

Juan R. Vélez | Monday, 24 May 2010

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## Liberals and conservatives war over Cardinal Newman's legacy

One of the leading intellectual lights of Victorian England will be beatified in England later this year. An unholy row has broken out over his significance.

*In September of this year Pope Benedict XVI will beatify Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890), the famous convert from Anglicanism who was one of the leading intellectuals in Victorian England. Liberals and Conservatives each wish to claim Newman for their side. Which was he? MercatorNet interviewed Fr Juan R. Vélez to find out. Fr Vélez is co-author with Michael Aquilina of a forthcoming book, "Take Five: Meditations with John Henry Newman." He is also preparing a biography on Newman titled "Passion for Truth: John Henry Newman."*

*MercatorNet: The Pope was accused recently of hijacking Cardinal Newman to prop up the cause of conservative Catholicism. Liberal or conservative? Which was he?*

Newman did not think in the terms "liberal and conservative". What he did think about was the

danger of rationalism: he saw rationalism as an enemy of Christianity. By rationalism he understood the philosophy which substitutes man's ideas and conclusions for God's revelation. He strongly contested the notion that religion is something man made which has no lasting claims. He was against subjectivism in religion. As a young Anglican clergyman at Oxford until the time he was named a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, he fought against a subjective religion that was not based on objective truths revealed by God to men.

Newman was against the "liberal" minded theologians at Oxford who did not adhere to the Tradition of the Anglican Church. He was also against excessive display or reliance on feeling in religion characteristic of Evangelicals of his day. Both the liberals and Evangelicals of his day down played the importance of doctrine and hierarchy in Christianity. Newman thus was opposed to a religion that was man made or emotive, but he did not refer to himself as conservative. However, he was gradually more and more upset by the High Church Anglicans, who for the most part did not promote the spiritual and devotional aspect of the Christian religion, adhering primarily to the external forms of worship, often skipping things for the sake of expediency. Newman observed this "soft religion" when as a young



clergyman, his bishop chided him for not having officiated the wedding of young woman who a few years earlier had refused to be baptized.

*MercatorNet: In 1845, immediately prior to his reception in the Roman Catholic Church, Newman finished his Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine. What is development in doctrine?*

For 20 or so years, while a student and teacher at Oxford, Newman studied the changes in doctrines and practices of Christians throughout the centuries. For many years he accepted the Protestant notion that Catholic doctrines and practices were a corruption of primitive Christianity. However, his study of Christianity and the actions of the Anglican Church led him to examine his position. He began to understand that over time Christianity incorporates some doctrines and corresponding religious practices. He saw that these changes had a good explanation.

For instance, he saw that the belief in Purgatory was a "development" in the Christian understanding of God's forgiveness obtained through the sacrament of penance. It constitutes a remedy for penance that is not completed on earth. Purgatory cleanses the soul from any attachment to sin remaining in a soul that dies in the state of grace. Although Purgatory is not specifically named in the Bible, the doctrine about this purification can be trusted because of the nature of genuine development in Church teaching.

*MercatorNet: But according to Newman does Church teaching change?*

Yes and no. To be more precise, Church teaching undergoes development. This is not the same as teaching which "evolves." Evolution implies one thing changing into something else -- the Church's teaching does not evolve into something else. To ascribe this to Newman is a mistake. Newman explained that development can be good or bad. A bad development in doctrine is called a corruption in Christian teaching. An example of a good development was the actual exercise of authority that the successor of St. Peter grew to have. The contrary was in fact the corruption, namely disregard for the office of Peter established by Christ himself.

Newman believed that religion is a definite set of doctrinal truths and practices which do not change substantially; forms or external elements can change or develop, but only in keeping with the original reality. In addition a better articulation of these truth and a deeper understanding can be reached.

*MercatorNet: What is the point of handing down fossilized dogmas as Tradition without questioning them?*

Here we must distinguish between Tradition in religious beliefs and social and political traditions. The first originates directly from God whereas the second are man made traditions. Christian tradition is the oral and written transmission of what God revealed to the Church through the Apostles and their disciples under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Within this tradition there is Apostolic Tradition stemming from the time of the Apostles or their disciples. Ecclesiastical tradition is the tradition that grew in the subsequent centuries also under the guidance of the Holy Spirit promised by Christ to the Apostles and their successors.

Catholics believe that Christ transmitted to the Apostles and their immediate successors the doctrines that He wished them to hand down to the bishops who would succeed them. Tradition consists in the oral preaching, example and institutions such as the sacraments administered by the Apostles. The Holy Spirit inspired some men to write down some of this Tradition, which has become the New Testament. Both Tradition and the Scripture form the one deposit of faith, which contain the truths that God wishes men to believe and practice. For any development in doctrine to be faithful to what God has revealed it must be faithful to Tradition and Scripture.

*MercatorNet: How did the doctrine of early Christianity come to be put into question or to be rejected?*

Starting in the 16th century Ecclesiastical Tradition and later Apostolic Tradition were put into question for a variety of reasons. This was the result of reactions against abuses by Churchmen, excessive confidence in human reason with the start of the Renaissance, and a gradual break with the authority of Rome. In 19th century England there were two wide spread practices that derived from the Protestant Reformation: the practice of a Bible Religion excluding what is not explicitly found in the Scriptures, and the exercise of "Private Judgment" in religious matters.

Newman was a historian of early Church history. His in-depth study of this period and of the writings of the Church Fathers gave him first hand knowledge of the Church's Tradition. He discovered that the Fathers were witnesses of the Church's Tradition and teaching on Scripture. His study of the Fathers enabled him to avoid these errors and to point them out to others in his sermons and essays.

*MercatorNet: What are some applications of Newman's ideas on development? How would the criteria that he laid out support or preclude important changes in Catholic doctrine or morals?*

We could ask ourselves: would Newman accept some type of Church government in which the Pope did not have authority? Newman struggled with this idea for years before becoming Catholic. He finally came to realize that the authority of the pope was a development of the power given by Christ to Peter. Therefore any denial of this authority would be contrary to the initial doctrine and would be unacceptable.

In a subject altogether different, we might ask, would Newman accept the use of contraception? Naturally he would not accept this as true development in moral teaching. He would find that the sanction for such behavior had no grounding in Sacred Tradition or Scripture. In fact such behavior was prohibited such as in the case of Onan.

On an even more contested question these days, would Newman accept a change in the practice of celibacy for Catholic priests of the Latin rite? To begin Newman would note that St. Peter and some but not all of the Apostles were married. St. John and St. Paul were celibate men. He would be quick to quote the passage of St. Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus teaches that some are given the gift of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Next, it is likely that he would argue that guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church soon recognized the benefit for celibacy. About the year 300 in the West celibacy began to become the norm. The Church had developed a fuller understanding of the spiritual and pastoral requirements for celibacy. In any event, Newman would look to Tradition and Scripture as understood by the Church's teaching office to judge about the validity of any developments.

*MercatorNet: What then would Newman consider true development in the Church's doctrine?*

Newman would probably see as true developments of Catholic doctrine various social teachings of the Church such as the notion of common good and subsidiarity, as well as Vatican II's teaching on the collegiality of bishops.

Newman himself contributed to a number of developments in Catholic theology such as a more spiritual understanding of Purgatory and a deeper understanding of role of the laity in the Church. There is a lot to be said about both of these subjects and especially of Newman's influence in fostering an educated Catholic laity resonating with the later teaching of Vatican II. This council also underlined, as Newman had done earlier, that all Christians are called by God to live holy lives.

To the question, then, of: "Was Newman a liberal (in hiding) or a conservative?" one must answer that Newman was neither. He was a man anchored in the Church's Tradition and Scripture who looked to the authoritative Teaching of the Church to teach, guide and decide in doctrinal matters. Newman provided future Christians and theologians with tools to judge about the soundness of developments in doctrine. He shows us that any true development is always rooted in Tradition and faithful to Scripture as well as subject to the Church's teaching authority.

*MercatorNet: The gay community in Britain is also trying to portray Cardinal Newman as a latent homosexual? How would you respond to that?*

Newman's close and life-long friendship with some of his male peers and students has been construed as an indication of homosexuality. This is part of the modern bias of seeing friendship primarily in terms of sexual relations. As the Newman scholar Ian Ker has argued there is no evidence to suggest that Newman suffered from same-sex attraction. Having said that, the Catholic Church teaches that homosexual inclination per se is not sinful. All persons, whether married or single, are called by God to live chastity, each according to his state in life.

*MercatorNet: Critics have also said that Newman utterly opposed the idea of his beatification and that he even took steps to ensure that it would be impossible to make a cult of his remains. Is the Pope making a mistake in beatifying him?*

Newman was keenly aware of his failings, such as pride and over sensitive reactions. With

the passing of years his awareness of falling short of God's graces gave him an even greater sense of God's holiness and his own nothingness. The thought of being considered a saint or called a saint would thus have been naturally repulsive to him. True saints don't consider themselves holy; rather they see themselves as repentant sinners. Pope Benedict, after a careful study of Newman's life and work, has rightly recognized the holiness of Venerable Newman, and will soon declare him one of the blessed.

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