarnation

The evangelizing young Oxford Fellow outlined a Christology that unfolded in Eucharist and Sacrament, for the divine life of the risen Lord is intended for all time and all space. In that fashion, 'the gracious economy of His Incarnation' continues in the Church of the Eucharist and Sacraments. 'Christ communicates life to us, one by one, by means of that holy and incorrupt nature which he assumed for our redemption.'¹⁰ With his classical Christology and Sacramentology it is not surprising in the least that he should have stressed the sacramental follow-through that is the Liturgy. '*Quod conspicuum erat in Christo transiit*

⁷ R. W. Church, *The Oxford Movement*, 191 -2.

⁸ PPS, III, 115-6; 120-1.

⁹ PPS, II, 143.

¹⁰ PPS, II, 146.

in Ecclesiae sacramenta: What was visible in Christ has passed over into the sacraments of the church.' (Pope St Leo the Great)

It is 'in the services of worship we elicit and realize the invisible.'¹¹ This accounts for his advancing understanding of the Church. 'It comes from Christ, it is the vehicle of his Spirit, and has charge of the sacraments by which he reaches us...Through it Revelation is preserved.'¹² It is with such vision that Newman's dramatically unfolding ministry reaches ever increasing numbers. If evangelization consists substantially in facilitating the love of and for the Redeemer, then John Henry Newman is an exceptional evangelizer.

Engaging with the 'Signs of the Times'

With his clairvoyance the English cardinal not only read the signs of his time, but also addressed many of the new challenges to the Gospel. However, he saw in these challenges new opportunities for the Good News! A few examples should be mentioned. In his Essay on the Development of Doctrine, written midway through his life and in order to remove remaining difficulties with the Catholic Creed, he shows the vitality of the content of faith. In a particular way, he outlines the 'tests' by which we distinguish legitimate and illegitimate doctrinal developments. In that fashion he prevents 'Catholics landing in the ditch of historical relativism.'¹³

He saw in the fields of science and technology the challenges they posed for both faith and reason. He saw, already in 1831, the tendency to compare unfavorably theology with science: the former is 'weak reason', the latter 'strong reason'! Two of his greatest works address the topic, the Oxford University Sermons and A Grammar of Assent.

He also discerned the roles of the transcendentals in Christian culture and Theology. Those 'colors of being' (Klaus Hemmerle) shine out over the landscape of the real, connecting philosophy, theology and culture. The glory-beauty of God shines on the face of God's Son, Jesus Christ, St Paul insists (2 Cor 4:6). Now the transcendental of beauty serves to bring out the splendor-glory of the faith that has been 'once for all entrusted to the saints.' (Jude 3) This makes him the precursor of two of the greatest names in twentieth century Catholic theology and 'resourcement': Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger.

We have been considering St John Henry Newman as an evangelizer. We saw how he was both a practitioner and a thinker in that great and challenging project. To evangelize is the abiding task of the Church. Whoever encounters the crucified and risen Lord receives the call to witness in daily life and tell at every opportunity that the Lord goes before us, our 'hope of glory'. St John Henry Newman stands out as a shining instance of evangelization for our times.

¹¹ PPS, III, 250.

¹² C. S. Dessain, *ibid.*, 27.

¹³ Tracey Rowland, 'A Saint for the 21st Century' in Catholic Herald, October 11, 36.