

Cardinal Newman, A Precursor of Vatican II's Vision of the Laity
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Cardinal John Henry Newman, founder of the Oxford Movement and Anglican convert to Catholicism was one of the great minds of the 19th century. Pope Benedict XVI beatified him in Birmingham on Sunday, September 20, 2010. On the eve of the beatification the Pope said that Newman was “the great champion of the prophetic office of the Christian laity.” Undoubtedly one of Blessed John Henry Newman’s significant contributions to the life of the Catholic Church was his understanding of the specific vocation of the laity in the world and in the Church.

Newman learnt from his patron saint, St. Philip Neri, who worked tirelessly with laymen and women in Rome, as well as St. Francis de Sales, the apostle of Geneva. Newman was a contemporary of the French layman, Blessed Frederic Ozanam. These men taught laymen and women the ideal of holiness in their daily affairs and in their professional work. After Newman other holy men such as St. Josemaría Escrivá have played a prominent role in teaching the universal call to holiness in everyday work.

The Oxford don understood early on that holiness is the goal to which all Christians must strive. Anything short of this would be a soft and superficial religion. Newman taught that to seek holiness one must constantly watch for Christ and practice self-denial in religion. He urged each person to respond to God’s unique call. In one of his sermons Newman said, “God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another” (Meditations on Christian Doctrine).

Studying at Oxford and later teaching its undergraduates Newman became friends with leading men of English society, including William E. Gladstone, later English Prime Minister, Edward Manning, later Archbishop of Westminster, and Frederic Rogers, future Lord Blanchford. Through the influence of his personal friendship as well as sermons and books he urged them to use their talents wisely and justly in their positions of leadership. Many of these men would consult Newman for his advice. With the help of some of them he established the Birmingham Oratory School to provide for the moral and intellectual formation of children and youth.

Asked by Archbishop Cullen of Dublin, Newman established the Catholic University of Ireland. He was concerned with giving Catholic laymen a very good education in letters and sciences. He set up a residence where the first students could benefit from mentors’ friendship and advice. One of Newman’s achievements was that of acquiring a small medical school and incorporating it into the new university. In lectures to the students in medicine and others sciences Newman refuted the claim that there is opposition between faith and science. Ahead of his time, Newman struggled to obtain autonomy for laymen in

the financial running of the university. He argued against ecclesiastic authorities that laymen were more suited than clergy in secular endeavors. The most important fruit of Newman's work in Ireland was the set of lectures on university education that became the famous *Idea of a University*.

Years later at the suggestion of William Ullathorne, Archbishop of Birmingham, Newman attempted to open a house of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri in Oxford to assist Catholic undergraduates, once more allowed by law to study at Oxford. The English bishops, however, thwarted Newman's plan afraid that it would encourage Catholic youth to attend a pagan Oxford. In a letter to a friend Newman retorted that youth should not be kept in glass cages. They must instead be formed in the faith in order to resist the temptations of the day, and they should be present in the universities. The English cardinal also worked to improve the education of factory workers, mostly Irish immigrants.

Newman built up a circle of friends, lawyers, clergymen and writers who were practicing Catholics unafraid to stand up for just laws and social mores as well as the defense of the Catholic Faith. He understood that educated laymen must exercise the faith in their ordinary circumstances, especially in positions of importance in society. With well-formed consciences these men must act on their own, not as simple instruments of the bishops. They have freedom for personal initiatives and involvement in secular affairs. Newman thus envisioned educated laity involved in the laws and cultural institutions of the day, bringing the light of Christian values to temporal affairs. Years later this spiritual doctrine was proclaimed by Vatican II. Newman is thus rightfully considered a precursor of Vatican II's exhortation to the laity to be a leaven for society and to strive for holiness in everyday life. The words of Blessed John Henry continue to awaken us from any laziness or fear and to challenge us to exercise a Christian influence in society.

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