



The Legacy of John Henry Newman

By Bernard Fyles, St Helens Circle

John Henry Newman was born in 1801 and died in 1890. His life can be divided into two almost equal parts. Until 1845 he was an Anglican and, for many years, probably the best known clergyman in the country, albeit a highly controversial one. After 1845, he was a Catholic, having been received into the Church at Littlemore near Oxford by the Italian Passionist missionary Fr Dominic Barberi (who was featured in the June edition of *Catena*). During the Catholic period of his life, Newman was, once again, a famous, and in some quarters, a notorious public figure.

Once again, he attracted controversy and even suspicion but he ended his life in relative peace, reconciled in 1877 with Oxford, the university he loved but lost, and recognised in 1879 by Pope Leo XII as an outstanding Christian leader and rewarded with the red hat of a Cardinal.

Newman was a remarkable man in all phases of his life and he left behind him a rich legacy, to the Anglican Communion, to the Catholic Church and to the general cultural life of the country.

I want to touch briefly on some aspects of this legacy. If there are any genuine Newman scholars reading this, then I must apologize in advance for my shortcomings. I am not intending to write a definitive account of all possible aspects of Newman's legacy. All I can hope to do is highlight what seem to me a few key points.

Newman began life as an Anglican with strong Evangelical leanings but his religious opinions changed as he grew older. After briefly flirting with the idea of a career in the law, he was ordained to the Anglican ministry and in 1828 he was appointed vicar of St Mary the Virgin, the University Church in Oxford. With John Keble and EB Pusey, he became a leading figure in what we know as the Oxford Movement. (This is sometimes called the Tractarian Movement since they published a series of pamphlets called *Tracts for the Times*).

Church attendance in Anglican churches at that time was very high but much religious practice was nominal and lukewarm. The more fervent Anglicans were largely Evangelical in theology and practice with the great figure of William Wilberforce as their leading light. The Methodist breakaway had done much to revitalise the non-conformist churches but

Catholicism was viewed as something alien and even wrong. There was great suspicion of Popery or Romanism.

The Oxford Movement viewed things differently. They did not see the Church of England as a Protestant church. They regarded Anglicanism as a *Via Media* – a middle way – between Catholic and Protestant, a church containing elements of both traditions. They wanted to restore or introduce into Anglicanism aspects of Catholic teaching and practice which they felt were part of the Anglican pre-Reformation patrimony.



John Henry Newman

Newman himself gradually came to realise that his position in the Church of England was untenable. In 1843, he resigned his living at St Mary's and in 1845 he was received into the Catholic Church.

The spiritual heirs of the Oxford Movement today are the Anglo-Catholics, those who, while remaining in the Anglican Communion, adopt many aspects of Catholic worship and Catholic belief. Their best known grouping in this country is the movement known as *Forward in Faith*. Those who have visited the Anglican shrine at Walsingham will have seen Anglo-Catholicism at its most public and most vigorous.

I have close personal links with Anglo-Catholicism. My brother-in-law and his wife are active members of *Forward in Faith*. Jenny, indeed, has represented the Anglo-Catholic viewpoint on the General Synod. These are the heirs of Newman the Anglican. These are the people to whom Pope Benedict is reaching out in his letter *Anglicanorum Coetibus*. He is offering them a place of their own inside the Catholic Church while retaining many of their Anglican traditions.

The Pope's offer, if accepted, would reconcile, at least in part, the two halves of Newman's life. The fact that Catholic teaching and practice have taken root and survived in the Church of England is the direct result of the work of Newman and his fellow Tractarians. I look forward eagerly to the day when, God willing, I can receive Communion with my brother-in-law and his wife at the same Mass. That would truly be Newman's legacy to me.

When he became a Catholic, Newman left Oxford and made his way to Rome. It was obvious he would seek ordination as a priest and it was widely assumed he would find a home with the Jesuits. This did indeed seem an obvious move but instead, in 1847 Newman joined a smaller order, the Oratory of St Philip Neri.

In 1849, he returned to England with a view to establishing the Oratory in his native land. He founded two institutions both of which survive. He founded Brompton Oratory in London, now famous for the splendour of its liturgy and the excellence of the Oratory school. His other foundation was at Edgbaston in Birmingham where he himself lived for most of the rest of his life.

He was, for a time, headmaster of the Oratory school where one of his pupils was that other great Catholic figure, Hilaire Belloc. (After Newman's death, JRR Tolkien was also educated at Edgbaston Oratory). The parish is still thriving in its original location. The school itself has left Birmingham and is now located in Oxfordshire.

All these active institutions can be seen as Newman's legacy in bricks and mortar. The same could also be said of University College Dublin where Newman played a significant role in its foundation.

It is often said that Newman's theological legacy can be found in the work and documents of the Second Vatican Council.