

*From Peter Jennings, Press Secretary to the Newman Cause  
Mobile: 07967 639556*

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF CARDINAL NEWMAN TODAY**

Fr Paul Chavasse, Provost of the Birmingham Oratory, and Postulator of the Newman Cause, preached the following homily at the 5.30 pm Mass in Westminster Cathedral on Wednesday 10 September 2008:

It is a great honour and a particular pleasure for me to be here with you this evening at this Mass, during which the new mosaic in memory of John Henry Cardinal Newman is dedicated. I suspect that in the months to come there will be many more such images appearing in churches in our country and around the world.

I say this with confidence because, as I am sure you all know, the likelihood of Cardinal Newman being beatified in the next few months is now very high. One can never be certain, of course, and there are still various stages to be gone through in Rome, before we can be completely sure. At the moment it is a case of so far so good.

Presuming that the beatification takes place, what will this signify? One Roman prelate said recently that it will be a "great moment" in the history of the Church. I think we can understand why that is the case by examining some of the words of recent Popes, all of whom have expressed enormous interest in the figure of the great English Cardinal.

Pius XII, writing as long ago as 1945 for the centenary of the Cardinal's reception into the Catholic Church, mentioned Newman's search for truth, of his being captivated by the beauty of Catholic teaching, which he made the guiding principle of his whole life.

Paul VI, speaking in 1963, said of Newman that he was guided solely by the love of the truth and fidelity to Christ and so traced an itinerary, the most toilsome, but also the greatest, the most meaningful, the most conclusive.., so as to arrive at the fullness of wisdom and of peace.

John Paul II, when he visited this country in 1982, spoke of Cardinal Newman as the pilgrim for truth. In 2001, celebrating the bi-centenary of the Cardinal's birth, the same Pope said that John Henry Newman belongs to every time and place and people,' he is a sure and eloquent guide in our perplexity, and in all our needs a powerful intercessor before the throne of grace.

Pope John Paul also commented on how the Cardinal's writings show forth a remarkable synthesis of faith and reason, and how the trials and difficulties he faced in his long life revealed his utter fidelity to Christ. Benedict XVI in May 2005, in a message to the late Cardinal Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris, when the latter came to celebrate Mass at Trinity College Oxford, wrote of Newman's disciplined commitment to the pursuit of religious truth. He hoped Newman's example would inspire generations of students to draw abundantly from the richness of the Christian tradition in order to respond to the deepest yearnings of the human spirit.

"A sure and eloquent guide" said Pope John Paul. We cannot limit the way Cardinal Newman fulfills this role to any one particular facet of his life. To do that, to see him through one aspect of his life to the exclusion of all else is to belittle him - as it would any

historical figure so treated. The Cardinal's contribution to the life of the church was so far-reaching that it is hard to summarise it adequately. Hence for this evening I can only touch briefly on a few of the ways he is important for us today.

The brief quotations I mentioned a moment ago - and there are so many more which I could have used - underline for us one aspect of Newman's importance for the world today. Our culture, our civilisation, is often described as suffering from a crisis of truth. Pilate's question "What is truth?" is one asked not just by philosophers and writers today, but in different guises by ordinary men and women, whose tangled lives, whose personal histories reveal that they long for something or someone to help them make sense of what they experience, to help them give direction to their lives.

John Henry Newman shows that this search for truth is a vital search and each one must make it in order to come to that harbour of peace and tranquillity where the human spirit can be at rest and where the integrity and truthfulness of a human life can find full expression. Cardinal Newman discovered in mid-life that this could only be truly found in the one fold of the redeemer, that only in Christ and in his Church could truth and contentment be found. St Augustine, another favourite of Benedict XVI told of a similar search - "thou hast made us for thyself O Lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

Tied to this search for truth is Newman's profound understanding of conscience - how it is formed or de-formed, how it works, where it leads us. This teaching is of great importance in a day and age like ours which completely misunderstands the notion of conscience and which often uses conscience in the way Newman saw happening in his own time - an expression of self-will, a counterfeit which has but little to do with the voice of God given to all men and women. He asks us to examine our conscience and see if it does not point us to One with claims on us and which makes us long for clearer guidance. He asks us to discover where it is God speaks more directly and to ascertain that He has provided a permanent guarantee that this knowledge, this revelation, will not be lost.

Another aspect of Newman's importance might well be his recognition of the true bases of an authentic theology. I don't want to sound like a seminary lecturer this evening, but when we look at Newman the theologian we see someone whose deep grasp of Sacred Scripture and whose thorough reading of the Church Fathers meant that what he wrote rested on reliable foundations. Because of this its appeal remains fresh. He was utterly convinced of the truth of Christian revelation and gave his whole heart to the pursuit of the Christian ideal as a lifelong champion of the faith.

We can think too of Newman's educational legacy, whether in the schools which he began, or in the University in Dublin which still honours him as its founder. In these undertakings he showed what true Christian education should be like — whether in the pastoral solicitude he showed to the pupils and students entrusted to him, or in the principles which underpinned what he tried to achieve.

The Cardinal's motto, as I am sure you know, was "Cor ad cor loquitur" ("heart speaks to heart"). These words too underscore another aspect of his importance to us. His was a personal approach, not abstract, legalistic or authoritarian. The life of God's grace in the soul of an individual believer was what mattered to him. He wanted to draw the hearts of men and women to find rest and contentment in the heart of Christ the Saviour. It was

often remarked that Cardinal Newman had a great gift for friendship, inspiring deep love and loyalty in the hearts of others. This is another thing he can teach us in an age where true friendship is so often undervalued or misunderstood: he teaches us the importance of earthly friendships as a preparation for, a foreshadowing of, the supreme friendship we are called to have with our Saviour.

Truth and conscience, theology and education, friendship with God and neighbour - in all he teaches us about these things he rings true, he is felt to be authentic, a man of deep integrity. What united all that he did came from the same source as helped define our Cardinal's special patron, St Philip Neri, the founder of the Oratory. As St Philip in the 16th century, so Cardinal Newman in the 19th (and beyond) - determined to enable people to raise their eyes from the materialistic, secular society in which they live, and look instead at the counter-fascination of God's truth, purity and beauty - to seek instead for true holiness of life. Holiness of life is what united all Newman's gifts and talents and it is the supreme thing which he teaches us to strive for.

He would not stoop from his high ideals whether as an Anglican or a Catholic, when to have done so might have brought him temporary advantages. He stood ready to sacrifice all that he loved best in order to follow God's truth. He puts before us the Christian ideal in its fullness and although he was so full of sympathy to the perplexed and doubting who sought him out, he would never allow them to lower the standards of holiness to which all are called. That is what he teaches us as well. That is the lesson of his life and it is why we may soon be able to honour him as one of the Saints of God. John Henry Newman, in mind and body, in heart and soul, sought to be holy, to be a saint, to fulfill that vocation to which we are all called.

So may he indeed intercede for us all at the throne of grace, so that we might be faithful and true as he was, letting ourselves be led by that "kindly light" out of the shadows and images which surround us in our earthly existence, into that all-embracing light of God's presence in heaven. As he prayed: "O my God, let me never forget this truth: that not only are You my life, but my only life."

Amen.