

St John Henry Newman

On 13th October Pope Francis canonised John Henry Newman as a saint, along with Giuseppina Vannini, Mariam Thresia Chiramel Mankidiyan, Dulce Lopes Pontes and Marguerite Bays. This is special cause for rejoicing, as Newman has been one of the great lights for the Church in modern times. Reflecting on his life and teaching connects with the theme we've been considering of the foundations of Catholic Faith.

Newman is sometimes called 'the Father of Vatican II' because of the influence of his thought and writings upon the Council (even though it opened 72 years after his death). His name is seen on many university campuses in various countries, for example in Newman Centres, or Newman College at the University of Melbourne. Three hymns to which he wrote the lyrics are 'Lead, kindly Light', 'Praise to the Holiest' and 'Firmly I believe'.

St John Henry Newman was born in London on 21 February 1801. A teenage conversion experience initially brought him to evangelical Calvinism. But his spiritual journey led him, while Anglican vicar of the university church of St Mary's in Oxford in the 1830s, to be a leading light of the 'Oxford Movement' that sought to revitalise Catholic traditions for the Church of England (while still opposing the 'claims of Rome' that the one true Church was that led by the Pope). Newman became a nationally-known and controversial figure, and the influence of the Oxford Movement is still seen in the Anglican Communion especially in what is termed 'anglo-catholicism'.

But Newman's historical studies and theological reflection led him, from 1839, to the conviction that the theory he had mapped out, with Anglicanism as the *via media*, the 'middle way' between Rome and Protestantism, was intellectually untenable: it was only the Church in union with Rome that was the Church of the Apostles, and of his beloved ancient Fathers – the Church founded by Christ.

Yet he still had a major objection: Rome seemed to have illicitly added many new doctrines to the original unchangeable Apostolic Faith, such as purgatory or devotion to Mary. But as he went through the final process of conversion in 1845, he wrote his classic *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* in which he came to the answer. Ideas necessarily grow from within, and all these doctrines simply brought out, under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, the implications of what was present in the original Revelation.

And history showed that teachings held by Protestants, Anglicans, and Catholics alike, such as the precise doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, or the correct list of New Testament books, weren't fully explicit at the start either, but were arrived at in ancient times by this same process of development. And so Newman realised that through all the upheavals of history, it was the Catholic Church that was identical with the original Church that Christ established.

In the words of the closing pages of his *Essay*: the Catholic Church 'pauses in her course, and almost suspends her functions; she rises again, and she is herself once more; all things are in their place and ready for action. Doctrine is where it was, and usage, and precedence, and principle, and policy; there may be changes, but they are consolidations or adaptations; all is unequivocal and determinate, with an identity which there is no disputing.'

As the conclusion became irresistible, Newman requested ‘admission into the One Fold of Christ’. He was received into the Catholic Church on 9 October 1845, and became a priest of the Oratorian Fathers founded by St Philip Neri – establishing the Oratory in England, at London and Birmingham, residing at the latter. In 1864 he wrote the *Apologia pro Vita Sua* – a ‘history of his religious opinions’, to refute the accusation that even before his conversion he had been a secret ‘Romanist’, working to corrupt the Anglican Church. Widely read, it was a landmark in winning intellectual respectability for the Catholic Faith in Protestant England.

In light of our recent reflections on the truth of the Catholic Faith, I’ll quote his words from the *Essay on Development* on the greatness of *truth*, and our duties towards it:

‘That there is a truth then; that there is one truth; that religious error is in itself of an immoral nature; that its maintainers, unless involuntarily such [*for example, those excused by ignorance*], are guilty in maintaining it; that it is to be dreaded...that truth and falsehood are set before us for the trial of our hearts; that our choice is an awful giving forth of lots on which salvation or rejection is inscribed; that “before all things it is necessary to hold the Catholic faith;” that “he that would be saved must thus think,” and not otherwise... – this is the dogmatical principle, which has strength.’

‘That truth and falsehood in religion are but matter of opinion; that one doctrine is as good as another; that the Governor of the world does not intend that we should gain the truth; that there is no truth; that we are not more acceptable to God by believing this than by believing that... that we may take up and lay down opinions at pleasure; that belief belongs to the mere intellect, not to the heart also; that we may safely trust to ourselves in matters of Faith, and need no other guide – this is the principle of philosophies and heresies, which is very weakness.’

Newman was named cardinal by Pope Leo XIII in 1879, taking the motto *Cor ad cor loquitur*: ‘Heart speaks to heart’; and his speech on that occasion breathes the same spirit: ‘To one great mischief I have from the first opposed myself. For thirty, forty, fifty years I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of liberalism in religion...Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another, and this is the teaching which is gaining substance and force daily. It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion, as true.’

And a stirring affirmation from his *Apologia* in 1864 expresses Newman’s total submission to the Catholic Faith as being that one truth: ‘I believe the whole revealed dogma as taught by the Apostles, as committed by the Apostles to the Church, and as declared by the Church to me. I receive it, as it is infallibly interpreted by the authority to whom it is thus committed, and (implicitly) as it shall be, in like manner, further interpreted by that same authority till the end of time.’

Cardinal Newman died in Birmingham on 11 August 1890. Pope Benedict XVI beatified him in the same city in 2010. His feast day is 9 October, anniversary of his becoming Catholic. Newman’s writings and example have been an inspiration to numerous converts making the journey from other Christian communities into full communion with the Catholic Church.

The inscription he chose for his gravestone expresses the journey of his own life: *Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*: ‘Out of shadows and images into truth’.