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Blessed John Henry Newman for Catechists

An interview with author, Father Juan R. Vélez

John Henry Newman (1801–1890) was a teacher at the University of Oxford who became a Roman Catholic in 1845, and dedicated his life to teaching the truth about God, the S. Scriptures and the Catholic Church. Newman first taught Christian doctrine as an Anglican clergyman at St. Mary's Church in Oxford and at Oriel College, one of the colleges at Oxford University. When he became Catholic he founded the Catholic University of Ireland where he gave memorable lectures on the role of theology in university studies. Later he founded a school for boys in Birmingham, England, which gave boys intellectual and doctrinal formation. Pope Benedict XVI beatified John Henry Newman on September 20, 2010.

How is Blessed John Henry Newman a good example for catechists?

A good catechist is an articulate and convincing witness of the faith. He or she relies on the Church's teaching and tradition to explain the truths contained in the Scriptures. Newman had these qualities. Furthermore a good catechist is someone who believes and practices what he teaches. This unity of life was the hallmark of Newman's life. Those who met Newman were moved by his integrity and persuaded by his teaching.

Did Newman have a catechetical method?

His method of teaching varied according to the academic level of his students, but a common element of his teaching method was the importance he gave to the role of mentoring. He believed in the necessity of helping students individually. In part this was the method used at the Oxford colleges, but one which was going out of style. Newman, not only reinvigorated the practice, he added concern for the spiritual and moral life of his students. He realized the truth is connatural to one's way of living. Those who practice virtue learn about truth with greater ease. Newman was concerned with teaching the whole truth to his students, not just theory.

What texts did Newman leave behind that could help in the catechesis of youth?

Once a Roman Catholic Newman wrote brief notes on Christian Doctrine that are contained in a book compiled after his death under the title of Meditations and Devotions. Although these are not extensive they are masterful in their clarity and in their capacity to elicit noble sentiments from the reader. For college students, Newman's sermons, which he wrote as an Anglican, contain sound Catholic teaching with elegant arguments and many examples. Having said, the greater part of Newman's writings are a catechesis for colleges students and adults.

Please talk about the study of Scripture and catechesis.

John Henry Newman read and studied the Scriptures. He understood that together with Tradition they form what is called the "rule of faith." The Scriptures teach us the truths that we are to believe and guide our behavior as Christians. His sermons are rich in quotations from S. Scripture and an explanation of the texts. If he were to be asked he would undoubtedly recommend a good study of the Old and New Testament as a part of catechesis.

What other catechetical resources did Blessed John Henry Newman employ?

Newman, who played the violin well and appreciated culture, understood the power of art in worship and in the transmission of the faith. Already as a young Anglican clergyman he prepared children to sing hymns for the religious ceremonies. As a Catholic priest he encouraged children to pray to the Mother of God with the Holy Rosary. For older students he prepared a commentary of the litany of Loreto, which provides a biblical explanation of the invocations to the Blessed Virgin Mary. For instance, he explained why Mary is called "House of Gold." Gold is the most precious mineral and she is the house or ark in which the Son of God dwelt.

What did Newman say about the saints?

John Henry Newman had a patron saint, St. Philip Neri, whom he tried to imitate and to whom he prayed. Newman wrote a novena to St. Philip with beautiful considerations and prayers. The themes include humility, prayer, purity, tenderness of heart, cheerfulness, etc. To St. Philip he prayed, "Gain me the grace to love all God's works for God's sake, and all men for the sake of my Lord and Saviour who has redeemed them by the Cross. And especially let me tender and compassionate and loving towards all Christians, as my brethren in grace." This novena in itself could serve as a catechesis on virtues. Newman had devotion to other saints such as SS. Peter and Paul, SS. Athanasius and Gregory Nazianzen. His writings suggest that he taught children likewise to have a heavenly mentor. The saints teach us the faith and give us example of how to live it. In addition to the saints, Newman taught boys to befriend their guardian angel, and he wrote some beautiful verses about his.

What role did culture play in catechesis for Newman?

Newman realized the power of good literature in forming the imagination and vocabulary of students. He arranged some Greek and Roman plays for the students at the school to perform. He knew from personal experience of the power that ancient heroes have to inspire a child's imagination. As a student of the classics he also lent from ancient authors the art of writing and conveying ideas. Older students can learn from the classics of literary figures that point to Christ.

Please tell us a little about yourself!

I was born in 1961 in Venezuela to a family who came from Medellín, Colombia, where we returned when I was still a boy. My parents had five children. My father was a physician and when we were still young we lived for two years in London, very near where Newman once went to grade school. My parents taught me many things, especially piety, love for the family and the practice of virtues.

How did you discern your call to the priesthood?

Like my father I also studied medicine. I graduated from the medical school at the University of Navarre, where I got to know Opus Dei, the Work of God. After some time at Navarre I discovered my calling to dedicate myself in the service of God through this institution of the Catholic Church. Opus Dei, founded by St. Josemaría Escrivá in 1928, promotes the universal call to holiness in work and everyday life. The majority of its faithful are laymen and women who carry out a wide variety of secular occupations.

When did you first read about Newman and how did this influence you?

After finishing residency training in internal medicine and doing one year of Endocrinology in Pittsburgh I was asked by the director of Opus Dei to consider studying theology full time. I went to Rome where I completed studies in theology at the University of the Holy Cross. Then I went again to Spain where I did doctoral studies of theology at the University of Navarre. There I met my mentor, a great Newman scholar, Fr. José Morales, author of an excellent biography of Newman in Spanish, many articles on Newman and a number of translations of his work (the latter together with Victor García Ruiz). Reading the biography by Fr. Morales immediately interested me in Blessed John Henry Newman's passion for truth, intellectual honesty and spiritual fortitude.

You have co-authored Take Five, Meditations with John Henry Newman with Mike Aquilina. What was the genesis of this book?

Mike Aquilina and I met when I lived in Pittsburgh. There his family and I became friends. I once asked Mike to work with me on biography of Newman, which I have since then finished, but he was too occupied with many books that he was writing. Provisionally, later on when I looked for a publisher for the biography Mike suggested that we write a book of short reflections on Newman, and we set to work on it to publish it before Newman's beatification. This book is a pocket-anthology for ages high school and up, which offers the reader a daily page for prayer divided into a few points including a text from Newman, some questions to meditate on and a few biblical quotes.

What are your hopes for the book?

Our hope is the many people are introduced to Blessed John Henry Newman through this selection of excerpts from his writings, and that people take a few minutes to pray with these texts and scriptural quotations. So far the book has sold well and people have shown a lot of interest. The concept of taking at least Five Minutes a day to reflect and pray with the saints is tried and true, but editions like this one make it practical for people.

You have written a biography on Blessed John Henry Newman. When will it be published?

Presently I am working on corrections for this biography titled John Henry Newman, Passion for Truth. I have worked on this book for seven years and am happy that St. Benedict's Publishers/TAN have agreed to publish it in September 2011. At www.newmanbiography.com those interested can read about this forthcoming book. This biography explains Newman's search for the true Church, his growth in virtues, and his long life, rich in relationships and educational projects.

Thank you, Father!

Fr. Juan R. Vélez G. is a priest of the Prelature of Opus Dei who resides in San Francisco. He holds a doctorate in dogmatic theology from the University of Navarre. His doctoral thesis was on John Henry Newman's Eschatology. His interest in the life and works of Cardinal Newman began with his doctoral studies under Prof. José Morales, author of John Henry Newman (1801-1890). Fr. Vélez has a medical degree, also from the University of Navarre, and was previously board certified in internal medicine. Please visit his website: www.newmanbiography.com, and his Face Book page: Cardinal Newman for Beginners.

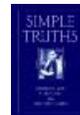
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