

Newman and Littlemore – his love for the poor

Sr. Mary-Birgit Dechant, F.S.O.

“Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society’s most neglected members.”¹



These words of Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* can rightly and easily be applied to the work and life of Blessed John Henry Newman and especially to his work among the poor of Littlemore. Using Newman’s Letters and Diaries this article will present Newman’s association with Littlemore: how he exercised his pastoral duties in this poor hamlet outside Oxford, and how the people of this place remained dear to his heart.

(1) Newman named Vicar of Littlemore

Littlemore became part of Newman’s life when he was appointed Vicar of St Mary the Virgin in 1828. For centuries, Oriel College had provided one of their own fellows as Vicar of St Mary the Virgin. As Littlemore was an outlying village in the parish of St Mary’s, Newman became Vicar of this small hamlet, too.

On Friday 28th March 1828, Newman went with the Provost of Oriel, Edward Hawkins, to see Littlemore for the first time.² *“Littlemore is a straggling street between two and three miles from Oxford extending from Cowley Church across the Henley Road down to the river near Sandford.”³* That is how Newman himself describes the place when he wrote to his Bishop in 1830. There was no church, not even a village school. If people went to Church on Sunday, they either had to walk the three miles to St Mary the Virgin in town or had to go to one of the neighbouring parishes of Iffley, Sandford or Cowley. Littlemore was a very poor place in many ways. Even if the intervening years have seen many changes so that Littlemore is now, more or less, a pleasant place to live, one would not boast of residing there to the townspeople of Oxford.

¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, N. 186.

² Ch. St. DESSAIN (ed.), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vols. I-XXXII, London/Oxford 1961-2007, vol. II, p. 63: From now on abridged e.g. LD II, 63.

³ LD II, 194.

It is hardly the most desirable part of Oxford, and nor does it enjoy a reputation as an elegant centre of culture. Most people know it for the presence of its mental hospital, which opened in the 1850s, rather than for any connection with Blessed John Henry Newman.

Newman took his duties as Vicar very seriously. He was true to the insight he had received after his ordination to the diaconate in 1824: *“I have the responsibility of souls on me to the day of my death.”*⁴ He started to visit his parish two to three times a week. This was an unusual undertaking for an Oxford don and presumably no vicar before him had dedicated so much time and love to his parishioners outside of town. At first, Newman traversed the distance between Oxford and Littlemore on horseback, but later he came to prefer walking or to taking a carriage, called a fly. On his way to Littlemore, he used the time to ponder on his next sermon or to call on parishioners. He soon made a census and counted 452 residents, and discovered that the majority of the children were uneducated and illiterate.

As early as 1828, he asked for permission from Oriel College to build a church at Littlemore. *“My plan is this - ultimately to make Littlemore and St Mary’s practically separate parishes - and at present to provide a person who ... would take Littlemore entirely or almost entirely to himself, having nothing to do with St Mary’s.”*⁵ His request was refused. Littlemore seemed too poor to support a church and a Vicar of its own. So, he rented a room where his congregation could meet. He began to catechize the children and to explain to the servants St Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.⁶ He taught in the house of a Mrs. Birmingham. On 8th February 1829, he happily wrote to his sister Jemima: *“I began my Littlemore evening catechetical lectures last Sunday.”*⁷



In 1830, his mother, also called Jemima, and his two surviving sisters, Harriett and Jemima, moved to Rose Hill, close to Littlemore. They were happy to be near John Henry. They soon got involved in the various parish duties at Littlemore. Newman had a set of rooms in their house and it served as a kind of vicarage for Littlemore. His sisters gathered the children of Littlemore and ran a rudimentary school. They and their mother visited the sick and elderly.

Newman’s brother Frank was concerned that the upkeep of the house in which Newman’s mother and her daughters lived was too expensive and that they led a too luxurious life. Even Newman’s mother was concerned that the house was too much of a financial strain for

⁴ John Henry NEWMAN, *Autobiographical Writings*, London 1955, p. 201.

⁵ LD II, 162.

⁶ LD II, 94.

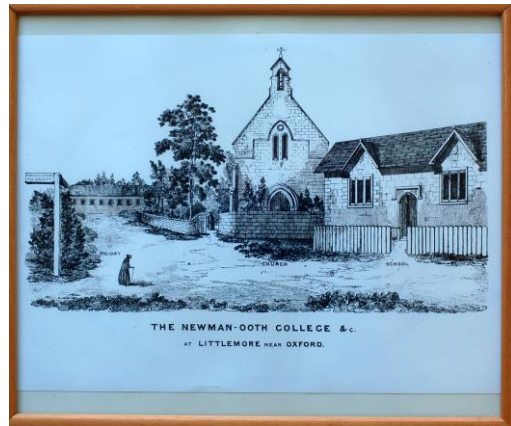
⁷ LD II, 119; see also LD II, 116.

her son. In a very interesting letter to Frank, written on 7th September 1834, Newman, however, defended his decision:

“She [Newman’s mother] does with as few servants as possible - and perhaps your own experience abroad will show you that to dispense with servants altogether and keep one’s own house in order oneself is not the way to improve one’s talents or to do most good. Everyone has his place in society – there is a difference of duties and of persons fitted to them. ‘High’ and ‘low’ are mere names, and invidious ones. I would rather speak, if I could, of right and left hand ranks, all being on a level. When I engage servants, it is a mutual engagement, for the good of all. They do what they are fitted to do, and which I for want of training cannot do – and I in turn do good, first to them, then to others, or at least ought to do. Whatever I give my Mother and Sisters is indeed the first way of viewing it a free gift – [...] - I will affirm that one very great portion of it passes from them in direct charity, another portion in indirect, and the whole of it places them in a position to benefit a number of persons variously whom otherwise they could not benefit. The other day I heard her [Mrs. Newman] lamenting she could not take another servant: you would have said this was ‘the pride of life’; but I happen to know that it was solely with the view of keeping a girl from bad example, and teaching her a servant’s work. Here she would have given away in board (say) twenty pounds a year and got nothing for it.

*... She and my sisters are spreading God’s glory far more than if they lived simply on their own means, and gave away what they had beyond those means in the lump in charity. They are the instruments of temporal good to two hundred people at Littlemore – they teach the children, set an example to the parents, and even when they cannot do all they wish, they make people better who otherwise would become worse:
[...]*

True, they might give up housekeeping and live in lodgings as somewhat cheaper, but then where would be the kitchen for Littlemore, with broth and messes? [...] – in a word, they enable me to spend a large sum upon the poor which I could not spend satisfactory myself. (How can I manage a parish without women?) [...] What could I do better with the money? Give it to some Religious Society, to be spent by strangers in which I had no reason to feel confidence?”⁸



One thing was certain: the people of Littlemore were very grateful for all the Newman family did for them. Forty years later, Anne Mozley, Newman’s sister-in-law, found the memory of both the rector and his family alive in the parish. In 1875, she related to his sister Jemima that

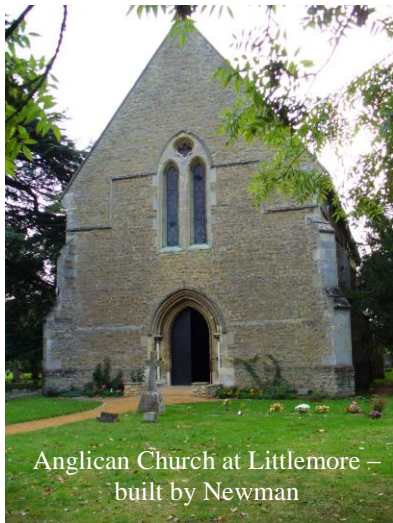
⁸ LD IV, 329 ff.

one parishioner (Martha K.), “*still sees you and Harriett in green silk cloaks, in which you looked so nice. You were her ideals of goodness and taste. It had been an honour for her to help in the kitchen at Rose Bank (to which the family had moved from Rose Hill). [...] Also she was of Newman’s mother’s class, has most devoted recollections of her kindness to people, knows still her taste in needlework, and how particular she was.*”⁹

On one occasion Mrs. Newman, glad that there were so many candidates for Confirmation, rejoiced in “*seeds of promise sown by yourself*”. Summing up she wrote: “*everyone is very grateful and I do hope the people are something better and happier than they were some time ago.*”¹⁰

(2) A Church and a School for Littlemore

In April 1835, Newman’s sisters collected signatures for a petition to Oriel College to build a church: practically all the inhabitants of Littlemore signed it.¹¹ This time the request met with approval. With joy, Newman wrote to his friend Henry Wilberforce, “*I am building a*



chapel at Littlemore. If you know any rich man furnished with ability, I have no objection to be indebted to him. I hope to do it for £500 or £600. The College give ground and £100. Population 470. I want it to hold 200.”¹² Mrs. Newman had the honour of laying the foundation stone of the church on 21st July 1835. In her diary, she wrote, “*A gratifying day. I laid the first stone of the church at Littlemore. The whole village there ... J.H. a nice address.*”¹³ She calls the occasion “*that day of triumph.*” Sadly, she died suddenly on 17th May 1836. Newman commemorated her in the new church with a memorial plaque made by his good friend Richard Westmacott.

Newman decided that the church should have St Mary and St Nicholas as its patrons, as he wanted to keep the link to the life of the Church at the time of the Littlemore Mynchery¹⁴. On 22nd September 1836, the Bishop of Oxford, Richard Bagot, consecrated the church and the graveyard around the church was blessed. It was a day of great joy for Newman, his parishioners and friends. The children, of whom Newman was always fond,

⁹ Anne MOZLEY (Ed.) *Letters and Correspondence of Newman to 1845*, 2 Volumes, Vol. II, p. 438.

¹⁰ Much of this is taken from Maisie WARD, *Young Mr. Newman*, Sheed and Ward, London 1952, pp. 268-271.

¹¹ 295 signatories, “including all but one of the householders”: M. LOBEL (Ed.), *Victoria County History of Oxfordshire*, Vol. 5, London 1957, p. 212.

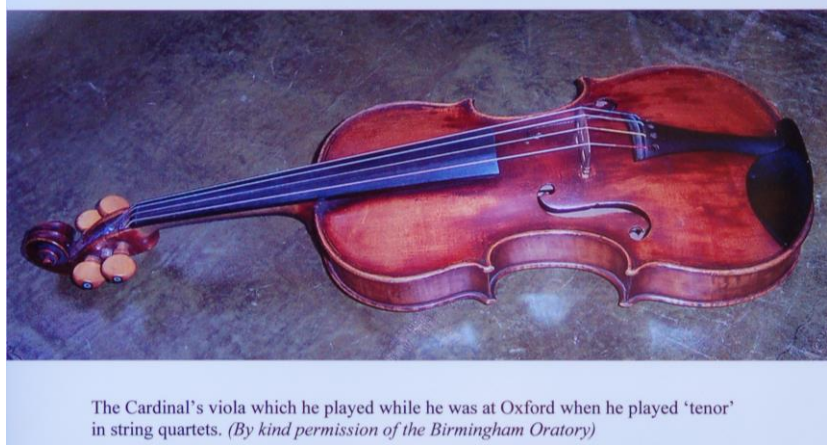
¹² LD V, 64.

¹³ The address can be found in LD V, 104 ff.

¹⁴ In Littlemore a Benedictine convent existed which was dissolved at the reformation. A part of the building has been preserved until today. Newman knew that the chapel of these Sisters had been dedicated to St Mary and St Nicholas. Mynchery is an old English word for monastery.

were given buns.¹⁵ Newman wrote to Keble: “*Everything has been happy and pleasant.*”¹⁶ In the succeeding years, Newman always made the anniversary of the dedication into an impressive feast.

Visitors to the church of St Mary’s and St Nicholas often notice a commemoration plaque at the back of the church, which shows the names of all who donated something towards the building of the church. In this list are mentioned the children of Littlemore. One doubts that they could have contributed very much, but Newman insisted that their names be included – a sign of his love for them. Shortly before the consecration of the church, he wrote in his diaries, “*Walked to Littlemore – to hear children sing.*”¹⁷



The Cardinal's viola which he played while he was at Oxford when he played 'tenor' in string quartets. (By kind permission of the Birmingham Oratory)

Littlemore now had a church. From that time onwards, it also received a hard working curate, as Newman could not give as much time to the village as he found necessary. John Bloxam, a fellow of Magdalen College, moved to Littlemore, residing at the house of a Mr. and Mrs. Barnes, and doing his best to improve the situation of the village. In 1838, a school was built. This school was quite simple and small, but it served its purpose. It is another sign of Newman’s great concern for his parishioners.

Shortly before Lent 1840, Newman informed his brother-in-law Thomas Mozley, “*Tell Harriett I hope to write her soon - but I am very busy just now. I am going up to Littlemore for a while. (Bloxam has resigned the Curacy and Copeland is to be Curate. Meanwhile I want to see how the school is.) And hence I have a good many things to get off my hands here. I am afraid my school mistress drinks - and at best she is a do-nothing - which is a perplexity.*”¹⁸

Newman took Bloxam’s room with Mr. and Mrs. Barnes and dedicated his time to looking after things in the school. At the same time, he set himself a strict programme for Lent: reciting the Breviary, abstaining from food and from his books, which he had left in Oriel. He gave catechism classes on Sunday afternoons, for which he prepared the children during the week. These classes became an attraction for the Oxford dons and other people. He found an old

¹⁵ Cf. LD V, 358.

¹⁶ LD V, 359.

¹⁷ LD V, 357.

¹⁸ LD VII, 248.

violin, tuned it, and used it to teach the children to sing hymns in church. He practiced with them, often twice a week. He wrote to his Aunt, *“I am passing a most happy time. I came up here as a sort of penance during Lent; but though without friends or books, I have as yet had nothing but pleasure. So that it seems a shame to spend Lent so happily.”*¹⁹

(3) Moving to Littlemore

Newman considered moving to Littlemore for good and wrote to some of his friends, confiding a ‘secret’ to them: *“Since I have been up here, an idea has revived in my mind, of which we have before not talked, viz. of building a monastic house in the place, and coming up to live in it myself. It rose in my mind from the feeling which has long been growing on me that my duty as well as pleasure lies more at Littlemore than I have made it. It has long been a distress that I know so little of my Parishioners in Oxford [...] It has pained me much to be preaching and doing little more than preach - knowing and guiding only a few, say about half a dozen: moreover from the circumstances of the case, however little I might wish it, preaching more for persons who are not under my charge, members of the University.”*²⁰

Humble, as he was, Newman does not mention that his preaching had an enormous influence on Oxford and attracted large crowds.

He thought much about the possibility of erecting a *μονη*.²¹ He wrote down his hopes for this *Monastic* house (which had to be big enough to host his extensive library) in a Memorandum²² and admitted to Pusey: *“I am sanguine that if we could once get one set up at Littlemore, it would set the example both in great towns and for female societies. Again, perhaps it might serve as a place to train up men for great towns. Again, it should be an open place, where friends might come for a time if they needed a retreat, or if they wished to see what it was like.”*²³



¹⁹ LD VII, 286.

²⁰ LD VII, 264.

²¹ “place of retreat” (LD VII, 264 footnote 1).

²² Cf. LD VII, 263.

²³ LD VII, 265.

Easter 1840 was celebrated at Littlemore with great solemnity. His sister Jemima and Anne Mozley, had made him a very ornate altar-cloth for the church at his request. Newman used it at the Easter Vigil and wrote to his sister Jemima, "*It looks beautiful ... Indeed we are all so happy that one is afraid of being too happy. We have got some roses, wallflowers, and sweet briar, and the Chapel smells as if to remind one of the Holy Sepulchre.*"²⁴

After the happy Lent in 1840, Newman returned to his rooms in Oriel College. However, he continued to make plans for his future residence at Littlemore. On 20th May 1840, he bought 10 acres of land at Littlemore and soon planted various trees. However, before he could develop his future 'monastery', Newman felt compelled to leave Oxford more quickly than anticipated. The publication of Tract 90 in February 1841 had roused such a great controversy, that he took the lease of the 'Cottages' in College Lane at Littlemore. This consisted of a stable previously used for the Oxford-to-Cambridge coach service, which had been linked to some adjoining cottages. The former stable was big enough to accommodate his extensive and valuable library. The cottages could serve for him and for friends, Oxford students, and possibly, for candidates for the ministry in the Anglican Church who would like to share his life for a shorter or longer period. During the winter, the necessary work of conversion, which Newman supervised, was undertaken. He lived, partly, in St George's, a house close to the Cottages. In Lent, his books were transported to Littlemore. On 20th April 1842, we read in his Letters and Diaries, "*Came up to Littlemore in evening in fly, sleeping for first time in my own cell.*"²⁵ Soon afterwards, John Dobrée Dalgairns moved in. Together they drew up a schedule for their day.

Newman was happy to spend his time in prayer, in studies, in companionship with his friends and of course in the pastoral duties of Littlemore. He now really had established a parsonage and had become even closer to his parishioners who meant so much to him.

In summer 1843 William Lockhart, one of Newman's friends who was sharing his semi-monastic life at Littlemore, decided to be received into the Catholic Church. Newman was shocked. He had not expected this. At the same time, his own doubts about the legitimacy of the Anglican Church were growing stronger and stronger. Newman decided to resign his appointment as Vicar of St Mary the Virgin and, therefore, of Littlemore as well. On 25th September 1843, the day on which the anniversary of the consecration of Littlemore Church was celebrated with great solemnity, he preached his famous farewell sermon 'The Parting of Friends'. Newman gave frocks and bonnets to all the children as a parting gift.²⁶ Edward Bellasis wrote to his wife describing the whole scene in detail concluding, "*Nothing I can say to you can give you the remotest idea of the sorrowfulness or solemnity of the scene. ... And thus*

²⁴ LD VII, 312.

²⁵ LD VIII, 508.

²⁶ Cf. LD IX, 534.

the services of the greatest man of our times, the acutest and most laborious, and most energetic of the sons of the English Church is lost to us, he retires into lay communion."²⁷

We know little of his parishioners' reaction to this development, but we do know that an old woman remarked soon after his departure, "*We don't seem comfortable now as we used to, I think.*"²⁸ Certainly, for Newman it was a very difficult step to give up the parish and his dear parishioners.

Rev. Charles Page Eden was appointed as the new vicar. He had decidedly different ideas to Newman, and it was a great trial for Newman to have Eden as his successor. Others felt this too. James Mozley wrote, "*How revolting that St. Mary's and Littlemore must come into Eden's hands. When one remembers how it was built, and who laid the foundation stone, and everything about it, it certainly seems to deserve a better fate.*"²⁹

(4) Newman as a layman in Littlemore

'The Cottages' were no longer a parsonage. They were only a place where a group of men prayed, studied and sought the Lord's will and His truth. Newman's conviction, that the Church of Rome was the Church of antiquity, continued to grow in him.

On 24th June 1844, a visitor arrived at what Newman and his companions now referred to as 'The College'. The Passionist Priest, Dominic Barberi, came to pay a visit to his friend John Dalgairns, one of the young men living with Newman at Littlemore. Barberi and Dalgairns went to Newman's cottage to see the chapel where they prayed together and to talk with the famous Oxford preacher. Newman had already heard about the missionary life of Barberi in England and received him with great cordiality. In Newman's Diaries of that day, we read only the following words: "*Father Dominic called.*"³⁰



However, these few terse words belie the profound impact this visitor was to have. On the day before Newman was received into the Church he wrote in one of his letters about Barberi, "*I saw him here for a few minutes on St. John Baptist's day last year. He is a simple, holy man; and withal gifted with remarkable powers.*"³¹ In their short encounter, Newman sensed that this man was filled with holiness and

²⁷ E. BELLASIS, *Memorials of Mr Serjeant Bellasis. 1800 - 1873*, Burns Oates and Washbourne LTD, London 1923, third edition, p. 60.

²⁸ Maisie WARD, *Young Mr. Newman*, Sheed and Ward, London 1952, p. 271.

²⁹ LD IX, 492 f.

³⁰ LD X, 285.

³¹ LD XI, 6.

since his first conversion at the age of 15, holiness had always been Newman's ideal. Furthermore, Newman and his friends in the Oxford Movement knew that holiness was one of the proofs of the authenticity of the Church. In a famous letter to his friend Bloxam, Newman had written on 23th February 1841 concerning Roman Catholics: *"If they want to convert England, let them go barefooted into our manufacturing towns, let them preach to the people, like St Francis Xavier, let them be pelted and trampled on—and I will own that they can do what we cannot; I will confess that they are our betters far – I will (though I could not on that ground join them) I would gladly incur their reproach. This is to be Catholics, this is to secure a triumph. Let them use the proper arms of the Church, and they will prove that they are the Church by using them."*³² Barberi lived exactly what Newman had envisaged as an ideal. When Newman saw his ideas been made real in the life and person of a Catholic priest, his bias against the Catholic Church began to dissipate. Barberi played a great part in Newman's coming into full communion with the Catholic Church. Barberi had not only vowed poverty as a Passionist, but he lived poverty and he loved to serve the poor. Newman, who had served the poor at Littlemore, was won over to the Catholic Church by this living example of love for the poor.

It is worthwhile mentioning that Barberi himself was impressed by the way of life of those who lived at 'The College'. He noted the place breathed *"an air of the strictest poverty, such as I have never witnessed in any religious house in Italy or France, or in any other country where I have been. A Capuchin monastery would appear a great palace when compared with Littlemore."*³³

In September 1845, Newman sent his book 'An Essay on Development of Christian Doctrine' to the publisher. On 3th October, he resigned his fellowship at Oriel College. Barberi



to serve as he had

arrived at Littlemore on 8th October about one hour before midnight, soaking wet from the heavy rain all day long. The events of that evening and of the next day, when Newman was received into the Church, are well known. Newman entered a Church that he knew was rich and abundant in grace, but that in England at least was made up mostly of poor immigrants. It was the Church he had come to love. It was the Church he wanted served the poor of his parish.

³² LD VIII, 42.

³³ Denis GWYNN, *Father Dominic Barberi*, London, Burns and Oates 1947, p. 175.

The last night Newman spent at Littlemore was the night of 21st February (his birthday) 1846. On Sunday, 22nd February, he went to Mass at St Clement's for the last time. Newman had to tear himself away from Littlemore, as he himself testified: "*As you suppose, it was of course a very trying thing to me to quit Littlemore - I quite tore myself away - and could not help kissing my bed, and mantelpiece, and other parts of the house. I have been most happy there, though in a state of suspense.*"³⁴ To Mrs. Bowden he wrote, "*In spite of my having been in such doubt and suspense, it has been the happiest time of my life, because so quiet.*"³⁵ In a letter to Henry Wilberforce he put the question: "*Shall I ever see Littlemore again?*"³⁶ He saw it only twice more.

(5) Newman's returns to Littlemore and his continuing contact with former parishioners

On 16th June 1868 Newman visited Littlemore with his close friend Ambrose St John. They took the train from Birmingham to Abingdon from where they made their way to Littlemore. Newman visited some of his old parishioners and was happy to see how Littlemore had become 'green'³⁷. He wrote the next day, "*It is a great pleasure to me to have seen Littlemore once again - and to see so many persons whom I have not seen for so long - and to see how beautiful the place looks. It will be a pleasant picture in my memory.*"³⁸ To William John Copeland, his former curate at Littlemore, he wrote about his visit: "*Crawley's is a really pretty place - the Church is greatly improved - and the Vicarage very nice. We saw Mrs. Palmer, young Humphries and his second wife (a Boswell) - old Mrs. Humphries and her daughter - Martha King - Charles Pollard's nephew - Mr. Whitlock.*"³⁹ To Henry Wilberforce he told about the visit: "*It was 40 years at the beginning of this year, since I became Vicar. Alas, their memory of me was in some cases stronger than my memory of them. They have a great affection for my Mother and Sisters - tho' it is 32 years since they went away.*"⁴⁰

We know that one of his parishioners at Littlemore was intrepid enough to visit Newman at the Birmingham Oratory: Richard Humphries who had been parish clerk of Littlemore, while Newman was Vicar. Newman had taught him as a young boy to play the violin and had married him to his first wife, Mary Hanks, at St. Mary the Virgin in 1839. One day Richard Humphries noticed the advertisement of a cheap trip to Birmingham, and made up his mind to avail himself of the offer, and go and see his 'dear vicar', although a journey by train was very new to him. On arrival at the Oratory, he rang the bell, and asked the porter for Mr. Newman. He was told that

³⁴ LD XI, 132.

³⁵ LD XI, 126.

³⁶ LD XI, 125.

³⁷ LD XXIV, 89.

³⁸ LD XXIV, 87.

³⁹ LD XXIV, 94 f.

⁴⁰ LD XXIV, 89.

Mr. Newman was not usually disturbed at that hour. “Well,” he said, “*will you take him a message? Tell him that Richard from Littlemore has come to ask how he is.*” He had not to wait long. Newman did not even wait to put on his boots, but came along in his slippers, and said, ‘*Come in, come in, and tell me all about my dear people.*’ So, Richard Humphries went in, and had a long talk with his former vicar and was invited to stay for dinner with the Fathers. Newman notes this visit in his diary on 3th September 1872.⁴¹

Newman kept contact with some of his former parishioners even if he did not visit them. On 26th September 1877, for example he wrote, “*I was glad to hear so good an account of Mrs. Crawley – and I have had an opportunity to thank her for her kind message by a friend of hers who was here yesterday. I never forget the 22nd the day on which that poor little chapel was opened, in 1836, what a time ago!*”⁴²

The Woodmasons of Littlemore were another family with whom Newman kept up a correspondence. They had followed Newman into the Catholic Church in 1845 with most of their children. He wrote to Copeland on 21st April 1878 about one of the daughters of the family: “*As to Miss Woodmason, from what you say, the case is very deplorable. Has she eaten up her capital? An almshouse (for ladies) would be the thing to look for, would not it? If immediate want is to be met, I will glad [sic] give something – but she seems to want an annuity.*”⁴³

On 10th September 1878, he returned to Littlemore once more but only for a few hours.⁴⁴

(6) Conclusion

“*If the whole Church takes up this missionary impulse, she has to go forth to everyone without exception. But to whom should she go first? When we read the Gospel we find a clear indication: not so much our friends and wealthy neighbours, but above all the poor and the sick, those who are usually despised and overlooked, ‘those who cannot repay you’ (Lk 14:14).*”⁴⁵

Blessed John Henry Newman put into practice what Pope Francis calls us to do. This is obvious from his concern for the people of Littlemore, which sprang from his faith and surrender to God and his fidelity to the Gospel.

© International Centre of Newman Friends
Via Aurelia 257, 00165 Rome

⁴¹ LD XXVI, 161. The visit is as well mentioned in an article of 1899 in *The Oxford Time* (cf. LD VIII, 625).

⁴² LD XXVIII, 239.

⁴³ LD XXVIII, 348.

⁴⁴ LD XXVIII, 400.

⁴⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, N. 48.

newman.roma@newman-friends.org
www.newmanfriendsinternational.org