

## WHY NEWMAN SHOULD BE CANONIZED

In 2001 Almighty God worked a healing miracle on earth through John Henry Newman's intercession in heaven. Thus the Church was able to declare that he is indeed among the ranks of the blessed. We are now praying that his intercession in heaven will produce a further miracle, and that he will soon be numbered among the canonized saints.

In 1990 St. John Paul II launched what has come to be called the New Evangelization. In many places where the Gospel of Christ was once accepted and lived, that faith has been weakened and often abandoned. Like his two immediate predecessors the present Holy Father Pope Francis urges us to recommit ourselves to our primary task of Catholic evangelization. He reminds us that the Church is missionary by nature and by mandate, and so evangelization is not to be seen as an add-on, but is intrinsic to our Christian calling.

In our efforts to live and preach the truth of Christ we need role models to inspire us and those with whom we wish to share the Good News. As a role model for the many-faceted enterprise of the New Evangelization, Blessed John Henry has much to offer the modern Church in the modern world; the real modern Church in the real modern world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For an in-depth and very readable biography of Newman, one can do no better than Fr. Ian Ker's comprehensive and authoritative work published in 2010. Here, I would like to highlight three aspects of John Henry's spiritual life which are (among many others) particularly relevant to the missionary task that lies ahead: the task of communicating our Catholic faith to others by the way we live, the way we serve, the way we pray, and the way we love. Newman the scholar is already widely studied and admired. We have disseminated his works. It is now time to bring into clearer focus the heroicity of his spiritual life.

A fundamental component of Newman's spirituality is his conviction of the primacy and immediacy of the unseen spiritual world around us. We need this initial conviction as we try to evangelize peoples and cultures that often ignore the reality of the supernatural, or else they take an unhealthy interest in warped versions of supernatural reality – occultism and all its poisonous derivatives.

Newman's belief that what we see around us is only a tiny part of reality properly understood is at the heart of his theological and spiritual insights, both as an Anglican clergyman and later as a Catholic priest. In one of his *Parochial and Plain Sermons* entitled *The Invisible World* he wrote:

*“.....in spite of this universal world which we see, there is another world, quite as far-spreading, quite as close to us, and more wonderful; another world all around us, though we see it not, and more wonderful than the world we see, for this reason if for no other, that we do not see it. All around us are numberless objects, coming and going, watching, working or waiting, which we see not: this is that other world, which the eyes reach not unto, but faith only.”*

(PS vol.iv, sermon 13)

The “numberless objects, coming and going” are not the things tracked by NASA. Newman of course meant the angels, the saints, the holy souls departed, those who inhabit the supernatural world of spirits. *“The world of spirits then, though unseen, is present; present, not future, not distant. It is not above the sky, it is not beyond the grave; it is now and here; the kingdom of God is among us.”* Greatest of all in this spiritual world is the supreme invisible presence of God Himself, the origin and sustainer of all reality.

Secondly, we should be inspired by the heroic docility with which he followed where the Spirit led. He was not in any way a

charismatic in the modern sense of that label. He believed our prayer should always be tranquil and sober. However, by the use of his mind and by a finely tuned self-awareness of his own spiritual sensibilities he persevered step by step under the Spirit's guidance along the path to truth, a path that led him out of the errors and prejudices which had coloured his earlier beliefs. The convert who in 1845 acknowledged the Roman Catholic Church as the one true fold of the Redeemer was the man who for many years previously had seriously believed that the Pope was antichrist, and the Roman Church a purveyor of idolatry, heresy, and superstition.

Newman's journey into the truth was long and painstakingly incremental. His conversion to Catholicism took time. It took time because there was much in him that needed to change, and also because he was scrupulously careful not to fabricate his response to grace. Those who instruct enquirers and catechize converts know that a genuine response to the grace of enlightenment cannot - must not - be simulated. John Henry's ecumenical journey illustrates the importance of following the promptings of the Spirit, not by frothy emotionalism or shallow irenicism, but by a calm and persevering incremental quest for that which God calls all souls to embrace: the fullness of revelation in the Church Christ founded.

In the first part of his ecumenical journey, Newman's most energetic enterprise was of course his invention of Anglo-Catholicism. It went deep with him. It took time for him to move beyond its shadows and images. Newman's journey shows us that God uses all the circumstances and events of our lives, even our mistakes, to draw us to Himself. Grace builds on nature. The spiritual sensitivity and intellectual acuity that we admire in Newman were clearly part of him when he was still an Anglican. Some of his finest sermons and most insightful studies were

written as an Anglican, an inspiring testimony to the workings of the Holy Spirit outside the visible boundaries of the Church.

Thirdly, we have the example of the fruitful integration within Newman himself of his love for God and his love of neighbour. His harmonious integration of those two great loves shows us that the gift of faith is a gift for the whole person. Newman loved God with the same heart and mind with which he also loved other creatures. His celibate and chaste affective life was not clouded by anything akin to what the post-Freudian world likes to call 'repression'. His capacity for deep friendship with others, women and men, is well documented. It is charmingly revealed in the attentive and affectionate letters he wrote to his closer friends.

In an age like our own when genuine friendship can so easily be occluded by an obsessive sexualization of human affectivity, Newman reminds us that human love at its best is a pointer towards that supreme love to which we are all called, whatever our state in life and whatever our role in the Church: our personal love for our personal Saviour. John Henry's human affections were an integral part of his spiritual journey. His friendships brought him closer to God.

*“Do you know what it is to have a friend in a distant country, to expect news of him, and to wonder from day to day what he is now doing, and whether he is well? Do you know what it is so to live upon a person who is present with you, that your eyes follow his, that you read his soul, that you see all its changes in his countenance, that you anticipate his wishes, that you smile in his smile, and are sad in his sadness, and are downcast when he is vexed, and rejoice in his successes? To watch for Christ is a feeling such as all these; as far as feelings of this world are fit to shadow out those of another.”*

(Parochial and Plain Sermons, iv, 22)

Newman drew others to Christ through the attraction they felt towards him, their pastor, their teacher, their friend. In this he is a fine example of how we can best pursue our mission to evangelize. Merely repeating with cool detachment the words on the pages of the Catechism, true though they are, will not by itself turn hearts and minds to the Lord. Human warmth and sincere inter-personal engagement are also needed. Heart must speak to heart. The human element is essential if the Spirit's gift of faith is to take root and bear fruit. The Holy Father's stirring Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) puts it thus:

*“Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’.”* (para.15)

Newman attracted others to the faith through his apostolate of friendship more than through an apostolate of controversy. He drew others along the path that he was travelling because he drew them to share personally in his life, his mind, his heart. As their pastor he was also their friend.

This inter-personal relational approach to the pastoral apostolate is John Henry Newman's most dynamic contribution to the necessary agenda of the New Evangelization. I venture to suggest that what can be called his 'relational spirituality' is just as much part of his greatness as his important theological insights into e.g. the authority of conscience, the development of doctrine, the role of the laity.

Here is one of the great lessons he has to offer the contemporary Church: we evangelize best not by aggressive proselytising, not by relishing our differences, but by attracting. Blessed John Henry Newman is a heroic example of how the

apostolate achieves its finest results when heart speaks unto heart. I pray that the Spirit will now give him to the universal Church as a Saint and Doctor, to help us in our vocation to bring many more of our brothers and sisters to the knowledge and love of Jesus.

*Fr. Ignatius Harrison, C.O.*  
*Provost of the Birmingham Oratory.*