

27th Sunday (A)

8th October 2023

‘Newman: Prayer, Studies, Pastoral Work’

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*

When I was an undergrad my university chaplain was a Benedictine monk — he was about my age now, and he was an *avid* admirer of Newman. He often regretted that there was not more of a cult of devotion to Newman in this country, and he feared that Newman would never be beatified and canonized. Happy to say, he was wrong. Dom Christopher died in 2003, but within a decade Newman *was* beatified, in person by Pope Benedict in September 2010 in a rainy field on the edge of Birmingham. And then, inside another decade, canonized by Pope Francis in the hot sunshine of St Peter’s Sq in October 2019. Dom Christopher would have been thrilled. He was long a champion of Newman’s thought, and he had been helped on his own journey from Anglicanism to the Catholic faith by reading John Henry Newman. It was the sheer intellectual honesty of Newman’s struggle to find the source of Truth, I think, that appealed to Fr Christopher,

and which made Newman such a model convert for him, and helped him take that big decision to become a Catholic when at university himself.

We are truly blessed to have St John Henry Newman as the patron saint of our university chaplaincy. It was not always the case — this building was known for decades simply as ‘The Chaplaincy’ — but I for one am delighted that ‘Newman House’ is now used, and that Cardinal Newman’s name stands proudly on Gower Street, this university thoroughfare, right opposite that other great giant of Victorian study and thinking, Charles Darwin. Have you ever noticed it? — that Newman’s name, on the front of our House, and the blue plaque bearing Darwin’s name on the UCL BioSciences ‘building, face across at each other: science and religion, faith and reason, joint pillars of London’s university students’ concerns?

Why might Cardinal Newman be of special and relevance to us, university members here in London in 2023? Isn’t he an eminent Victorian man, of a bygone era, on whom the dust should settle? Gosh, no! Just the

opposite. It is no co-incidence, I think, that far from being beatified and canonized decades ago, maybe at the start of the 20th c., instead he was beatified and canonized at the start of the 21st c.! He is a man who would be at home in every age: his deep learning — his diligent, exacting and probing mode of study — and His utter love for Christ and His Church, mean, I am convinced, that he would have sat easily alongside the great Fathers of the Church in the Patristic era, conversing with them in fluent Greek; equally, I am convinced, he would have sat easily as a Cardinal in the Synod in Rome this month, bringing his sensitivity and understanding to the deliberations and discussions. So, yes, he has much to say to us as students two centuries after he himself was a bright — but struggling — student at Oxford in the 1820s.

I would like to think of his influence on us in 3 areas of our Catholic university life: (i) prayer/liturgy; (ii) theology/study; and (iii) pastoral work/volunteering. He was a multi-dimensional man, not a stuffy academic disconnected with the world — not at all. He has much to

say in all areas of our life and work, and we can take real and contemporary inspiration from our patron saint.

I. **Prayer & Liturgy.** Newman was a devotee of truly Catholic celebration of the sacraments, and a man of deep prayer. Volume upon volume of his sermons, meditations and prayers are available. Yes, written in a particular style of Victorian prose, needing to be read slowly and carefully, but demonstrating his ardent spirituality. From the age of just 27 — still in his Anglican days — he was Vicar of the University Church, Oxford, and took the task of that post very seriously, preaching to the students at some length, and to such success that the University Church was packed, and hushed as he made his way to the pulpit each Sunday evening for 15yrs. Beyond his prayerful sermons, he also gradually drew inspiration from Catholic tradition, and as the Oxford movement gathered pace, he and his like-minded friends wanted their churches and their celebration of the liturgy to include more of the

Catholic elements that they felt that an evangelical / low-church / Calvinistic Anglicanism had jettisoned. It's the work of Newman and the other Tractarians (as they came to be called) that means that much of mainstream Anglicanism is 'high church' or Anglo-Catholic; and it's why many visitors to England and new arrivals from abroad find it hard to distinguish a lot of Anglican churches from Catholic ones. This is thanks to Newman et al. — he cared for truly sacramental liturgy, the Eucharist emphasized, the visual restored (like the Crucifix and the Stations of the Cross) ... and he expressed all this in the way he built a church to his own design in the village of Littlemore. He was a champion of good liturgy, and a strong devotional life. It is always beautiful that our festal Mass for Newman today includes some of his hymns: *Firmly I Believe & Truly, Praise to the Holiest in the Height, [Lead Kindly Light]* ... Cardinal Newman teaches us that as students, at an age when he also was deepening his love for the

Lord, we must prioritize our prayer life; we can't relegate it to the bottom of the agenda; in fact, it must be at the *top* of the to-do list every day — time for silence, time for prayer, time (if at all possible, some weekdays) for daily Mass, that intimate encounter with our blessed Saviour which Newman grew more and more to love. Newman House offers you countless ways of being involved in prayer, in larger and smaller ways through the week: use them!

II. **Faith & Learning.** There is no greater champion of the rigour of coming to understand fully the Catholic faith than John Henry Newman. He grappled long and hard with questions of theology in all his 20+ yrs as an academic in Oxford. His starting point was as a 15-yr-old evangelical Christian; he ended his days a Catholic priest and Cardinal! Quite a journey, but no accidental one. No; every step was considered and, even, *agonized* over. Newman was a careful, considered man, and a scholar through-and-through. The closer he came to accepting, and

embracing, Catholicism, the more he strove to be sure of it. For maybe 5 years he delved vigorously into a study of ancient Church disputes and heresies, particularly the Arian crisis of the 4th c., to see how the Church resolved these splits and schisms, to ascertain where the uninterrupted Truth might lie. No-one could ever accuse Newman of having left a stone unturned in his desire to find the truth of Christian religion. In particular, he grappled with the nature of the ‘additions’ or, better, ‘developments’ of doctrine from the apostolic age to the Catholic Church of today, and in time he came to realise that the Church is an organic, living being, not a fossilized one, and that such evolution was a genuine sign of its being the living voice of Truth, and not a sign of its corruption or defect. At that point, he put his pen down in the *Essay* he was writing, and asked to be received as a Catholic the moment the chance arose, which was on 8th/9th October 1845. He is a great and wonderful patron to

all of you, students, grappling with the ideas and questions of faith and truth, Catholicism’s claims and of course your doubts. Newman House offers you lots of opportunities to come and listen, discuss, learn, about the faith through talks and groups. Some of you are already following the path of becoming Catholics; and our invitation to many more of you to the *Sycamore* programme each Wednesday offers the chance to consider in a welcoming, open, way a dimension of Catholic teaching and life. Don’t let these important opportunities to understand your faith at a crucial moment in life to pass you by! Cardinal Newman would *want* you to be an educated and informed laity, Catholics who really know that their faith is based on sound thinking and rational foundations!

III. **Pastoral Care and Action.** A third and final dimension of Newman’s fantastic example to us as university Catholics of the 21st c. is his dogged commitment to pastoral care. He was never ever an

ivory-tower academic locked away in a book-lined college room. He got into trouble with Oriel College, Oxford, and was actually penalized, for his wanting to be a proper *personal tutor*, caring not just for the students' learning, but for their whole personal wellbeing. Previously, as an Anglican deacon in his parish work in the rather run-down eastern parts of Oxford, he had set himself to visit his parishioners, and he managed to see every one of them, in every street of his parish, in just 3 months; an astonishing feat, an exercise of true pastoral zeal. In his Catholic days, he was a devoted parish priest, in the Oratory parish at the heart of a working-class district in Birmingham: his was not an esoteric lifestyle, despite his *eminence* (in both senses of the word!). No; it was a hard-working attention to pastoral duty, with the sick and the poor greatly to the forefront. When he died, in August 1890, some 15,000 of Birmingham's population came out for his funeral — this was not because of his great learning,

his patristic theology or his astonishing conversion, but because he had touched their lives in his 40yrs as an Oratorian parish priest in their midst. As we keep his feast today, we have the opportunity ourselves to offer some time and effort in pastoral and voluntary work: we have our Volunteering Fair today, during our coffee & cake. It is *no coincidence* that we have it today: as Newman said in one of his most famous meditations, *God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me, which He has not committed to another. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for nothing. I shall do good. I shall do His work.* Make good use of this Fair today; seek a way of volunteering, giving back to society from the privilege you have of time as a university student! *Please* don't let this pass you by!

Cardinal Newman, saint and scholar, priest and pastor, pray for us: help us to live a life of prayer; to have the integrity to seek an informed Catholic faith; to have a pastoral concern for every one of God's people, and to labour to the very end of our life for God's holy kingdom!