

Newman biographer highlights cardinal's insights amid Anglican turmoil
By Benjamin Mann, Catholic News Agency, August 14, 2012

A biographer of Blessed John Henry Newman says the noted 19th-century Catholic convert can offer guidance to Anglicans in the midst of their denomination's current moral and doctrinal crisis.

Cardinal Newman “saw the importance of knowing one's faith, and the truths revealed by God through the Church – and the importance of living according to those truths, not according to opinions,” said Father Juan Velez, author of “Passion For Truth: The Life of Blessed John Henry Newman” (St. Benedict Press, \$18.75).

While stressing the call to holiness for both laity and clergy, Newman also came to recognize the gift of the teaching authority held by the bishops in union with the Pope.

This visible apostolic authority contrasts sharply with the modern Anglican practice of “putting the beliefs of the Church up for a vote,” the biographer observed.

“Passion For Truth” is the first major biography of Bl. Newman to be published since his beatification in 2010. Its author discussed the late cardinal's life and thought in an Aug. 10 interview, two days after the biography became available as an e-book.

“A big part of the biography is the first part of Newman's life, his process of conversion,” explained Fr. Velez. During this time, “he had the question before him: ‘What is the true Church? What is the fold of Christ?’”

Fr. Velez hopes that “Passion for Truth” will help Anglicans and other non-Catholics understand Newman's journey, while also deepening Catholic readers' faith.

Newman's life and writings, he noted, are “a source of continued help to those who are thinking about their Catholic faith – or thinking about becoming Catholics.”

The Victorian-era cardinal is a favorite of Pope Benedict XVI, who beatified him and has praised his contributions on topics like conscience and doctrinal development. Fr. Velez thinks it is “very likely” Bl. Newman eventually “will be canonized, and then made a Doctor of the Church.”

Born in 1801 and ordained an Anglican clergyman in 1825, Newman caused an uproar in his own day by becoming a Catholic in 1845. In that year's “Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine,” he famously declared: “To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant.”

During his Calvinist-leaning youth, and his later involvement in the high-Church Anglican “Oxford Movement,” Newman had always understood Christianity as a faith founded on revealed dogmatic truths.

In time, he came to acknowledge that this original “deposit of faith” required the safeguard of a living apostolic authority, to distinguish legitimate doctrinal developments from corruptions and errors.

Ordained a Catholic priest in 1846, Newman was named a cardinal in 1879 and died 11 years later. Today, he is the patron of the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, the Catholic jurisdiction set up in 2011 to preserve the Anglican heritage in communion with Rome.

As the ordinariate begins to draw Anglican clergy and laypersons into the Catholic Church, the future of their former communion – and particularly its U.S. branch the Episcopal Church – has been called into question over plunging demographics and doctrinal confusion.

A July 2012 Beliefnet article described the Episcopal Church as “near collapse” following its 2012 general convention, which formally approved same-sex “blessing” ceremonies and a policy on transgender clergy.

During the same convention, the U.S. branch of the Anglican communion voted to sell its administrative headquarters in New York City. The Episcopal Church lost over 200,000 members and 300 parishes from 2006 to 2010, bringing its membership to the lowest level since the 1930s.

The Church of England, the world's flagship Anglican body, also faces issues related to biblical authority and sexual morality, along with a controversy over women bishops. At a July 2011 meeting, leaders heard that aging congregations could render the denomination “no longer functionally extant” by 2030.

This situation, Fr. Velez said, is a far cry from the Victorian-era Anglicanism of Newman's day – which held strongly to many basic Christian teachings on faith and morals, and saw its bishops as possessing authority to teach and govern.

Nevertheless, Newman's critiques of Anglicanism are key to understanding the institution's present crisis, Fr. Velez indicated.

“There are underlying issues that are the root problem, and I think Newman had his finger on two of them,” he observed.

One connection between historic Anglicanism, and its current struggles, is its inability to find grounding for what Newman called the “dogmatic principle.”

Foundational to Newman's understanding of faith, this principle held that the Christian religion was founded on definite eternal truths revealed by God. While these truths could be grasped more deeply over time, through a process of development, they were not subject to any essential dispute or revision.

In both his Anglican and Catholic periods, Newman dedicated himself “to fighting what he called ‘liberalism in religion,’” Fr. Velez noted. This is the “emptying of religion” that occurs “when people believe in what they want,” looking on faith and morals merely as matters of taste and opinion.

Within contemporary Anglicanism, where “revealed truths are put to a vote” and revised, there has been “a very serious undoing of the basic religious beliefs and truths,” Fr. Velez said.

A related question faced by Newman before his conversion, and by Anglicans in the present day, concerns the “apostolicity” of the Church – its continued governance by successors of the apostles, possessing the authority to teach and act in the name of Christ.

“Without that ecclesial authority, the Church's teaching is undermined,” Fr. Velez said – describing the process that has continued since Newman's day. “There is an unraveling of the faith.”

“Newman was worried about that in his time. He was worried about the bishops losing authority and not exercising it.”

As he reflected on Church history, and the process of sorting out true doctrinal developments from errors, Newman came to understand the authority of the Popes was “something constitutive of the Church, something foundational that God had wanted.”

“He realized that the Anglican Church is not what the early Christian Church was, and is missing that papal authority.”

Compelled by his realizations to enter into full communion with the Church of Rome, Newman never looked back – despite facing personal hardships, public attacks, and misunderstandings between himself and others within the Catholic Church.

Such difficulties “are inevitable in human relations,” and can be expected within the human reality of God's Church, Fr. Velez noted. Through them, Newman learned to exercise charity, and correct his own personal faults.

“None of these difficulties that Newman experienced, made him doubt that he had made the right decision to become a Roman Catholic,” Fr. Velez recalled.

Upon becoming Catholic, Newman felt “like a ship coming to port, from a boisterous ocean, and he felt safe. He never had any doubts of what the Catholic Church taught.”

Above all, the biographer said, he “realized that the most fundamental thing in life is to follow Jesus Christ in his Church – regardless of people's mistakes, and sins, and one's own sins.”