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Cardinal Newman's Challenge to the Laity

Interview With Author Father Juan R. Vélez

By Karna Swanson

LOS ANGELES, California, SEPT. 15, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- For Cardinal John Henry Newman, faith isn't something you keep to yourself, but rather something you share with others in the work place, in school, and in the community, says author and Opus Dei priest, Father Juan R. Vélez.

Father Vélez is co-author with Michael Aquilina of "[Take Five, Meditations with John Henry Newman](#)," published this year by Our Sunday Visitor. He is also editing a biography titled "[John Henry Newman: Passion for Truth](#)," which will be published next year by St. Benedict's/TAN publishers.

In this interview with ZENIT, Father Vélez offers a brief introduction to the thought and writings of Cardinal Newman, who will be beatified Sunday, as well as some of the lessons the average Catholic can learn from him.

ZENIT: Benedict XVI is presiding at Cardinal Newman's beatification ceremony on Sunday. What connection is there between these two Catholic scholars?

Father Vélez: Cardinal Newman and Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, are two towering intellectuals, among those few who stand out every century. These men guide the lives of others, especially when they are rooted in a life of prayer and humility. Newman (1801-1890) was a teacher and Anglican clergymen at Oxford University. At the age of 44 he became Roman Catholic. He was ordained a Catholic priest. In 1879, Pope Leo XIII made him cardinal.

There are many things in common with these two men, beginning with their serene and retiring personalities and their love for music. Newman played the violin and especially liked to play Beethoven. The Pope rests by playing the piano, and his favorite composer was another classical musician: Mozart. Both men taught at universities and relished libraries; they were at home in academic pursuits and each wrote many articles and books.

Newman and the Pope both studied extensively the writings of the Church Fathers, those men approved by the Church for their sound teaching and holy lives during the first Christian millennia. Newman was especially fond of St. Athanasius and the Pope is greatly indebted to St. Augustine. Based on their study of the Fathers they understood the meaning and normative role of Tradition in the Church.

Both scholars have some similarity in their spiritual writings. These are steeped in the sacred Scriptures. In some sense both writers share a common methodology for scripture interpretation: an ecclesial and patristic approach to biblical exegesis. Newman quickly recognized in the first half of the 19th century the errors of early historical-critical method. In Jesus of Nazareth and many articles, the Pope has pointed out the insufficiency and problems of a predominant historical-critical interpretation of the Scriptures that does not

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give the proper room to the spiritual, patristic and ecclesial understanding of the Word of God.

The love and reverence for the liturgy and its theological and aesthetic value, as well as the recognition and teaching of the harmony between faith and science are among other areas both writers have in common.

ZENIT: You and Michael Aquilina wrote "Take Five, Mediations With John Henry Newman" with the idea of bringing the thought and writings of the cardinal down to the level of the average Catholic. Where did the idea for this book come from?

Father Vélez: My friend Michael Aquilina together with the editors of Our Sunday Visitor had the good idea of starting the series "Take Five" to help Catholics spend a few minutes of reflection each day with great spiritual authors. The first volume is on St. Ignatius of Loyola, the second is on Pope Benedict XVI, and the third is now on Blessed John Henry Newman.

In the fast pace of every day life people need to find some minutes to pray and reflect. Five minutes is not too hard to find; this daily time dedicated exclusively to God is indispensable for a man or woman who takes his relationship with God seriously.

Newman, unlike most saints, was a brilliant author who wrote in the best 19th-century English prose. Often it is hard too read his works without an introduction and a selection of some of his writings. Many of the things that he wrote, especially his sermons, have ready-made applications to our daily struggles.

ZENIT: You are currently editing a biography on the cardinal. What are some aspects of his life that were new to you in reviewing this new book?

Father Vélez: One of the points that I have discovered in reading Newman's diaries and letters is how much he prayed and fasted for some years before his conversion. It is often said that his conversion was an intellectual one. This is true, but his heart was disposed by God's grace in response to prayer and sacrifice.

Newman referred to Pascal who said that the heart has reasons that the mind does not know. Newman explained in his seminal work, "Grammar of Assent," that we know God through the voice of our conscience, and through an accumulation of thoughts, feeling and events that brings us to an experience of God. We could say that the heart and reason come together in the knowledge of God; faith is more than a logical syllogism.

I have also discovered that the reserved and even shy Newman was a man with a very big heart who knew how to love his friends; and he had many, many friends. Newman lived what he preached; his friendships were chaste, generous, deep and lasting. (For more on Newman's friendships, see: http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/heart_speaks_to_heart).

ZENIT: What tips do you have for those who want to know more about Cardinal Newman, but who are daunted by his dense texts?

Father Vélez: It is important that those who read Newman begin with his sermons, for example the "Parochial and Plain Sermons." Usually at the start of the sermons Newman introduces the argument, and at the end he sums it up.

Next, I would say that it would be very helpful to read a biography on Newman; there are many good ones. I suggest most people do this before reading his extraordinary intellectual biography, "Apologia pro Vita Sua," or his masterful conceptualization of university education, "Idea of a University."

In addition, an excellent approach to Newman are his short meditations on the Stations of the Cross, on visits

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to the Blessed Sacrament and on the Blessed Virgin Mary. Scepter Press has a collection of his Marian texts titled "Mystical Rose" and a good anthology of texts, "The Rule of Our Warfare: John Henry Newman and the true Christian Life," compiled by John Hullsman. One of Newman's two novels, "Callista," "A Tale of the Third Century" is a simple and good introduction to his ideas and writing.

ZENIT: What place should Cardinal Newman have in the lives of the laity? What lessons does he offer for the average Catholic?

Father Vélez: Like his patron saint St. Philip Neri, the 16th-century Apostle of Rome, and later St. Josemaría Escrivá, Newman was a tireless preacher of holiness in every day life. His first volume of "Parochial and Plain Sermons" begins with a sermon titled "Holiness Necessary for Future Blessedness." In many sermons Newman denounced the shallow and easy religion of his day; he urged men and women to have lives of self-denial and obedience to God.

Newman worked for the education of children, blue-collar workers and university students. He began a school in Birmingham and the Catholic University of Ireland. He was convinced that each Catholic must develop his God given talents to be able to serve his Creator in Society. Like Escrivá would do 50 years later, Newman inspired his peers and students to occupy their places in society bringing the light of Christ to all environments of society, especially those with highest responsibilities.

Blessed John Henry Newman thus urged the laity to exercise their faith and responsibility in society without fear. From his time at Oxford, Newman was a friend of William Gladstone, a devout Anglican and later Prime Minister of England, and Henry Wilbeforce, a writer and editor, son of the famous abolitionist and a convert to Catholicism, together with many more. These persons were powerfully influenced by Newman's life and writings, many in the Oxford Movement in the Anglican Church, and many more as Roman Catholics.

Newman basically thought the Christian laity should give importance to prayer and the study of the faith, and next they should make a difference in their work place, universities and government. They shouldn't consider their faith a hat that one hangs on a peg when entering a home. The new blessed asks each one of us: How can I better serve God in my profession and in my social relations in society?

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On the Net:

"Take Five: Meditations with John Henry Newman":

<http://www.aquinasandmore.com/catholic-books/Take-Five-Meditations-with-John-Henry-Newman/sku/22910>

"John Henry Newman, Passion for Truth": www.newmanbiography.com

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