

## St. John Henry Newman

St. Mark's Chapel

27 October 2019

Father Rob, dear friends of the Newman Association of Vancouver and the Newman Club of UBC, parishioners and friends of the Catholic Community of St. Mark here on the UBC campus:

### *Introduction*

Today we are celebrating the raising of John Henry Newman to the glory of the altars, to use a somewhat antiquated expression, one of the most influential Christian thinkers of the last two centuries. He was a towering theologian, often referred to as “the invisible thinker of Vatican II,” especially because of his teaching that the lay faithful, through their Baptism, share in Christ’s mission as Priest, Prophet and King. Newman was the best-known convert to Catholicism in the nineteenth century; a founder of a university, which failed; a man of prayer and intense devotion; a prolific writer of nearly fifty volumes and thirty-two thousand letters; and an influential and moving preacher. In this distinguished but simple man we have a great life, a life well lived and fulfilled, one touching both our heads and our hearts.<sup>1</sup>

For those engaged in the intellectual life, whether as students or life-long academics, Newman is someone to look to for his wisdom, and to look up to for the integrity of his life. Small wonder that he is

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *L'Osservatore Romano*, n. 22 (1 June 2005), 9.

venerated here at the Colleges, where he would be so at home, for he was a man who loved not only learning but the very institutions where study and learning take place. His life, so strongly associated with the academic world, confirms the importance and beauty of an educational environment where intellectual formation, moral discipline and religious commitment walk hand in hand, as he proposed in *The Idea of a University*.<sup>2</sup>

But above all, Cardinal Newman invites us to pursue holiness. He was a holy man, profoundly aware of God's presence within him and of the need for a personal encounter with him in the depths of his own being.

### ***Absolute Primacy of God***

Newman was absolutely convinced of the absolute primacy of God in the life of individuals and society.

The young Newman, although he had come to know the "religion of the Bible" thanks to his mother, went through a period in his life full of difficulties and doubts. At the age of 14, he was influenced by philosophers such as Hume and Voltaire and he turned towards a kind of

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Address to the World Congress for the Pastoral Care of International Students (2 December 2011).

deism, in accordance with the humanist and liberal trends of the early nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, in the following year, Newman received the grace of conversion. As he later wrote in his *Apologia*, he found consolation, “in the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator.”<sup>3</sup> He experienced the objective truth of a living and personal God, who speaks to the conscience and reveals our condition as creatures. From that moment on, Newman understood his absolute dependence on the existence of the One who is the beginning of all things.<sup>4</sup>

In expressing his dependence on God, he is completely in harmony with St. Augustine’s declaration that God has made us for himself and it is only in him that we can find rest for our yearning, and, likewise, with St. Teresa of Avila’s laconic formula, “solo Dios basta,” “God alone is enough for me.” In one of his sermons he said:

The soul of man is made for the contemplation of its Maker;  
and that nothing short of that high contemplation is its  
happiness; that, whatever it may possess besides, it is

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<sup>3</sup> St. John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua*, Chapter 1: “History of My Religious Opinions to the Year 1833.”

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Message on the Occasion of the Symposium Organizaed by the International Centre of Newman Friends (18 November 2010).

unsatisfied till it . . . lives in the light of God's presence. He alone is sufficient for the heart who made it.<sup>5</sup>

This is why throughout his life “his overriding desire was to know and to do God's will.”<sup>6</sup>

Cardinal Newman believed that God was fully engaged both in the lives of individuals and in this world: that nothing was outside the reach of grace. Nothing. What we lack is the supernatural vision to see the hand of God and his nearness. In our day, in which so many cling to the visible and the transitory as the whole of reality, and in which little is said about heaven, Newman's trusting gaze towards eternity is a healthy reminder that we live with a horizon far wider – and more exciting – than the empirical world we can apprehend.

About the place of God in university studies, Newman wrote of what he called the “circle of knowledge,” to indicate the interdependence that exists between the various branches of knowledge. God and God alone has a relationship with the whole of reality, with every branch. Consequently, eliminating God from the Academy means breaking the

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<sup>5</sup> St. John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 5, “The Thought of God, the Stay of the Soul,” pp. 316-317.

<sup>6</sup> St. John Paul II, Address to the Academic Symposium Organized to Commemorate the Centenary of the Death of Cardinal John Henry Newman (27 April 1990), 4.

circle of knowledge. This explains why Catholic institutions of higher learning, with their specific identity and their openness to the “totality” of the created world, carry out an invaluable mission.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Particular Vocation and Mission of Each Person***

As Newman pondered the mysterious divine plan unfolding in his own life, he came to a deep and abiding sense, as he wrote, that “God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life but I shall be told it in the next.”<sup>8</sup>

Once he had come to that unshakeable sense that God had entrusted a specific mission to him, he declared: “Therefore, I will trust Him. . . If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. . . He does nothing in vain. . . He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide the future from me. Still, He knows what He is about.”<sup>9</sup> All these trials he knew in his life; but rather than diminish or destroy him they strengthened his faith and confirmed

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Catholic Education (7 February 2011).

<sup>8</sup> St. John Henry Newman, *Meditations and Devotions*.

<sup>9</sup> St. John Henry Newman, *Meditations and Devotions*.

in him the conviction that God “does nothing in vain,” and so nothing happens to us without purpose.

When we are pondering that great question: “what does the Lord want to do with my life?” “What’s out there in that open future?”, we do well to recall Newman’s absolute confidence that the Lord has a particular mission for me, for me personally, one that he has given to no one else.

### ***Ways to Holiness***

For all his intellectual prowess, Newman was a man of devotion who pursued holiness in his life. Echoing the Gospel, he preached in an early sermon, “Be you content with nothing short of perfection.” This was not a call to entertain spiritual thoughts or feelings of holiness. He was pious, to be sure, but also a realist. Our Saint was convinced that holiness is a day-to-day charge lived in ordinary life: “Is not holiness the result of many patient, repeated efforts after obedience, gradually working on us, and first modifying and then changing our hearts?”<sup>10</sup>

In his *Short Road to Perfection*, he summarized his understanding of holiness in simple words:

If you ask me what you are to do in order to be perfect, I say,  
first – Do not lie in bed beyond the due time of rising; give

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<sup>10</sup> St. John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 1, 42-43.

your first thoughts to God; make a good visit to the Blessed Sacrament; say the Angelus devoutly; eat and drink to God's glory; say the Rosary well; be recollected; keep out bad thoughts; make your evening meditation well; examine yourself daily; go to bed in good time, and you are already perfect."<sup>11</sup>

And elsewhere Saint John Henry Newman described the virtues of a holy person like this:

The Christian has a deep, silent, hidden peace, which the world sees not. . . The Christian is cheerful, easy, kind, gentle, courteous, candid, unassuming; has no pretense . . . with so little that is unusual or striking in his bearing, that he may easily be taken at first sight for an ordinary man.<sup>12</sup>

It might not be quite so simple for us – but there is no other place to start than in what we do now, in the situations we live and the people we meet.

### ***From the Interior to the Exterior World***

On this World Day of the Poor, I'd like to point out that Newman's

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<sup>11</sup> St. John Henry Newman, *Meditations and Devotions* (Westminster, Md.:1975), 286.

<sup>12</sup> St. John Henry Nreman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 5.

intellectual gifts and devotional life, honed in the Oxford Movement, led him to appreciate the importance of caring for the poor and marginalized as essential to a holy life, which he once expressed in these words:

Taught by our own pain, our own sorrow, nay, by our own sin, we shall have hearts and minds exercised for every service of love towards those who need it. We shall in our measure be comforters after the image of the Almighty Paraclete, – that is of the Holy Spirit – and that in all senses of the word, – advocates, assistants, soothing aids. Our words and advice, our very manner, voice, and look, will be gentle and tranquillizing.<sup>13</sup>

He calls us to become “paracletes” for the poor, the excluded, the unloved; that is, comforters and protectors, as the Holy Spirit is for each of us.

### ***Conclusion***

As we continue our Eucharist, may we raise our hearts with the company of saints to the praise of the Holiest in the height for the gift to us of St. John Henry Newman. May he pray for us!

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<sup>13</sup> St. John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 5 (London. 1870), 309.



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