

John Henry Newman: Apostle of the Truth

Blessed John Henry Newman will be canonised on Sunday 13 October 2019. Monica Rapeanu STL, a Lay Dominican of the Irish Province, considers his relevance for today.

Throughout the ages, the saints have ennobled human society, have endowed it with benefits of every kind, and with their example of practising the virtues in a consistent and exceptional way have adorned every rank and every condition of life. And John Henry Newman is no exception. He was already recognised as a saint by contemporaries in the nineteenth century, including by many outside the Catholic fold. Yet, when he was told that some thought him a saint, he insisted that he had nothing of a saint about him. He obviously said this not out of false humility, but because he strongly believed that credible witnesses are more important than the words they say or what others say about them. A saint who would admit his own sanctity would hardly be credible. It is often not words that have the power to convince but the way one lives one's life. This is the case with Newman. All he wanted was to let Christ shine through everything he did and thus become himself a light to others.

Newman is the right new saint for our age

Much has been written since Newman's canonisation began featuring in the news in February. Some have expressed the view that his canonisation comes late. Others are of the opinion that he should be made a Doctor of the Church too. And there are also those who have been justly pointing out that Newman is the right new saint for our age, especially if one considers the ongoing persecution of Christians.

Thirty years ago, in a talk titled 'The Permanent Relevance of Newman', Fr Louis Bouyer, a

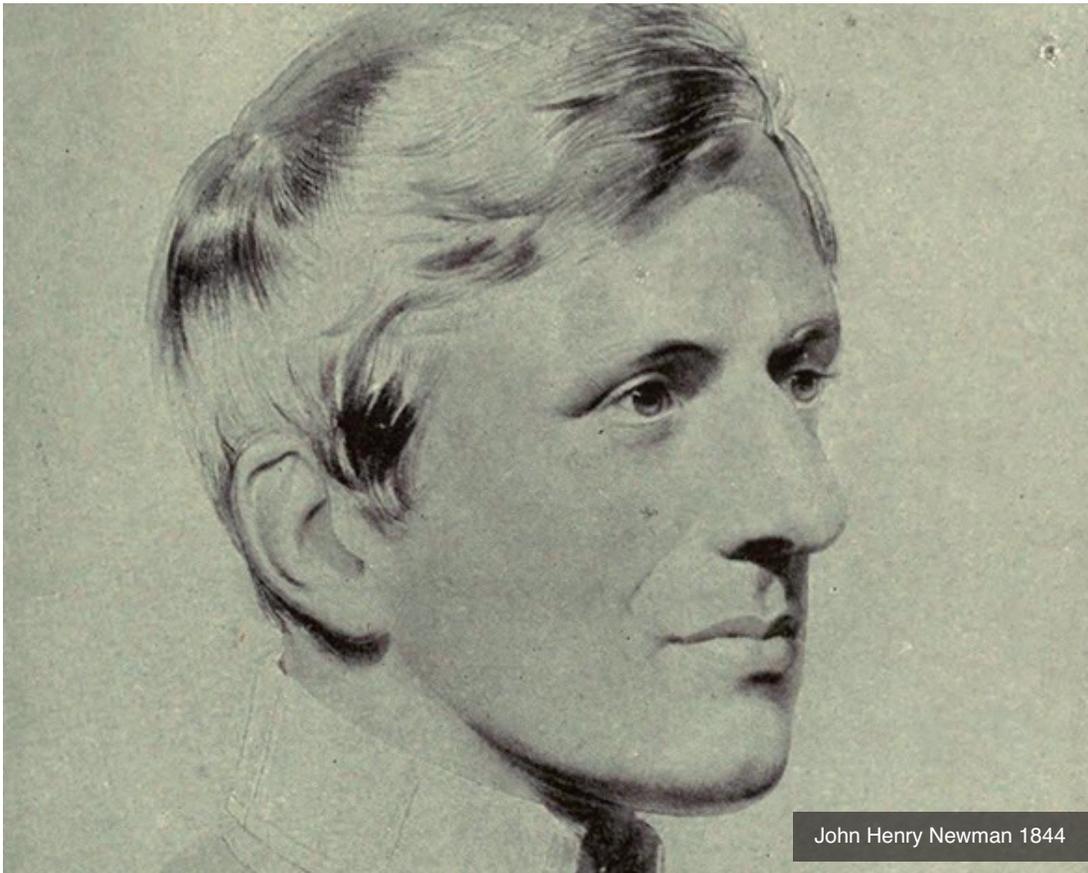
member of the French Oratory and himself a convert, highlighted the fact that Newman managed 'to develop in both his personality and teaching an immediate and spontaneous union between fidelity to God and intellectual integrity without these being in conflict'.¹

When I think of the permanent relevance of Newman, I think mainly of his enduring witness to the truth, his zeal for souls and his vision for education, which all reflect the union between his fidelity to God and his intellectual integrity and reveal that he was first and foremost a heroic lover and apostle of the truth.

A tireless defender of the Truth and of Faith

The phenomenon of the separation of faith and culture has been considered by all the modern popes as one of the most dramatic and damaging phenomena affecting our times. On many occasions, Pope Benedict XVI, who beatified Newman in 2010 and who is also an admirer and devotee of him, has drawn our attention to the growing mentality of relativism and has even spoken about a dictatorship of relativism. It is not difficult to notice that we live in a world which leaves God off the agenda, as it were, and which does not recognise anything as definitive. The most serious crisis our world is going through these days is a 'crisis of truth', to use Ralph Martin's title,² and this, I believe, represents the greatest poverty. The concept of truth is greeted with suspicion; it would suffice to call to mind the myriad of opinions and systems which have laid claim to the concept of truth. Secularism has enveloped our society, leading to generations of people who do not know the foundations of the Faith. Materialism (or consumerism) and individualism are also pervasive barriers to the gospel.

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John Henry Newman 1844

Newman lived in the century that saw the rise of modern non-belief

Newman lived in the century that saw the rise of modern non-belief. He saw in the nineteenth century both the rise and the progress of that liberalism and secularism which would become two of the major challenges in our day. An attentive reader of Newman's writings will find them attractive and relevant for many reasons, not least because he shared the modern situation with us. In a way, it could be said that everything he wrote was penned with the Christian who had to defend the Faith in mind. Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, an autobiography and defence of his conversion to Catholicism, is perhaps his best-known work. In 1870, he published *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, in which he analyses philosophically the act of assent by the human

mind to revealed truths, and thus he offers a most fitting justification of the act of faith during what he viewed as a greatly troubled period in which 'old' certitudes were shaken.

Many consider that his masterpiece of theological writing and his greatest contribution to the body of Catholic works is *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. He knew that an honest pursuit of the truth is essential, and he also knew that the goal of apologetics is not victory but truth. The Fathers of the Church made him a Catholic, and it was his reading and studying the Fathers that led him to understand and affirm that development of doctrine did not mean that new things were added or could be added to suit the fads of the moment, but rather that more and more aspects of a great mystery became clear, while the substance of doctrine had ever remained the same. His profound knowledge of the Church Fathers helped him not only to defend the tenets of the Catholic faith and answer the

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questions posed by his opponents, but also to show how the ideas Catholics professed in the nineteenth century were implicit in the earliest teachings of the Church.

The defence of the truth and of faith has been from the very beginning required of Christians and in the face of today's numerous attacks, it should be obvious that there is still a crucial need for Apologetics as it was also in Newman's time. Reasoned answers to questions about the truth and faith need to still be given. It is not helpful to 'curse the darkness' or simply denounce relativism. Nowadays we find ourselves in a situation which is quite similar to that of the first Christians, and as such we should see this both as a challenge and as an opportunity. We cannot remain indifferent to the process of secularisation. Just like Newman, who was firmly grounded in his Catholic faith, we ought to be always prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in us (1 Pet. 3.15) and to show the beauty of the Christian vision.

Newman teaches us, particularly in this time of confusion, that we should not pick and choose what truths to believe or teach truths that contradict the teaching of the Scriptures and Tradition. As Christians, we should not follow the most recent trends in thinking and acting, but we should be guided by truth alone. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote: 'To defend the truth, to articulate it with humility and conviction, and to bear witness to it in life are ... exacting and indispensable forms of charity.'³

A model for priests

No one can deny that Newman was an intellectual giant, but one needs to remember that he always gave the utmost importance to his spiritual and pastoral duty as a priest. He lived a life that combined the love of truth with the love of others, always trying to live what he taught; that is why to many he was a living example of what he preached. Newman's vocation was indeed unique, spiritual as well as intellectual, and precisely because he was, above all, a pastor of souls, he dedicated himself to both the corporal and the spiritual works of mercy. He visited the sick, helped the poor, comforted the bereaved and cared for those in prison, but he considered preaching to be a major way of reaching out to others, and he knew that it has an incalculable impact. His sermons and letters reflect his great interest in instructing and advising the faithful. Even his rules for writings sermons, which he carefully observed, are indicative of his love for souls; he was truly passionate about bringing people to the fullness of the Faith and sustaining them in it. As a preacher whose gaze was permanently fixed on Christ, 'he tried to awaken his listeners to a deeper awareness of their Christian dignity, to a more consistent and practical faith and to all the demands of the Gospel',⁴ by proclaiming and teaching at all times the truth – not a watered down truth, but the whole truth.

His teaching centred around the theme of personal influence. He even dedicated one of his sermons to this very topic: Personal Influence, the Means of Propagating the Truth. According to him, the most intimate development of the truth of the gospel was the development of the truth of life, the development of personal holiness. No one can be won for Jesus Christ and his Church merely by means of arguments. Credible witnesses are more important than words. In his view, the truth of the gospel 'has been upheld in the world not as a system, not by books, not by argument, nor by temporal power, but by the personal influence of such men ... who are at once the teachers and the patterns of it'.⁵

His prayers make it plain that he lived constantly in the presence of God, and we find the clearest proof for Newman's belief in the power of personal influence in one of his prayers: 'Make me preach Thee without preaching – not by words, but by my example and by the catching force, the sympathetic influence, of what I do – by my visible resemblance to Thy saints, and the evident fullness of the love which my heart bears to Thee.'⁶

A guide to educators

Newman remains without a doubt one of the greatest and most eloquent spokesmen for liberal education. His comprehensive ideas regarding teaching and learning are openly expressed in his classic *The Idea of a University*, in which he wrote that liberal education – which is to be understood as a real cultivation of the mind – was the principal goal of a university. In his homily at the beatification ceremony, Pope Benedict XVI paid particular tribute to Newman's vision for education, 'which has done so much to shape the ethos that is the driving force behind Catholic schools and colleges today'.⁷

John Henry Newman emphasised the culture of the mind and considered that the aim of a university should be the development of minds. Concerning the role of the teacher, this should be – in Newman's understanding – not just a mere handing on of information but helping the student gain right judgement. The teacher must make it possible for his students to know much, but he should bear in mind that a load of informa-

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tion can weigh down the mind. For Newman, teaching is, above all, a process that goes on between living people, so it is something greater than to merely impart knowledge by different methods. Thus the teacher is highly encouraged to look not only at the truth of things, but also at the one who desires to know this truth: 'It is this direct bearing of the teacher on the taught, of his mind upon their minds, and the mutual sympathy which exists between them which is his strength and influence when he addresses them.'⁸

He strongly believed that a university must be a community, or offer the chance of community, of friendship between teacher and teacher, teacher and student, and student and student. 'A university,' he wrote, 'is an Alma Mater, knowing her children one by one.'⁹

Newman thought that the omission of religion from an institution professing to teach universal knowledge would be an intellectual absurdity

Newman was very much concerned also with the relation between knowledge and virtue, between education and the pursuit of holiness, and he emphasised always that knowledge alone is not enough. As he wrote in *The Idea of a University*, 'Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justness of view faith ... It is well to be a gentleman, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life; –these are the connatural qualities of a large knowledge; they are the objects of a University ... but still, I repeat, they are no guarantee for sanctity.' Hence formation needs to be done primarily by the development of the student's interior life, for excellence can only come from within, bearing the fruit of learning through personal struggle and sacrifice. So, if we only pack knowledge into a lot of young heads in schools, this will not lead to a more virtuous society in the future.

Moreover, Newman thought that an institution that failed to provide for the study of religion could not be called a university. Why? Because the deliberate omission of religion from an institution professing to teach universal knowledge would be an intellectual absurdity. What was important to Newman was the presence of the truth about God leavening the minds. Nowadays, I think, this ought to become important once again to all teachers and educators at all levels.

Whether or not St John Henry Newman will be proclaimed someday also a Doctor of the Church is not important. He never cared for titles anyway, and he trusted and even prayed that no one would ever treat him with deference and respect. What matters most is that the way he lived his life, and the way he preached the truth will continue to speak to our hearts and teach us how to follow Christ daily without hesitation.

In an age in which we feel acutely the pressure of having to follow the crowd and do whatever others do, Newman teaches us the importance of constancy, consistency and perseverance in being faithful to the Truth. Most certainly what he would have us do – amid the encircling gloom and confusion of our day – is follow the Kindly Light and, thus, point others to it.

1 Bouyer, L., 'The Permanent Relevance of Newman', in *Newman Today*, vol. 1, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989, p. 165.

2 Martin, R.P., *A Crisis of Truth: The Attack on Faith, Morality, and Mission in the Catholic Church*, Servant Books, 1982.

3 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, Encyclical Letter on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth, no. 1, 29 June 2009.

4 Boyce, P., *Introduction to Mary: The Virgin Mary in the Life and Writings of John Henry Newman*, Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing and Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001, p. 6.

5 Newman, J. H., 'Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826 and 1843' in the Definitive Third Edition of 1872, Sermon V, pp. 91–2.

6 *A John Henry Newman Prayer Book*, London: St Paul's Publishing, London, 2010, p. 33.

7 Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Cofton Park of Rednal, Birmingham, 19 September 2010.

8 Newman, *The Idea of a University*, London: Longmans, Green, 1907.

9 See <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/discourse6.html>.

10 See <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/discourse5.html>.