

Blessed John Henry Newman, a Great Teacher of the Faith
The 19th-century scholar's profound insights remain highly relevant for 21st-century Catholics.

by FATHER JUAN VÉLEZ 10/08/2012 Comments (6)



On Oct. 11, the Church begins the Year of Faith called for by Pope Benedict XVI to encourage the faithful to seek spiritual renewal and a deeper understanding of the Catholic faith in response to the grave crisis of faith in the contemporary world. One tried-and-true way to learn more about our faith and progress with spiritual renewal is to read the lives of the saints, teachers of the faith who, through their example and word, nourished both their contemporaries and Christians of future generations. Blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890), an Anglican convert to Catholicism and later a cardinal, is one of the great modern teachers of the faith. Through a diligent study of the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church, Cardinal Newman pursued the truth wherever it led him. His intellectual honesty and courage led him to give up the prestige he enjoyed at Oxford University in order to convert to the Roman Catholic Church in 1845.

In his sermons and books, Newman teaches the faith in a deep and convincing manner. He taught that faith is "assenting to a doctrine as true, which we do not see, which we cannot prove, because God says it is true, who cannot lie." Furthermore, he explained, it is assenting to what God's messengers say because we do not hear God's voice directly. Newman wrote that faith in God is unlike ordinary faith in men. The believer "is as certain that the doctrine taught is true as God is true; and he is certain because God is true, because God has spoken, not because he sees its truth or can prove its truth." The believer "receives the tidings from one who comes from God. This is what faith was in the time of the apostles, as no one can deny; and what it was then, it must be now, else it ceases to be the same thing."

Today's Crisis

What can the writings of a 19th-century English scholar teach us today, in a world so very different than his? At the root of today's crisis of faith is often religious ignorance based on superficiality and materialism.

People adopt the beliefs contained in songs on the radio or comedy shows on TV. Many of these ideas contradict what reason and faith tell us about God and about human nature. Many ridicule and attack the Church and her teaching. In high schools and universities, students are presented with the false dichotomy of religion vs. science.

In this pagan environment, Christians need good reading material that teaches the truths that transcend time, reading material that will answer their questions and meet their aspirations.

There is no substitute for personal reading and studying of the content of faith. In his own journey of faith, Newman studied the Bible, the Church councils and the writings of the Church Fathers. In his study, he learned the importance of Tradition (what the Church believes and transmits through the ages), the role of the Pope in the Church, why we pray for the deceased, the purpose of devotion to the saints, etc.

Pope Benedict XVI chose Oct. 9, the day in which the Passionist priest Blessed Dominic Barberi received Newman into the Church in 1845, as Blessed Newman's feast day.

Two years have gone by since his beatification. More people are asking God for favors and cures through Newman's intercession. And also more people are reading his writings. But still, overall, few people know much about Newman or have read any of his works.

Recommended Reading

A good place to start is to read some of his sermons and a biography.

Newman's *Parochial and Plain Sermons* were written during his Anglican years but contain sound Catholic doctrine. This collection contains homilies on a wide range of Christian virtues and practices, with an emphasis on faith in God, humility, self-denial and the worship of God. Newman, who had a deep knowledge of the Scriptures, transmits to the reader the truths sometimes veiled in a text. He explains the fuller meaning of Old Testament texts with passages from the New Testament. And he leads the reader to aspire to a holy life, always setting before him the vision of heaven.

Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations is another volume of sermons; these were delivered shortly after he became Catholic. The style and imagery are ornate, resembling the Italian St. Alphonsus Liguori, but Newman's gift for developing arguments and use of satire is present. He strongly challenges his audience with words such as these: "You at present are troubled

with an uneasy heart and a divided will; you need to be converted. ... God is moving you to acts of faith, hope, love, hatred of sin, repentance; do not disappoint him; do not thwart him; concur with him; obey him."

Throughout the United States, there are Catholic chaplaincies at secular universities that are named Newman Centers after Cardinal Newman. These centers are places for worship and growth in the faith. They are places for fellowship with Catholics and offer assistance to students. For many, the Newman Centers are also the means to encounter Christ and the Catholic Church. Much good is done in these centers of Catholic life. Unfortunately, however, only in some is Newman well known, let alone looked up to as a teacher of faith. A concerted study of the life and works of Cardinal Newman would greatly contribute to Catholic intellectual life and to the spiritual renewal of the universities and colleges of the United States.

The Idea of a University offers Newman's views about the nature and scope of a university education. In this now-classic work, Newman explains the necessary role for theology in university studies. In it, he argues that the end of a university education is the pursuit of truth, as the object of the intellect. Although he points out the difference between natural theology and revealed theology, he holds: "Right reason, that is, reason rightly exercised, leads the mind to the Catholic faith and plants it there and teaches it in all its religious speculations to act under its guidance."

Newman spent most of his life working in education, many years teaching university students at Oxford and in Dublin. He knew very well the moral and intellectual needs of students. Many of his best hours were dedicated to helping them to discover God and the purpose for their lives.

In our times, Newman's teachings continues to provide answers for spiritual and intellectual questions. He is a sure and experienced guide for those looking to deepen their understanding of Church teaching, particularly during the Year of Faith.

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