

27th Sunday (A)

12th October 2025

‘Newman: the author has joined the Catholic Church’

Wis 7: *I prayed, and understanding was given me* Ps 95: proclaim the wonders of the Lord.
2Tim 4: *preach the Word: be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort.*

Jn 15: 9–17: *as the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you; abide in My love.*

Today is not Cardinal Newman’s feast day! No, in fact it’s the feast day today of two other British-born saints: (i) St Wilfrid (born 634AD in Northumberland, educated in the famous monastery of Holy Island, Lindisfarne, becoming a reforming bishop of the late 7th c.); and (ii) St Carlo Acutis (born 1991 in London to Italian parents, and who died at 15; canonized just last month by Pope Leo). Great saints, from two ends of the spectrum of English Catholic history ... but their inspiring stories of Christian life & sainthood can wait for another day. Because today we’re keeping a feast of St John Henry Newman, our Chaplaincy’s patron saint, transferring the celebration to the nearest Sunday, as we always do, from its actual date of 9th October (Thursday last).

The typical date in the calendar for a saint’s feast day is the date of his or her death, or a date nearby: that’s true for St Carlo Acutis, who died 11th October 2006. But

sometimes the Church chooses another significant date. For example, St Wilfrid’s feast day is the date his relics were transferred to a new shrine in Canterbury Cathedral. Pope St John XXIII’s feast day (yesterday) is the date in 1962, 11th October, when he solemnly inaugurated the 2nd Vatican Council. What about our patron, St John Henry Newman? Why the 9th October? Well, it’s not his death date — that was 11th August — but it’s the date most significant in his life as a *Catholic* saint: it’s the date of his conversion to Catholicism: 9th October 1845.

This auspicious day, exactly in the middle of his long span of life (1801–1890) was a long time in coming. He was an Anglican, very devout, for those first 44 yrs of his life; and then a Catholic, equally devout, for the latter 45 yrs. The day of his conversion was a day that he arrived at in a painstakingly careful way, with study and prayer, and with some emotional turmoil, as he was temperamentally and nostalgically wedded to the Anglicanism of his Oxford days. It was a hard decision; it lost him many friends and the whole structure of his

clerical and academic career as an Oxford don and Vicar of the University church. But he never doubted that he had made the right decision in becoming a Catholic. His careful reading of the Fathers of the Church, its crises and heresies, and its having clung to orthodoxy through thick and thin, made him eventually convinced that the Catholic Church was, as he put it, “the one true Fold of the Redeemer.” In 1842, after some 25yrs in the University of Oxford, he took himself out of the academic limelight, and retreated to a little property on the outskirts of Oxford in Littlemore village that he called “The College” — these converted stables were for him and some like-minded companions a simple accommodation of small rooms around a central lawn, where they could pray and study. It was here, 3 yrs later, after the most crucial years of writing and thinking about the relation of Catholic and Anglican traditions with respect to the ancient Church (of Apostolic faith) that he concluded *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. The Foreword of this Essay was dated by him 6th October 1845, and in it he had argued his way

carefully and compellingly to the brink of conversion. He had become convinced that the theological development apparent in Catholicism, from the Apostolic Church to the modern day, that previously he had repudiated, was indeed legitimate and Spirit-guided — not accretions or novelties, but a rightful unpacking and deepening of the Gospel message. No longer could he see that his own wing of Christianity, in the Church of England with its origins in the English Reformation and the Thirty-Nine Articles, had full claim to being in accord with the True Church. Barely had he signed off on this *Essay*’s Foreword than the fortuitous passing nearby of the Passionist missionary preacher, Bl. Dominic Barberi, gave a chance for him to submit to the force of his convictions. The Postscript in the *Essay*, printed after the Foreword of 6th October, says:

Since the above was written, the Author has joined the Catholic Church. It was his intention and wish to have carried his Volume through the Press before deciding finally on this step. But when he had got some way in the printing, he recognised in himself a conviction of the truth of the conclusion to which the discussion leads, so clear as to supersede further

deliberation. Shortly afterwards circumstances gave him the opportunity of acting upon it, and he felt that he had no warrant for refusing to do so.

This was the visit of Bl. Dominic Barberi to Littlemore 8th–9th October 1845, when Newman immediately had the priest — still dripping wet from his journey through a stormy night — hear his Confession and receive him into the Catholic Church, and from whom he received his First Holy Communion at Mass in the morning.

Now, this Sunday homily cannot be solely a history lecture — I gave a talk on Newman’s long life story the other day (handouts available!) ... and nor can it suffice as a solid academic address on the merits of Newman in the wider sphere of Catholic thought (see instead, the *Newman Lecture* coming up on Thursday, 7.30pm, here). What it needs rather do is to anchor our devotion to this elegant and intellectually rigorous saint — a priest of such integrity — in the Holy Scripture which was Newman’s great love, and from which he preached with such fervour from his earliest days as an Anglican deacon (1824).

The readings set for his feast are amplified for our

own solemnity by a moving 1st reading from the OT Book of Wisdom: “*I prayed and understanding was given me; I called upon God and the spirit of Wisdom came to me. I preferred her to sceptres and thrones ...*” How fitting these words are! St John Henry Newman indeed had to give up the trappings of privilege and status (“sceptres and thrones,” so to speak) in the Anglican / University world when he followed the path that “the spirit of Wisdom” drew him inexorably in. He had long sought the Truth, and when it came to adhering to it, he had the courage to choose Truth over a comfortable *status quo*. As Newman later wrote, in his epic poem, *The Dream of Gerontius*, and as we sang at the start of Mass: “*And I hold in veneration, for the love of Him alone, Holy Church as His Creation, and her teachings as His own.*” Indeed — “*for the love of Him alone,*” eschewing other loves and emotions ... May he teach us a single-hearted devotion to Jesus’s teachings, even if from time to time we have to take leave of those who would oppose our faith and undermine, or even corrupt, our moral conviction. We are to keep the faith,

and live it in its fullness, “*for the love of Him alone.*”

Our 2nd Reading today is from St Paul advising his young protégé St Timothy, on the need for sound Christian teaching rooted in absolute integrity. The words St Paul uses could easily be applied to Newman: “*preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.*” Patience indeed was exemplified by Newman in his preaching: a gentle and unemotional speaker, he was renowned for delivering his weekly university sermons with a softness of voice, with little cadence or expression, and no dramatic gestures: allowing the force of his words — theology in beautiful Victorian oratory — to ‘speak for itself.’ His was always a serious, divine message, but delivered with such humanity.

The Gospel of this feast is from Jn 15, one of the chapters that St John gives us as a discourse of Our Lord at His Last Supper. Here we have the heart of it, for Newman: the connection of Jesus’s love for us as being the sole animating principle of belief and Christian practice:

“*As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you; abide in My love.*” The same eternal, infinite love that powers the Godhead, is what Jesus offers us as His gift ... that we ‘abide in His love.’ No wonder, then, that Newman chose as His motto when made a cardinal at 78, a Latin phrase adapted from St Francis de Sales, *Cor ad Cor Loquitur*, “heart speaks to heart’: the divine heart of Jesus, allowing Himself so close to our heart, that we can beat with that same love. Not for Newman was Christian faith a distant, cold or merely logical thing. No, from the very first moment of conversion to devout Christian faith in the love of God when he was just 15 and at school (Carlo Acutis’s age!) Newman knew that what fired the human being to hold firm to Christ was not in fact the sort of vast theo-historical studies that he undertook with tenaciousness and skill. It was instead the fire of love, caught by closeness to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. As he once wrote, so humbly:

Stay with me, and then I shall begin to shine as You shine: so to shine as to be a light to others. The light, O Jesus, will be all from You. None of it will be mine.