

28th Sunday (C)

9th October 2022

'Newman: Academic, Theologian, Convert, Priest'

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*

A couple of weeks ago I was outside near the front doorstep, and a couple, with their student-age daughter, were passing by, and they caught sight of the Vatican flag flying, and stopped to study the plaque with our house name on it. I guessed that they might be trying to find the Catholic Chaplaincy, and engaged them in conversation. It turned out that they weren't seeking the Catholic community, as such, but that they were intrigued by the naming of our House: "we're descended from John Henry Newman's family," they said! So, they probably weren't Catholic at all — Cardinal Newman is probably the most famous Catholic convert from Anglicanism of the past 200yrs.

For some of you, the name 'John Henry Newman' may be extremely familiar — he was beatified by Pope Benedict here in England in 2010, and canonized by Pope Francis in Rome just 3 yrs ago. But for others of you, especially if you have come to London's universities from abroad, his name may be obscure, and you may wonder just why our Catholic chaplaincy is named after him. Well,

there are countless reasons — starting with the fact that his childhood home was very near here, just down near Holborn — but mostly because he is an exemplary patron saint for us as university students, staff, and chaplains. Newman was an academic, a Christian theologian, a convert to Catholicism, and a pastoral priest. For all these reasons, we are so lucky to be named after him, to have him as our heavenly patron, and to be able to celebrate his feastday, 9th October at the very outset of the academic year, invoking his prayers for the year ahead together.

1. **Newman the Academic.** Our first connection with John Henry Newman is that he was a man of the university. He entered Oxford at 16, and by 21 was a fellow of Oriel College, where he would stay for over 20 years. He loved the life of reading and study, and was assiduous at it. But all was not plain sailing. In his first degree he only managed a '3rd'! This was not because of his lack of ability, but because he had utterly worn himself out with round-the-clock study, so by the time of his finals he was exhausted and had a minor

breakdown, unable to display any of his great learning. It was a spectacular failure, but he learnt to accept it with humility. He redeemed himself soon afterwards, in his fellowship exams, and entered into highly esteemed company at Oriel, where he really felt at home. But Newman also loved caring for the undergraduates — as a tutor he was much more concerned with their pastoral care than was the norm amongst the fellows. Much later on in life, he was instrumental in helping set up a Catholic University in Dublin, and although his tenure as Rector was short-lived, yet the ‘idea of a university,’ he considered, was a great task of the Christian life, one that should encourage young minds in their wider learning, and in their Christian formation. So: *Newman a great patron saint of our being at university, our giving ourselves wholeheartedly to our studies, and our avoiding ‘over-work’!*

2. **Newman the Christian thinker.** From the age of about 15, Newman was a fervent Christian. A profound moment of conversion in his teenage years led him to

devote himself to Christ his whole life long. As well as his becoming a tutor, then, at his university, he also was ordained in the Church of England. His first parish, which he looked after whilst being a College tutor, was a poor parish in Oxford, St Clement’s, but he rose through the ranks quickly to become the Vicar of the University church, St Mary the Virgin, an imposing church right by the famous Bodleian Library. For fifteen years (1828–43) he fulfilled that role, and gained such a huge following: his sermons — serious, lengthy, softly-spoken, in some of the most beautiful Victorian prose ever written — were so famous that there began to be little space each Sunday evening in the university church. The pulpit is still there — you can visit it — where he delivered those countless sermons, and soberly unfolded for the students the Christian life, the fruits of his learning. And the sermons are gathered in many volumes; you can read them still ... but I doubt that they would have the same effect when read as hearing his famous delivery did, the magnetic effect of

his manifest love for Jesus. Newman no doubt could have settled quite comfortably into a lifelong stint in that post as Vicar of the University Church, had he wished; he was only 27 when appointed to it. But Newman was not a man for which comfort came first. Truth came first. And the more he studied the faith, the more he read Church history, the more he pored over the Church Fathers, and the more he prayed and lived his Christian faith and Anglican ministry, the more he felt that all was not well. He began, with other Anglican theologians and friends in what came to be called the ‘Oxford Movement,’ to tease out the issues of ‘where the truth lay’ — how to reconcile the claims of Protestantism and Catholicism, and they published a long series, *Tracts for the Times*, tackling these various problems. Bu the time it got to Tract 90, penned by Newman himself, the public response against Newman was overwhelming, as it was suggested that he was veering perilously close to Catholicism. Newman didn’t backtrack; instead he resigned the fellowship at

his beloved Oriel; he stepped down from being Vicar at St Mary the Virgin, and he retreated to the very edge of Oxford, to the village of Littlemore, where he had some stables converted into little cottages — a mini-monastery for himself and his friends to stay in, out of the limelight, and prayerfully pursue their studies and their thinking with integrity. So: *Newman a great patron saint of our Christian formation, our determination to apply ourselves with fervour to understanding Christian teaching, and to pursuing the Truth.* As Jesus says in today’s Gospel, “every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both new and old.”

3. **Newman the Convert.** Newman was only in his early 40s when he withdrew from the University of Oxford and his pulpit in St Mary the Virgin that he excelled in. Half his life still awaited him. That second half of his life would be as a Catholic. Because, against his original inclinations and intentions, his time at

Littlemore — specifically, his studies of the theological controversies of the early Church, and especially the Arian heresy — brought him inexorably around to the idea of his needing to convert to the Catholic faith. He could no longer see that the *via media* which he had believed the Church of England to be — a halfway house between rampant Papism and stark unyielding Calvinism — was in fact the true Church, but that it was Catholicism, in communion with the Pope in Rome, that had held, through thick and thin, to being the visible continuity with the Apostolic Church. His becoming a Catholic took place on the night of the 8th/9th October 1845 — hence his feastday of 9th October. He made his confession to a travelling priest, an extraordinary Italian Passionist, Fr Dominic Barberi, and in the morning he attended Mass said by Fr Dominic, who received him in to the Church and gave him his 1st Holy Communion. It was a bold and brave move for John Henry Newman — intellectually he was convinced of it, as were most of his immediate company around him at Littlemore; but

so many others of his wider circle, so many with whom he'd shared life with in Oxford, well, in many cases he lost their friendship for ever. Emotionally it was a great wrench, a huge personal sacrifice. So: *Newman a great patron saint for us as we ask for daily, personal conversion as Catholics to a deeper conviction to serve the Lord in His Holy Catholic Church, and to make it more and more a holy, Catholic Church.*

4. **Newman the Pastoral Priest.** Newman's 2nd half of life, as a Catholic, through to his death 89, was still marked by his study, writing and speaking, but also, and principally as a pastoral priest. After a brief spell in Rome, he was ordained a Catholic priest less than 2 yrs after his conversion, and having encountered the priests of S. Filippo Neri in Rome (the Oratorians) he brought this order to England for the first time, and established them, with himself, in Birmingham. In the Oratory in Birmingham, as a priest amidst all the people and problems of Birmingham, Newman laboured as a pastoral priest, building up the work of the Oratorians,

building a church, and coming to be known by thousands of Birmingham Catholics. This pastoral work had always been in his heart, too. Even as an Anglican curate in Oxford, in his first parish, alongside his more famous work as a college tutor, he had been diligent in seeing his parishioners. In fact, in typical Newman fashion, within just 3 months of taking on that parish in Oxford, he had been to every single household in the parish. (I know that when I did house visiting in the streets of my previous parish it would take me 1–1.5yrs to visit all the Catholics!) In 1879 he was raised to the rank of Cardinal by the new Pope Leo XIII, putting paid to many of the anxieties and troubles of the preceding years. By no means was Newman's life easy, nor all his efforts a success: he had his fair share of trials and failures. At one point he was even tried for defamation, and lost the case, and was fined, though in fact he had spoken the truth but was unable to prove it in court. It was a huge long life, Newman had, in which he threw himself into every possible venture for Christ

with love and learning. It is said that 20,000 people turned out onto the streets of Birmingham for his funeral in 1890, so many hearts did he touch, and he reaches out to the ordinary Christian of today, struggling with the ups and downs of life, its successes and failures, its consolations and its challenges ... and to us at Newman House, named in honour of this great English saint. Our blessed patron is so special to us, and so relevant, because he combined an academic mind with a pastoral heart. Isn't that what we look for as we pursue life at university and in the chaplaincy? A heart that loves learning, a heart that loves Jesus Christ, and a heart that is drawn to serving others? Let's be reminded of that search for heavenly Wisdom that Newman pursued with such rigour and patience, and which we would do so well to imitate: as the 1st Reading said, "*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 riches as nothing.*"