

The Edinburgh Circle of the Newman Association

Archbishop Leo Cushley
Edinburgh
July 2014

Your Grace,

We note with sadness and surprise the content and tone of the letter you sent via Arthur Skelton, our chairman on the 11th July.

We respond as members and supporters of the Edinburgh Newman Circle and as loyal lifelong Catholics. Our members are mature, doctrinally well-informed and educated people, and have a good knowledge of faith matters. Many of us are in our sixties and seventies and possess a faith which in many cases has survived without compromise the considerable hostilities encountered in professional workplaces and secular environments. In this regard it has been of considerable help to us that we are members of an Association which promotes open discussion and greater understanding in today's Church. Over the years the Newman Association has invited speakers from outside the Church and from a number of positions within it. We believe that Catholicism has nothing to fear from debate and open discussion conducted in an atmosphere free from fear and denunciation.

We are most certainly not in the business of undermining the Catholic Faith. As members of the Newman Association we share its commitment to promoting a better understanding of the teachings of the Church and their relevance for our times, and to deepening our experience of its spiritual values.

It is therefore with a sense of bewilderment and incredulity that we note the observations of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It is interesting that none of our members, nor anyone attending the talk given by Joe Fitzpatrick, mentioned or complained to us about the phrase singled out by the CDF from the advance publicity. For many Newman members, and for those familiar with the conventions of theological discussion, the phrase "to call into question" signals a closer examination of, and/or alternative and valid ways of interpreting the topic. No member of the Newman would assume it implied any serious challenge to the centrality of the doctrine of Original Sin in the Church's teaching. The title and its concentration on "a new interpretation" of the bible story provided a more accurate reflection of our expectations. Nonetheless we shall obviously take care to prevent possible misunderstandings in our future publicity.

We always give considerable thought to our choice of speaker.

Our invitation to Joe Fitzpatrick came as the result of a recommendation from fellow Newman members of the Glasgow Circle to whom Joe had delivered a talk on the

same topic last year. Their opinion was a very positive one and his talk raised no cause for concern in the Glasgow Diocese.

It seems clear to us that no CDF representative can have been present at Joe Fitzpatrick's talk in Edinburgh. Had he been, he would have been struck by the sheer absence of dissent or controversy. Mr Fitzpatrick presented a scholarly and well-researched case, examining the imagery used in the bible story drawing on an impressive knowledge of the languages used in its early versions. Usefully he pointed to possible alignments of Christian teaching with scientific theory which could provide basic platforms for further theological investigation. In no way could any reasonably intelligent listener deduce that this talk constituted a serious undermining of Church Doctrine.

There was a clear consensus among those present that this talk was the best in the Newman Edinburgh programme this year.

Of greater concern to us is the CDF's diktat that we cancel Professor Tina Beattie's talk arranged for next September. We are aware of the fact that her planned talk at the University of San Diego was banned in controversial circumstances, but she was at the time defended by the Director of the Department who invited her, and by a prominent adviser in Religious Affairs to the Vatican. She has made a robust defence of her views and enjoys the support of many reputable theologians and the respect of many members of the hierarchy.

In the last two years she has spoken in Edinburgh and in Glasgow to audiences who could be left in no doubt of her deep commitment to the Church, her adherence to the principles and processes of theological discourse, her passion and her openness. She has much to contribute to the life of the church, and we regret that our invitation to her has resulted in a response of this nature from the CDF.

We have not been aware of any blanket ban on her speaking in dioceses anywhere else, and view with concern the action being taken now. It is difficult for us to reconcile this with Pope Francis's recent invitation to the Church's theologians to be braver in engaging with the realities of the world.

As a matter of courtesy we have sent copies of your letter to the parties most affected by these actions, i.e. Tina Beattie, Joe Fitzpatrick, our local membership, and the National Council of the Newman Association.

This a confrontation not of our choosing - and although the injunctions imposed by the CDF invite no dialogue, may we respectfully ask that you might meet with a small representative group of us some time soon to discuss the implications of these actions which extend far beyond the local boundaries of this diocese?

We are yours faithfully,