

HOMILY ON THE FEAST OF THE BASILICA OF ST. JOHN LATERAN

By the Reverend Mr Jack Sullivan, a Permanent Deacon from the Archdiocese of Boston, Massachusetts, 5.30 pm Mass in Westminster Cathedral, Monday, 9 November 2009.

Principal celebrant, the Most Reverend Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, and President of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

My dear friends, we are called this evening to celebrate the dedication of the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome. As a people of faith, we do well to honour one of our most holiest of places, a very special Church. Indeed, it is called the Mother of all Churches, a sign of the Universal Church because it is the Cathedral Church of our Holy Father, the Bishop of Rome.

The original basilica was erected and dedicated on November 9th 324, after the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. Constantine's conversion was prompted by a miraculous vision he saw immediately prior to engaging an invading hoard of barbarians, bent on sacking the Eternal City. The vision consisted of a great, luminous cross appearing in the sky with the words: "By this cross, shall you conquer."

Attributing his magnificent triumph to this victorious sign of the cross, he subsequently declared all Christians free to worship and practice their faith. The basilica has become a magnificent sign of victory for the countless numbers of martyrs to the faith in the first three centuries of the early Church. The basilica now stands as a stately and enduring sign of hope and light that the Church world-wide might continue to endure and prosper.

We are also enlivened by another and even more wondrous sign as we read the Gospel account of Jesus zealously expelling the money changers desecrating His Father's House. When asked for some sign of His authority to justify His actions, Jesus refers them to His own self-sacrificial death on the cross, only to rise again to victory in three days. His Resurrection to glory was the visible sign of the new and everlasting Temple, the Temple of His Body, the Church. And the Church is a visible sign of humanity's redemption, as Christ through Her, restores all that God has created.

Now our holy and enduring Church lives and is constantly renewed in a very special way by those called by Christ as His servants to inspire and revitalize her. One such person,

called for this purpose was the Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman. Although he died 120 years ago, Newman's thoughts and insights have enjoyed lasting acceptance, because they reflect the enduring truth about mankind's condition and his instinctive quest for his Creator.

When gazing upon the din and clamour of this world, Cardinal Newman was gifted with a most extraordinary sense of foresight, a supernatural vision enabling him to see far beyond the rather limited and worldly sight of his contemporaries. As a sign of Christ's presence in the world, he could see clearly that which was beyond the horizon. He could see clearly far above the clouds, to that shining cross in the sky, to that heavenly dimension. And he brilliantly preached and wrote about what he saw.

We see this gift most beautifully portrayed in Sermon 16 of his "*Parochial and Plain Sermons*". In his examination of the virtue of faith Newman wrote: "It is a practical perception of the unseen world. It is to understand that this world is not enough for our happiness. We must look beyond it toward God to realize his presence, to serve Him, to do His will, to surrender oneself totally to Him, who is the sovereign Giver of all good." He went on to say: "The victory of faith is ours if the souls of its members but cross over the threshold of worldliness, by submitting to the process of inner conversion, because we know it co-exists with a much higher design. God works for us. He even works for those who don't work for themselves!"

And so he surrendered his will to follow the "kindly light of truth", most often at great cost to himself. Cardinal Newman often reflected on God's "call" and concluded that God had destined him for some great undertaking, but what it was eluded him.

Newman writes: "Religious men cannot but feel in varied ways, that Providence is guiding them and blessing them personally... and God may be teaching us and offering us knowledge of His ways, if we but open our eyes in faith to all the ordinary matters of the day." Although Cardinal Newman was frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted in his time, his treatises were frequently the subjects of study by the Fathers of Vatican II.

Some of Newman's greatest works came as a result of his responding to either personal attacks or attacks leveled against the Church. But it was these very criticisms, these very trials, and these very challenges, that enabled Newman in his responses to acquire his remarkable spiritual insights. For example, his most renowned work while defending himself and the Church's teachings was his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. Reading Newman's

Apologia is not only an intellectually challenging pursuit, at least it has been for me, but also a journey of faith, leading us by his reasoning and persuasiveness to religious conviction. It opens our hearts to God so that “Heart may speak to heart”.

Now occasionally, God in his providential care permits us to experience severe pain and suffering, but in the final analysis, always for some greater good. The full weight of our sorrows, if patiently endured after Cardinal Newman’s example, often provides us with abundant opportunities for growth. In our perseverance we discern God’s Spirit guiding us, prompting us to follow “His kindly light of truth” along the path He has chosen for each one of us.

And so it was with me in Mid-August of 2001. I was tragically afflicted with a serious spinal condition causing intolerable pain with utterly no prospect of relief. One surgeon told me that I was on the brink of complete paralysis. You see, I had recently undergone spinal surgery because my lumbar vertebrae and discs were literally squeezing the life out of my spinal cord. During the procedure the surgeons also encountered serious complications. My dura mater or protective lining surrounding the spinal cord was very badly torn. For days after the surgery, I was still suffering incredible pain with no end in sight.

If I were lucky, my recovery would now take, at minimum, eight months to one year. My affliction was made more serious because it not only jeopardized my job, but also would prevent me from completing my formation classes to be ordained a deacon in the Archdiocese of Boston. You see, I was scheduled to begin my fourth and final year in less than one month, and was completely devastated when it became obvious that my ordination was no longer possible! Had God called me this far only to slam the door in my face? After I was told I couldn’t return to classes, I was compelled to get out of my hospital bed and attempt to walk.

But the pain was so agonizing that it took me more than five minutes merely to slide to the edge of my bed, and with a nurse’s help, to put my feet on the floor, leaning on the bed for support. I was completely helpless and the situation seemed hopeless. But it was this state of mind that led me to prayer. I called upon my very special intercessor and faithful friend: “Please Cardinal Newman, help me to walk, so that I can return to my classes and be ordained.”

Suddenly I felt a tremendous sensation of intense heat all over, and a strong tingling feeling throughout my body, both of which lasted for a long time! I also felt an

overwhelming sense of joy and peace, as well as a strong sense of confidence and determination that finally I could walk! I immediately exclaimed to the nurse: "I have no more pain". Minutes before I was in complete agony! During these precious moments, I was totally captivated, totally transfixed by God's presence! I had utterly no will power of my own! Then I realized that now I could walk, when I couldn't for months! I could walk upright! I could walk with strength in my back and in my legs!

Totally invigorated, I sprinted out of my room and then up and down all the corridors on my floor, with the nurse tagging behind shouting "slow down - slow down!" Immediately thereafter, I was discharged, and to everyone's astonishment, returned to my classes on time!

One year later, on September 14, 2002, I was ordained a deacon at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston. And without knowing the date of my ordination, Fr Paul Chavasse, the Postulator for the Newman Cause notified me, on that same day, that the Fathers at the Birmingham Oratory had voted to formally initiate the process for the beatification of their Founder, the Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman, and to take my case to Rome.

Was this notification a providential sign from God that my prayer to Cardinal Newman, that I might be ordained, indeed miraculously answered, or was the Postulator's notification, on the day of my Ordination merely a coincidence? Upon prayerful reflection, I know that it was wonderful sign, affirming not only that my remarkable healing was from God at Cardinal Newman's intercession, but also a victorious sign that John Henry Newman would soon be counted as one of the Blessed in Heaven! Wow! And most assuredly, a radiant and enduring sign of victory, through the power of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, for the Catholic Church in England and Wales!

In this Mass, as in every Mass, I thank God for this marvelous gift, with all my heart, and praise His Holy Name!

God bless you all.