

27<sup>th</sup> Sunday (A)

6<sup>th</sup> October 2024

'Newman: striving for Truth; living for Charity'

Wis 7: *I 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*

*I prayed, and understanding was given me;  
I entreated, and the spirit of Wisdom came to me.*

It's a joyful thing that, just a couple of weeks into the first term each year, we have a chance to keep the feastday of our patron saint, the Victorian English Cardinal, St John Henry Newman. His feastday is actually 9<sup>th</sup> October, but we typically keep it with solemnity on the nearest Sunday. 9<sup>th</sup> October is not the anniversary of his death — the typical date for a saint's feast — nor is it the anniversary of his birth. It is, in fact, the most significant date in his life other than his birth and death: it's the date of his conversion to Catholicism, exactly mid-way through his life in 1845 (he lived 1801–1890). That momentous occasion had been many years in the coming — a tortuous journey, in many respects, for by then he had been an Anglican minister, and a famous one, for some 20 yrs; and yet it was a journey that he eventually felt compelled to make. He made his confession to a travelling Passionist

missionary, Bl. Dominic Barberi, beginning in the late night of 8<sup>th</sup> October 1845, and concluding in the morning of 9<sup>th</sup> October, when Bl. Dominic received Newman and some of his companions into the Catholic Church then and there, and celebrated Mass with them for the first time. This took place at Littlemore, a village on the outskirts of Oxford: Newman's 'College' as he called it (some ex-stables that he had converted into a terrace of small cottages around a cloistered lawn) one can still visit, as a shrine to Newman, his thought and his conversion — it's a very prayerful place for retreat, as I have often discovered.

This feast-day homily today is no place to try and go into the whole of Newman's life, not even by way of a sweeping summary. His life was so full, across those 89 yrs, and his writing so all-encompassing, that a comprehensive biography would require instead a lecture. Now, luckily enough we have such an event coming up this week! [*Commercial break!* ... Please come to the **Newman Lecture** this Thursday at 7.30pm. It's being given by someone who really can't be bettered: a Cambridge Church-historian called Eamon Duffy, whom I've known for many years. He's an eminent scholar, a really great

speaker, and he knows his Newman inside-out; it's a huge privilege to have him come here to Newman House this week, so I ask you all to, please, make space for this in your diary, and come and support the Chaplaincy's annual lecture in honour of our great patron saint. *End of commercial break!*]

The Gospel reading today has those enigmatic words from Our Blessed Lord: “*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.*” Our Lord is addressing those steeped in Jewish tradition, and yet are now having to adapt themselves to Jesus's new preaching, and the revelation of His person. It's a deeply personal and challenging thing, to integrate what one has grown up with, with the revelation of what is new to one. All Jesus's hearers, from St Peter and the other Apostles, to the wider group of His disciples, and to others who even opposed Him, had to grapple with this: the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ — the Old Testament, now re-cast in the light of the New. Not everyone coped well with this, and yet true insight only came with understanding Jesus's message as the *fulfilment* of the Old Covenant: continuity,

not disruption. Only those truly committing themselves to Christ were in full harmony with their Jewish ancestry and beliefs; in fact, that was all coming now to fruition.

Thinkers such as Cardinal Newman have to do something similar, as they grapple with the question of determining the true path of Christian conversion. They have to look back, as well as to look forward — bringing out of the storeroom of Jesus's message things both new and old, so as to find the greatest riches in the integration of Christian wisdom. One might say that this was exactly how Newman proceeded, initially as an Anglican (deacon, university tutor and vicar) and then as a Catholic (Oratorian priest and Cardinal). He sought out the *wisdom of the ancients*, i.e. the ‘Fathers’ of the Church, especially in the Arian crisis of the 4<sup>th</sup> c., when so many in the Church were led into error, and yet the Church found its way infallibly through that crisis and back to orthodox faith in the Son of God). But Newman also addressed the *needs of the day*, the pressing theological questions of his time. He probed matters such as the legitimate *development* of

Church doctrine; personal *conscience*; papal *infallibility*; and *consulting the faithful* in the matters of the Church's life: deep questions that pre-empted some of the key issues of 20<sup>th</sup>-c. Catholicism and the Second Vatican Council. In this theological process of 'bringing out the old and the new' — in the *middle* of this very process, in fact — he became a Catholic! It was almost as if, his intellectual path being followed rigorously, he then had no choice but to convert. Temperamentally and by customs familiar to him, he was *not* looking to leave the Church of England; but as he brought out of the Christian storeroom things of old, he saw the answers to what was new, and those answers demanded that he become a Catholic. It wasn't just on a whim or an emotional tide of incense, Latin, or papal majesty. Just the opposite; it was quietly thought-through, agonized-over, and yet ultimately quite clear: he should no longer remain an Anglican clergyman and Oxford-university don; he should quietly convert. Hence he sought the Catholic ministering of the Sacraments from the hands of the humble Bl. Dominic as he passed through the

Oxford district on a stormy night in early October 1845.

For us, the clear lesson from Cardinal Newman is of *intellectual integrity in the faith*; to apply ourselves wholeheartedly to seeking union with Christ in His holy Church; to assuring ourselves of the truth of our religion; to praying for Wisdom, the wisdom that is the gift of the Holy Spirit Himself. We can take Newman as a sure guide and a careful companion. He determined coolly and collectedly which was the path to take. To leave what he had known for 44 yrs and instead to embrace Catholicism was a big step for him, a *wrench*, one might almost say: his final sermon as an Anglican is entitled, "*The Parting of Friends*," for he knew that his decision to withdraw from the Anglican ministry would not go down well in many quarters — yet he had the courage and conviction to press ahead with it. What a great patron for us, as Catholics and as seekers after Catholic truth, to help us persevere in the truth, no matter what the cost! — and here at university, at Newman House, to bolster our understanding of why our Catholic faith should be the *bedrock* of our life.

But I also want to draw attention today to another dimension of Newman's life and priestly work. He was by no means just an intellectual, a scholar, writer, preacher and theologian. As an Anglican, as soon as he was assigned to a parish in the poorer east of Oxford, he took to visiting *every single household* in his parish, which he managed to complete in just 3 months! This is also the calibre of our saintly patron — a man who had 'get up and go' about him! Years later, as an Oratorian father and Catholic Parish Priest of the Birmingham Oratory, he had the whole round of pastoral work that kept him very close to the people. He wrote little about these daily parish matters, but his work amongst them stretched on for years, from 1848 until a year or so before his death in August 1890: some 40 yrs in total! When he died and was taken for burial, tens of thousands lined the streets! This was not because he was a famous writer, theologian and convert — no, this was because he had given 40 yrs' service to the people of that part of Birmingham as a pastoral priest.

At Newman House, then, we are also urged to

imitate our patron in giving of ourselves generously. One of Newman's famous prayers reminds us that "*God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me, which He has not committed to another.*" In direct response to this, each year, we celebrate our patronal feastday in an additional way by the Volunteering Fair after the morning Mass. This gives you a chance to put your faith into action practically, by choosing some pastoral / volunteering or outreach work that you can commit to in the coming year. Newman, eminent scholar and theologian that he was, saw fit to strive daily in the practical service of his parishioners and of all with whom he came into contact; he was not aloof or thought himself only for the pulpit or lecturer's stand; no, he worked hard for others, and this too should be his legacy here at Newman House, where we give ourselves to others generously in "some definite service."

*Cardinal Newman, patron saint and scholar, priest and pastor, pray for us always: help us in Newman House to strive for the grace of Truth in Christian Faith; and to live it out fervently in practical Charity.*