

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN BIOGRAPHY

Introduction

Born in 1801, baptised in the Church of England, Newman became a Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford in 1822, an Anglican clergyman in 1825 and Vicar of the Oxford University Church in 1828. The Anglican Newman was a pastor of souls, a University teacher, and a student of Christian history and theology. His studies were never purely theoretical. Informed by pastoral experience, they were above all shaped by his insight into the needs of the present.

Newman's point of reference was the Church of the Apostles and 'the Fathers', the great teachers of the first Christian centuries. At school he experienced the attractions of atheism, and all his life showed unusual sympathy with religious doubt. But also at school he underwent a conversion granting him an abiding sense of God's presence. At the same time, Newman acquired the conviction that Christianity is a doctrinal religion, and that doctrine and religious experience are in harmony, not opposed. In Christianity, Newman believed, mind and heart, dogma and experience, come together. With the doctrinal and sacramental faith unfolding in him from his conversion, Newman desired to revive Christianity for a culture descending into unbelief.

Teachings

Some of Newman's Anglican works retain startling relevance. In *Arians of the Fourth Century* (1833) he conveys through Christian history the very contemporary drama of the battle for orthodox Faith against politically-inspired compromise and apostasy. In his *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (1834-1843), against a background of nominal, demoralised Christianity, he unfolds the Mysteries of Faith and awakens the depth and grandeur of the Christian life.

In the *Tracts For The Times* (1833-1841), Newman and his friends in the 'Oxford Movement' addressed the Church of England in the hope that it could be renewed in the Apostolic Faith. Gradually, it dawned on Newman that this was impossible. The Church of England could not embrace the truth Newman taught.

Embracing the Catholicism

1842-5 were his 'wilderness' years, out of the public eye, secluded in prayer and study. At Littlemore, outside Oxford, he worked on the still deeply influential *Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845). The book studies the ways in which Faith has unfolded in history; Newman

saw an analogy with how Faith unfolds in individual minds, including his own. At last he was convinced that the Faith of the Apostles and Fathers was the Faith of Roman Catholicism. The Church of Christ was the Church of Rome. Embracing the Catholic Church as the 'One Fold of Christ' Newman was received at Littlemore by Blessed Dominic Barberi on 9th October 1845.

An Oratorian

Ordained a Catholic priest in Rome in 1847 Newman returned to England with a mission from the Pope to found Oratories of St Philip Neri, in Birmingham (where he lived until his death on August 11 1890) and then in London. The Oratory discloses the heart of Newman: small and stable communities of priests, living together in charity, dedicated to prayer, to the liturgy, to preaching, teaching and the intellectual life.

In 1846, after he had been received into the Catholic Church, John Henry Newman's first Catholic home was on the site which is now Maryvale Institute. It was Newman and his followers who gave it the name Maryvale after St Philip Neri's church in Rome and it is specified in the Papal Brief as the location of the first English Oratory of St Philip in 1848. In fulfilment of Newman's vision for an educated laity, Maryvale is now an international distance learning Catholic Theology College open to anyone who wishes to study the Catholic Faith at any level.

As an Oratorian Newman founded a Catholic University in Dublin (1851) and a Catholic School in Birmingham (1859). He continued writing and publishing works which today are more profoundly influential than ever: his religious autobiography the *Apologia* (1864), the *Grammar of Assent* on the origins of Christian Faith (1870) and the *Idea of the University* (1873). Working tirelessly especially for the poor parishioners of the Birmingham Oratory, Newman also conducted an enormous correspondence, helping people all over the world with their religious difficulties.

Pastorally and educationally, in his published writings and in his correspondence, Newman's aim was to describe and arouse the Christian mind. His vocation was to help modern people realise the demands of thinking and acting with the mind of Christ and His Church.

Liberalism

When he was made a Cardinal in 1879, Newman said that all his life he had opposed religious Liberalism. In his own day, some of his fellow Catholics had regarded Newman himself as a 'liberal'. Influential ecclesiastical figures wanted to extend their authority beyond the domains

of Faith and Morals, into areas where Catholics are free to have their own ideas. Newman criticised such ambitions, and as a result was distrusted. Ironically, such ecclesiastics were themselves 'liberal' by Newman's definition. By 'liberalism' in religion, Newman meant preferring our own mind to the mind of the Church, manipulating God's truth to suit our own judgement and will. In his day, those Catholics who opposed Newman did this in the name of 'orthodoxy'. In our own day, Catholic liberalism more typically expresses itself in dissent from the Church's teaching, especially in questions of morality. Newman gives no comfort to either party.

Newman was a Victorian, and his religious journey was intensely personal. But his is much more than a Victorian conversion. Perhaps no one better than Newman shows us the objective reality of Christianity, active in human history and human hearts, with an integrity profoundly (sometimes fiercely) independent of society and politics. He is a Man of Faith, but his voice is modern, recognisably of our own age. He knew the uncertainty, even hostility, towards Christianity, provoked by Science and Philosophy, flowing from politics, the media and popular culture, and prophetically confronted these things. Entering into the experience of the loss of God, he shows how God might once again be known and loved.

Faith

Unlike so many in his own day – and in ours – Newman's response was not a watered-down Christianity of private 'spirituality' and State-approved social 'responsibility'. He shows us how to move from religious doubt, beyond dilution and compromise, to the fullness of Doctrinal and Sacramental Faith.

Instead of trying to argue someone into believing, Newman focussed on his or her conscience. It is not argument that awakens and draws the soul to God, he believed, but fidelity to conscience. The most powerful arguments for believing in God arise from desiring Him, and that desire is the fruit of obedience to conscience. Arguments against God, Newman said, are typically rationalisations of a conscience falsified into 'self-will' or simply ignored.

In perhaps his most powerful testimony to our own day, Newman shows how the light of conscience, active in every human heart, finds fulfilment not in subjectivity and individualism, but in obedience to the teachings of the Pope in the communion of the Catholic Church.