

## **Newman the Pastor**

Soon after I dropped that altar, broke that toe and read Newman's story, I went to become Vicar of his old church in Oxford, the University church of St Mary the Virgin. I was warned that the brooding presence of Newman hovered over it. Well I certainly knew that presence but found it a reassuring friendly one. All I had to do was to open the baptismal or burial registers and there I saw his neat spidery signature. Here was the evidence of Newman's involvement in the joys and sorrows of his people. Most poignant I found those many entrances in the burial register of babies and young children. Here was someone who knew the sharp end of pastoral work. It was out of all this human contact that there emerged those famous sermons, which drew the crowds, young and old alike. Neither the content nor the delivery was dramatic. There were no wild gestures or theatrical rantings. These were carefully prepared homilies, beautifully crafted and delivered in a rather quiet voice. But congregations were gripped. Why? Because the preacher spoke of the reality and wonder of God, of the God who touches us in the detail of everyday living.

Later as a Catholic, Newman became a disciple of St Philip Neri, the man who founded the Oratorian Order of priests dedicated to living together in friendship with one another and with God. Newman pioneered the Oratory in Birmingham. Here was for him an entirely new pastoral situation – the dreaming spires of Oxford left behind for an industrial city with its black noisy factories and crowded back-to-back houses. The preaching continued but now, as well long hours were to be spent in the confessional and there were the duties of setting up a new school. That involved not only teaching and care of pupils, but also dealing with often difficult and temperamental teachers – and, what mattered so much to Newman, keeping alive channels of communication with parents.

Causes, some frankly seeming to us of interest only to the most zealous ecclesiastic, came to dominate the latter part of Newman's life in the Church of England. He became a campaigning parson riding around the countryside delivering pamphlets. When he became a Catholic there were certainly controversies and causes but his focus became more and more on individuals. Newman had a great respect for the rank and file laity of the Church. They were not to be 'sent to bed' or treated as 'boys eternal' but encouraged to grow up into a mature adult faith. When his bishop asked loftily: 'Who are the laity?' he answered that: 'the Church would look foolish without them.' And when the Papal Chamberlain Monsignor Talbot stated that the province of the laity was simply: 'to hunt, to shoot, to entertain', Newman pointed out how in the fourth century when the bishops were 'unfaithful', lured by the Arian vision of an hierarchical God which fitted nicely into the current model of society, it was: 'the body of the laity which was faithful to its baptism' and held to the equality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Newman treated the faithful as grown-up people, each individual making his or her own unique spiritual journey. Often, like us, they had difficulties and doubts and they were not much helped by zealots of a 'dogmatising spirit', by those who were 'narrow, rigid and authoritarian.' Newman believed in what he called 'reserve' in communicating faith.

By this he did not mean a stilted British stiff upper lip – but sensitivity, a gentleness in dealing with people. The ‘kindly light’ of truth leads, it does not, as the ‘aggressive insolent party’ of super-Catholics did, jostle or bully. Yes, authority was to be respected but those who exercised it were not to be fawned over as Goneril and Regan fawned over their father King Lear but to be loved as the quiet faithful Cordelia loved her father, by daring to speak the truth. It had always to be remembered that the Church always taught that the highest authority of all was ‘conscience’ which is ‘the aboriginal Vicar of Christ’. So Newman declared: ‘if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts I shall drink – to the Pope, if you please – still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.’

*Father Peter Cornwell*

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