

28th Sunday (C)

10th October 2021

‘Cardinal Newman: Sainly Patron of University life!’

Wis 7: *prayed, and understanding was given me* Ps 144: *The Lord is just in all His ways.*
1Cor 2: *We are those who have the mind of Christ*
Mt 13: 47–52: *Things both new and old*

My last weekend in the parish in Hertfordshire, just 6 wks ago, was the parish’s patronal feast day — St Augustine’s Day; and on that day I reflected how it would have been a worthy thing to have spent my 14 yrs in the parish gradually reading through all of St Augustine’s works ... until I realised that to have read his 5 million extant words I would have had to read almost 1000 words/day, every day, for 14 yrs!! So ... as I arrive already at *our* patronal feastday — Cardinal Newman’s feast — I think I will make no such rash promise, to read through all Newman’s works in my years here! (I have no idea how many words he wrote, but it is very very many!) Nevertheless, I have great regard for him, and would wish, with you, to grow in knowledge and imitation of him.

How wonderful it is that the Chaplaincy’s patronal feastday is at the very outset of the academic year, really setting us up for the year ahead, imploring Newman’s

powerful intercession for our students and staff as you embrace a new and — please God — a more normal and fruitful university year of study, research, fellowship and ... divine “wisdom.” What a great patron to have! — one who was both an academic and a pastor; a man of prayer as well as of learning; a shepherd in heaven to inspire and lead us to appreciate the Wisdom that comes from God, which illuminates our minds not just in academic learning, but in Christian perfection: “*I prayed, and understanding was given me; I entreated, and the spirit of Wisdom came to me. I esteemed her more than sceptres and thrones; compared with her I held all riches as nothing!*” — words from the 1st Reading that could sum up the spirit-filled imagination and heart of our holy patron.

It’s 131 years since Cardinal Newman died in Birmingham, at the Oratory of St Philip Neri which he founded — but it’s only 11 years since his beatification, which took place on the rainy outskirts of Birmingham, at Mass celebrated by the Pope himself, Pope Benedict, during his great visit to our country; and it’s only 2 yrs

since his solemn canonization in the warm sunshine of St Peter's Square by Pope Francis. What a wonderful moment that was for the Catholic Church in this country; many had waited long years for his canonization to come. Newman's influence in Victorian England was huge; his fame in and around Oxford in his Anglican years as a fellow of Oriel College and Vicar of the University church was immense, and his power as a softly-spoken but persuasive preacher was renowned. No wonder, then, that after the accolades awarded him in the first half of his life, his decisions in the early 1840s — to renounce his Oxford fellowship, to resign as Vicar of St Mary's, and to move out of central Oxford to a quiet retreat in the poor village of Littlemore, to some converted cottages and stables — came as a great shock to the Establishment. But all this was to give him the time and space to pray, study and reflect on what would be the most momentous decision of his life, and one whose echoes would ring out across England, across the Church, and across the years!

I have often visited and stayed at Littlemore, 'the

College,' as Newman called it, where he lived for the 4 crucial middle years of his life, 1842–46. It's a place of great tranquillity, a place bathed in the quiet sanctity of the one who founded it. It was in this place, one awful wet night in 1845 — 8th to 9th October — that Newman finally took the decision to become a Catholic. He took the opportunity of a visit by Blessed Dominic Barberi, an Italian Passionist missionary priest, who had been in England about 4 years by then, preaching and encouraging the Catholic faithful up and down the country. It is said that Newman didn't even wait for Barberi to recover fully from the ordeal of arriving atop a stagecoach in the driving rain, but that while he was still drying himself by the fire, Newman fell to his knees at Barberi's feet, requesting Confession and admittance into the Catholic Church. It was far from an easy decision: Newman had been in the Anglican establishment for some 20 years, and in the Oxford academic life for 28 years; he had many friends in that life, and only a very few followed him in his conversion to the Catholic faith. It was a decision, then,

that cost him dearly, and he had almost to ‘start again’ in his life, and rebuild friendships and carve out a new way of life as a Catholic. But never at any point did he doubt he had made the right decision, and that, as he put it, at the age of 44 he had now entered the “one true fold of the Redeemer.”

As a Catholic, and then as a Catholic priest, Newman still had huge challenges to face. Obviously, in some ways he was a celebrity name entering the Church, which itself set up tensions with other Catholics. But more significantly were the debates he had to enter into with those who denounced his conversion. Not all his projects were successful — his founding of a Catholic University in Dublin was a mixed blessing, though it lives on today as ‘University College Dublin’; and at one point in the 1850s he had to defend himself in a libel trial, which he lost; his founding of the Oratory School in Birmingham also proved contentious, though it too still exists today. Even his establishing of the religious order in England of the Oratorians of St Philip Neri — principally the Birmingham

Oratory — was not without its headaches, and some of its members broke away to found a separate London Oratory, but it did prove to be the mainstay of his life as priest, pastor, scholar and — in his last 11 years — Cardinal.

But throughout his 45 Catholic years, he was a herald for the truth of Catholicism, the faith that for 300 years since the turbulence of the Reformation had been persecuted. Newman showed with great rigour, and personal patience and kindness that Catholicism was in England to stay, and to re-found itself with confidence. We need his prayers today, to maintain that vigour of spreading the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus to our fellow countrymen. He gives us much hope, and his now being a saint is a cause of much rejoicing for the whole Church, but most especially for ourselves, in the land which Newman loved. I remember that my 1st university chaplain, who was a devoted Newman adherent, back in the 80s, and attributed his own conversion in part to Newman, was doubtful that there was enough popular devotion for him ever to be canonized. Well, he was

wrong, and we are happy to have this latest English saint as a great figurehead for us as Catholic university members. We should implore this new saint for his prayers for our academic life in London's universities; and also in our national and political life. Newman was a quiet, diplomatic man, one who could argue firmly, rigorously, but respectfully and with great learning. May his prayers help all those charged with university office and also in our rather turbulent political life with the necessary negotiation, resolution, and reconciliation that are so needed in these days. Newman was a man of great integrity, constantly seeking the truth in all things, centred on Jesus Christ. May his intercession bring about what we all need so dearly, to unite our minds and our hearts with our faith — as he did, so intelligently, and so determinedly.

Cardinal Newman, saint and scholar, priest and pastor, pray for us, for our country, and for the Catholic people of our nation: may we live our faith in Jesus Christ with love and compassion, and great humility, as you did.