

On Saturday, 10 January, 1846 Mr John Henry Newman, recently received into the Catholic Church and still some way off ordination as a priest or finding his way to the Oratory, wrote in his diary:

Mr Phillips sent me over in his carriage to Loughborough, thence by train to York – where arrived at a quarter past five in time to dine with Dr Briggs. Talk with Dr Briggs.

Newman stayed with Dr Briggs in Fulford. The fine house still stands opposite the junction of Heslington Lane and Fulford Main Street. In a letter to a friend, written about a month after the visit, Newman spoke of his host in the warmest terms:

With Dr Briggs too, the Bishop of the York District, a regular Englishman, I got very intimate and have received from him the most open hearted kindness.

But on the night of the visit itself Newman wrote a memorandum for himself and his companions, on the substance of that “talk with Dr Briggs”. Newman’s tour had been arranged by Dr Nicholas Wiseman, then President of Oscott College in Birmingham and who later, as Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, was to open the present St Wilfrid’s in 1864.

In truth, Newman could find Wiseman’s enthusiasm rather irksome. He complained of being paraded round Catholic England like some exotic beast, newly captured, now to be exhibited to all comers. It was different with Briggs. He was clear and straightforward, practical where Wiseman was all good ideas. Briggs did not conceal the difficulties ahead but Newman appreciated his clarity.

From Bishop Briggs Newman heard about the difference between religious life and priests subject to a bishop. There was, he said, no medium between entering a religious order – and thus being free to operate more widely – and being subject to the local bishop, *as things were*. Those last words, *as things were*, were Briggs’ words, but Newman underlined them. Not long afterwards Newman was to find that middle way when Wiseman, who lived for decades in Rome, introduced him to the Oratory, a half way house between religious life and the diocesan priesthood, bound to a particular place, doing whatever work lies to hand, but free to order its internal life according its own charism.

Just one week ago we learned that our Oratorian community here in York has been established as an independent Oratory. I would like to put on record here this community’s profound gratitude to our Bishop for his original invitation to us to come to York, and for his continued encouragement in the intervening years. Thank you Bishop Briggs for welcoming and supporting St John Henry. Thank you Bishop Terence for welcoming and supporting us. Thank you both for your open-hearted kindness.

The day after that talk, on Sunday, 11 January, Newman wrote:

Went with Dr Briggs to Mass at the York Chapel then over York Minster. To Vespers at the Convent.

Before becoming Vicar Apostolic of the Yorkshire District, Briggs had responsibility for the whole of the Northern District before it was divided in 1840. So it is a particular pleasure to welcome a number of Dr Briggs’ successors from the northern dioceses, not only our own Bishop Terence of Middlesbrough, Bishop Robert of Hexham and Newcastle, and Bishop Ralph of Hallam.

The York Chapel, where Mr Newman heard Mass, was on this site, before Duncombe Place was laid out or the present St Wilfrid’s Church was built. When Newman came to York it was as a member of the lay faithful. It is a joy to celebrate his canonisation today with our own faithful people of York.

On that January Sunday Mr Newman paid a visit to the Minster. We welcome Bishop Glyn Webster representing York Minster and the Church of England in whose communion St John Henry first came to know Christ.

The convent was, of course, the Bar Convent. We welcome the members of that community so central to the history of Catholic York.

What are we celebrating when we celebrate a canonisation?

We may be tempted to think of it a kind of celestial honour rather like elevation to a heavenly House of Lords. We might think of it as the ultimate endorsement of some of St John Henry's most profound and influential ideas: his elucidation of the development of Christian doctrine; his teaching on conscience; or his concern for the education of the laity. But canonisation is not an honorary doctorate for services to education.

Sanctity is about holiness and holiness is a gift from God. This evening we are thanking God for the gift of a call. We are thanking St John Henry for his heroic response.

The key to St John Henry's holiness is to be found in the first passage we read this evening, from his *Spiritual Autobiography*, the *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, that *great change of thought.....making me rest in the thought of two and two only supreme and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my creator.*

From that moment, the fifteen year old schoolboy understood his faith to be a matter of a relationship, a friendship, friendship with God. It was a matter of heart speaking to heart. Nothing in life was more important than to discover what was pleasing to that friend.

To be sure, and especially in his early life, that desire to please God could make the young John Henry seem shy or reserved, somewhat shocked by the ways of the world. Later on it could make him combative and even acerbic in controversy. His gift for satire was unsurpassed in his age. Into extreme old age he was unafraid – as the saints always are – of standing out from received opinions in the world or the Church.

But when he found individuals who shared his love for God, or who he sensed were open to deepening that love, then real friendship always blossomed. This is evident throughout Newman's life: in his undergraduate friendships; for his university pupils; among the scores of letter-writers (perhaps especially his many highly intelligent female correspondents, often the mothers, wives and sisters of his friends and pupils); with his fellow clergy. St John Henry found time for everyone who wanted to find time for God.

Few saints have been so misunderstood or misrepresented as Newman. It was frustrating. It was his professed reason for writing his *Apologia*. That was the only reason for committing such personal memories to print.

I must, I said, give the true key to my whole life; I must show what I am, that it may be seen what I am not, and that the phantom may be extinguished which gibbers instead of me. I wish to be known as a living man, and not as a scarecrow which is dressed up in my clothes.

So often Newman's teaching has been misrepresented or used to promote positions very distant from his own. The key to understanding Newman must always be friendship with God, the vital importance of finding ever deeper knowledge of His will and ever more effective ways of doing it in our lives.

So St John Henry's account of the *Development of Doctrine* can never be understood as a manifesto for change for the sake of change, for the sake of relevance. Rather it is a way of understanding how, down the ages – and in our own age too – saints and faithful scholars, holy men and women – have found new and deeper ways of expressing the same perennial truth.

His concern for the education of the laity is not (as it has so often been taken to be) some Marx-inspired dialectical struggle between clergy and laity for power in the Church. Newman understood,

as few in his time did, the reality of the baptismal call to holiness for all God's faithful people. This was as much a political idea as a religious one in an age of an ever widening franchise. Ordinary Catholics were gaining political power. They needed an education to match. And in our own time, when any fool with a smartphone can click on "post" and make poison go viral, clear heads and holy hearts for all God's people have never been more important.

With Newman's teaching on conscience, how can it possibly be (as it has so often been thought to be), the assertion of an individual's right to self-determination over against the unchanging revelation of Christ and his Church. Once again, it is never about ourselves alone, about our individual sovereign will but about ourselves in relation to Christ. It is about a friendship. Perhaps he expressed this teaching best, not in any formal academic work, but in his novel, *Callista*. The novel form allows us to enter into the conscience of the heroine, an early Christian convert. It is the voice of Callista but we recognise Newman himself.

I feel that God within my heart. I feel myself in His presence. He says to me, 'Do this: don't do that.' You may tell me that this dictate is a mere law of my nature, as it is to joy or to grieve. I cannot understand this. No, it is the echo of a person speaking to me... It carries with it proof of its divine origin. My nature feels towards it as towards a person. When I obey it, I feel a satisfaction; when I disobey, a soreness – just like that which I feel in pleasing or offending some revered friend... An echo implies a voice; a voice a speaker. That speaker I love and I fear.

Most of us cannot hope to emulate St John Henry in his gifts of intellect and literary skill. But that is not what we are asking him to teach us. We are asking him to show us how to put the gifts that God *has* given us at the service of Christ and his Church, to deepen our own friendship with God. We are looking for his example. We might have chosen any number of writings to illustrate this straightforward teaching. Tonight we heard Newman's *Short Road to Perfection*:

It is the saying of holy men that, if we wish to be perfect, we have nothing more to do than to perform the ordinary duties of the day well. A short road to perfection - short, not because easy, but because pertinent and intelligible. There are no short ways to perfection, but there are sure ones.

If that reminds us rather of the little way of St Thérèse of Lisieux we are on the right track. Both she and St John Henry share that gift of being able to teach men and women at all levels of spiritual or intellectual formation precisely because their lives were transparent to God – like that that of Our Blessed Mother to whom Newman was so devoted.

St Thérèse is now a Doctor, a teacher, of the Church, an honour that we too pray will come for Newman too. [The bishops have to ask for this by the way, and since the only other English Doctor is our own northern St Bede, you might want to suggest to Pope Francis that it's time they got one down south!]

Why is this important? Because in the *darkness of this world*, on our journeys *o'er crag and torrent till the night is gone*, we need teachers to lead us, to guide us and inspire us. The way is not short, nor is it easy, but it is open to all who wish to respond to the call of God. It may not look like anything special.

One weekend in January 1846 a man got on a train in Loughborough, met a friend in York for dinner went to Mass the next day and had a look round the Minster, to all outward appearances an ordinary man. He must have looked nothing special to his fellow travellers, to those who knelt next to him at Mass or passed him by in the Minster. But that man was a saint because however it looked he was doing God's will with heroic generosity. If we listen to the voice of God wherever it calls us, in the teaching of the Church, in the scriptures, in our inmost consciences; and if we recognise God as our friend and respond to his voice; then we may not look very different, nor appear as anything special to the casual observer, though we will, without a doubt, be quite different from the crowd. If we do that – with St John Henry to help us - then we will be saints too.