

“They loved Jesus...”

Mother Julia Verhaeghe and Blessed John Henry Newman

The Spiritual Family The Work has been involved in spreading knowledge of the person and writings of Bl. John Henry Cardinal Newman for more than 40 years. What was the connection between Mother Julia (1910-1997), the Foundress of The Spiritual Family The Work, and Blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890)?

1. Mother Julia's encounter with Cardinal Newman

When The Spiritual Family The Work began in 1938, Mother Julia did not know anything about Cardinal Newman. This happened more than twenty 20 years later. In the 1960s, The Work went through a period of tests and trials. A priest gave Mother Julia a biography of Newman to read and a little later a Newman anthology entitled: *Uit de ziel van Kardinaal Newman. Bloemlezing uit zijne werken*. After having read Newman's own words, Mother Julia said to her Sisters: “*I have found a soul brother.*”¹ She was deeply impressed by both his personality and his writings and felt confirmed in the charism that God had entrusted to her. Looking back to this encounter with Newman Mother Julia wrote many years later: “*I was deeply touched, so that I kept a permanent veneration for Cardinal Newman und asked him often for faithfulness to the holy faith and the Church.*”



Around that time, through a member of the community, Sr. Maria Katharina Strolz, The Work came into contact with the Newman scholars Franz Michel Willam from Austria, and Fr Nicholas Theis from Luxembourg, who had organised several Newman conferences. In the 1970s Mother Julia, together with the Sisters' Council, asked Sr. Lutgart Govaert to obtain a PhD in dogmatic theology at the Gregorian University in Rome. She eventually wrote her thesis on the Mariology of Blessed John Henry Newman.

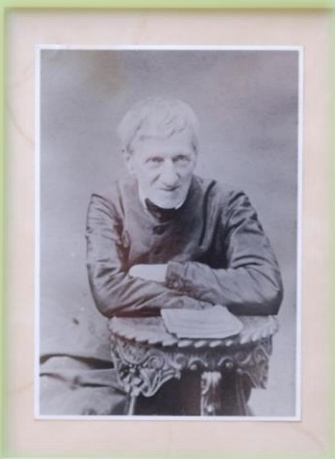
Several Newman scholars participated at the public defence of her thesis in 1973. They were invited to the community in Rome's Via Aurelia to celebrate Sr Lutgart's achievement. During the conversation, a Sister asked if any of the two specialists had the programme of the Newman Symposium which would take place in Rome in the Holy Year 1975. Nobody had any information.

¹ The texts by Mother Julia are to be found in the archives of The Spiritual Family The Work in Bregenz (Austria).

Therefore the Sisters got in contact with Fr Theis to ask him for the conference programme if he was the organizer.

He replied that he had no knowledge of such a conference, but that it was a good idea, and that he would be glad if the Sisters enkindled themselves a fire for Newman in Rome and organised such a symposium.

Mother Julia was at that time staying in Innsbruck. She was very sick. When the Sisters asked if they should take up the suggestion to organize a Newman Symposium, she did not hesitate a moment and answered: *“We have to do it, God himself will be the guarantee.”* She was convinced that it was God's will that the community should undertake this venture.



The Sisters set themselves to organise the symposium in faith and trust. At that time, the community was quite small and had never organised a symposium. It was the great intention of the Sisters to do their work in the spirit of Newman, of the Church and the charism, e.g. in union with members of the hierarchy, with the Oratorians in Birmingham and with various Newman scholars. The event, which eventually took place in April 1975, aroused great interest among cardinals, bishops, priests, seminarians and lay faithful. Pope Paul VI gave an audience to the participants who came from about twenty different countries.

After the conference, Cardinal Raimondi, the then Prefect for the Congregation of Saints, asked the community to establish a permanent Newman Centre in Rome and to help in the promotion of Newman's Cause. Since then The Work has contributed in the task of making Newman better known. Other Newman Centres were established in Austria, Hungary and Littlemore Oxford, at the very place where Newman was received into the Church. Mother Julia followed the development of the Newman apostolate of The Work by her prayer and encouragement until her death on 29 August 1997.

What are the main points in which the thoughts and hearts of Mother Julia and Newman met so that she saw in him a “soul brother”?

2. The three fundamentals of true life

The Church has one main criterion to discern if a person was a Saint or not: he or she must stand the test if he or she lived faith, hope and love up to a heroic degree. These qualities were attributed to Cardinal Newman in January 1991, and he was later beatified on 19 September 2010.

The conscious acceptance of the fundamental importance of a life in faith, hope and love is a central part in the charism of The Work. Mother Julia said: *“Faith, hope and love are the roots of the spiritual life”*. She exhorted the members of The Work to be faithful to these three theological virtues, which she also called ‘the three pillars’ or ‘the three fundamentals of true life’. She described the interior dispositions of the mind that foster their growth in various ways, but especially in the following words:

*“To venture life peacefully in faith
and not to brood selfishly.*

*To trust joyfully in God
without engaging in fruitless
arguments and disputes.*

*To serve in gratitude and love
without damaging unity through unkind criticism”.*



She would not have felt so close to Newman who lived faith, hope and love to a heroic degree if she had not surrendered herself to the Lord in a similar way. It was in the understanding of faith, hope and love that the minds of Mother Julia and Cardinal Newman met. Newman himself put it in the following way: *“And yet, though we have no right to judge others, but must leave this to God, it is very certain that a really holy man, a true saint, though he looks like other men, still has a sort of secret power in him to attract others to him who are like-minded, and to influence all who have any thing in them like him. And thus it often becomes a test, whether we are like-minded with the Saints of God, whether they have influence over us.”*² The following thoughts hope to clarify the claim, that Bl. John Henry Newman and Mother Julia were like-minded.

² John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons (=PPS) Vol IV*, Longmans, Green & Co, London 1909, 244.

3. A lively faith in God – a purified mind

Mother Julia had a deep understanding of the human person, of the conditions in which people live and are fostered or hindered in their life of faith. Through her own way of conversion in which the Lord led her, she perceived more and more that the obstacles to faith are not so much due to situations and people around us, as much as they might influence us, but to our own selfishness which puts up barriers between God and the soul.

She put the striving for this growth in faith in this way: *“To venture life peacefully in faith and not to brood selfishly.”* Our self-centeredness makes ourselves, and not God, the centre of our lives. This wrong attitude blinds us and preclude trust in God. It makes us ‘brood’ about ourselves and closes us interiorly up. She saw that the test of faith is hidden in daily life, in deeds built on faith or as she would say in “acts of faith” by which we forget ourselves and our own ideas and human thoughts and dare to follow God and his ways which often differ from ours.

The name The Work refers to the gospel of St John. In John 17:4 Jesus speaks about the work that the Father gave him to do and in John 6:29 Jesus teaches his disciples that *“This is working for God: you must believe in the one whom he has sent.”* The work of God is that we surrender ourselves to Christ, the Son of God, and live the obedience of faith about which the Second Vatican Council says: *“The obedience of faith”* (Rom 13:26; see 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6) *“is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him.”*³ Mother Julia invited others through her example and her words to have the courage to live in this obedience of faith, to live in and for God. She exhorted them to be open to God so as to come to a thinking inspired by the Holy Spirit who is the spirit of love.

She saw a danger in our spiritual life: that persons who sincerely strive for perfection tend to be concerned with their own holiness and do not trust enough that Christ is our Redeemer and that he alone can sanctify them and that he wants to free them from all useless occupation with their “ego”, our spiritual thoughts included. She gave helpful advice: *“Serve the Church and God will take care of your holiness.”* By serving the Church, we learn to forget to think about ourselves and learn instead to think of the needs of others, to live in the spirit of love.



³ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Dei Verbum, No. 5

Cardinal Newman, too, experienced many obstacles to faith in the 19th century. His great concern about which he wrote his last major work *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* was about how modern man may come to a deep faith, how he may say 'yes' to God. What he expressed as an elderly man, was already important to him when he preached his inspiring sermon on "Self-contemplation" in the University Church of St Mary the Virgin in 1835: "*Another mischief arising from this self-contemplation is the peculiar kind of selfishness (if I may use so harsh a term) which it will be found to foster. They who make self instead of their Maker the great object of their contemplation will naturally exalt themselves.*"⁴

Even more clearly he wrote in the "*Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification*": "*Divine worship is simply contemplating our Maker, Redeemer, Sanctifier, and Judge: but discoursing, conversing, making speeches, arguing, reading, and writing about religion, tend to make us forget Him in ourselves.*"⁵ Certainly Newman did not want to make an absolute statement that "*discoursing, conversing, making speeches, arguing, reading, and writing about religion*" are basically wrong. But he wanted to point out that at times we put our "ego" too much in the centre by "*discoursing, conversing, making speeches, arguing, reading, and writing about religion*" instead of putting God in the Centre, him who lives in us and who is greater than our thoughts. We tend to forget that all that we are and have, is given by God and that there is no greater value to our lives than the presence of God around us and in us. Faith, he preached, "*looks off from self to Christ; and instead of seeking impatiently for some personal assurance, is set by obedience, saying 'Here am I, send me'.*"⁶

Mother Julia showed, as Newman, the way to leave this erroneous state of mind behind: by acts of loving obedience of faith, by following one's conscience in concrete daily life. Her faith was very practical. It was able to overcome many obstacles. She knew very well how important the formation of conscience is in our Christian life. Our minds have to be orientated according to God's truth that we meet in the Gospel, in the teaching of the Church and in the truth that God awakens in our mind and conscience. She recognised, too, that even people who sincerely strive to come closer to God often choose to follow not the full truth, but – what she called – "*a relative truth*". A truth, which sees things from the "I" still marked by selfishness, from one's own imagination, from our own subjective point of view. Faith, however, is based on objective truth and therefore everybody has to discover and follow this truth if he/she wants to attain interior freedom. Someone who is willing to surpass these "relative truths" will come to experience God very deeply as she expressed: "*God wishes that his voice be taken seriously, in obedience that is inspired by faith. He wishes us to follow his voice in concrete acts of daily life that belongs to Him. God wishes, that*

⁴ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons Vol II*, Longmans, Green & Co, London 1908, 172.

⁵ John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification*, Longmans, Green & Co., London 1908, 337.

⁶ PPS II, 23.

his voice should find its way into our conscience and reach our heart. He wishes to fill our life with his love and mercy”.

It is well known that Cardinal Newman had discovered the importance of conscience for the faith. The fidelity to his conscience led him to find peace in the “haven” of the Church. It made him able to make clear decisions in the complex situations of his life. In his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, and in many of his sermons, he makes clear that conscience makes us experience the echo of the voice of God and that our minds are made to recognize and act according to the truth. In one of his sermons he said: *“This Word within us not only instructs us up to a certain point, but necessarily raises our minds to the idea of a Teacher, an unseen Teacher; and in proportion as we listen to that Word, and use it, not only do we learn more from it, not only do its dictates become clearer, and its lessons broader, and its principles more consistent, but its very tone is louder and more authoritative and constraining. And thus it is, that to those who use what they have, more is given; for beginning with obedience, they go on to the inmate perception and belief of one God.”*⁷

4. Trust in God’s providence – a spirit of poverty

Mother Julia’s life was permeated by a deep trust in God’s providence, as was Newman’s. Both left their “cause” in God’s hands and were not disappointed. Mother Julia witnessed how her community gradually took shape and grew. She was filled with peace and joy of heart even amidst difficulties and trials. She could wait in patience when she felt that the hour of God had not yet come and could act very quickly if she had come to the conviction that this was necessary



to fulfil God’s plan. Mother Julia trusted deeply that God had a plan with the Church as a whole and with her community. This plan is revealed not at once, but step by step. She lived according to Newman’s principle *“one step enough for me”*⁸. She fully agreed with Newman’s famous words: *“God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which he has not commissioned to another. I have my mission – I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next.”*⁹

⁷ John Henry Newman, *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, Longmans, Green and Co., London 1908, 65.

⁸ John Henry Newman, *Verses on Various Occasions*, Longmans, Green and Co., London 1903, 156.

⁹ John Henry Newman, *Meditations and Devotions (=MD)*, edited by Rev. W. P. Neville, Longmans, Green and Co., London 1907, 301.

Mother Julia had a great love for the tradition of the Church and at the same time a keen awareness of the importance of development in the Church. She loved the Fathers of the Church and encouraged her sons and daughters to read and study them attentively. She saw in the First Christians wonderful examples of the Christian life and encouraged the members of The Work to imitate them while taking into account the circumstances of our time.

Newman's sense for the doctrinal development of the Church was a key element on his journey towards the Catholic Church. He saw clearly that the Church always has to preserve the deposit of the faith and at the same has to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit that brings about new developments. He, who had studied the Fathers of the Church in such an intense way, looked up to them as his friends and companions.

Mother Julia taught others to come to a deeper trust in God and defined the virtue of hope in the following way: *“To trust joyfully in God without engaging in fruitless arguments and disputes.”* God has created us as his image and likeness. We are very precious in his eyes. This faith fills us with the hope that God will continue to work in us and through us. However, through original sin and its consequences our trust in God does not come naturally to us. When we find ourselves in a difficult situation, it can be hard for us to stop worrying, to stop weighing in our mind one line of reasoning against another. It can be hard for us to leave behind our fears, doubts and uncertainties and allow God himself to take care of us. We then argue and dispute with ourselves. At times, this takes the joy from our hearts. Therefore, Mother Julia prayed and taught others to pray: *“Grant me a deep trust in your loving Providence. Keep me from all undue anxiety, and help me to control my wishes and desires in a spirit of poverty. Deliver me from all selfish discussing, doubting so that I may no longer hinder or disrupt your eternal plan for me. Grant me your joy.”*

The Foundress of our Spiritual Family saw trust in God's providence linked to a spirit of poverty. She invited the members of The Work to put anything they possessed, be it of material, intellectual or spiritual quality, at the service of God and his Church. We all have received much which we can put at the disposal of others. The more we learn to serve each other in the diversity of vocations, graces and talents, the more the Mystical Body of Christ can grow and we can become happier because we learn to complement others and to be complemented.

The spirit of poverty helps us to acquire a childlike trust in God's merciful love. Hope concerns not only the exterior life with its daily challenges, but very much our interior life, our life with God. It is a hope in God's merciful and just love. On the way of a growing faith, we discover our own imperfection and can be tempted to become discouraged. God, however, does not want our discouragement but our renewed trust. God's love is merciful and just at the same time. Mother Julia spoke about this in countless texts and letters. Newman would have agreed with her. He

himself expressed it in the following words: “*Such is the merciful severity with which He repels us that He may gain us more truly.*”¹⁰

5. A purified love – to be at the service of unity

Mother Julia was filled with a tremendous love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus. She gave herself unconditionally to the Lord and wanted nothing else than to be his instrument. Repeatedly she spoke about His “*unspeakable love*”. Her whole life was an expression of her longing to answer His love generously and selflessly.



John Henry Newman, too, had a deep personal love for the Lord. Something of it we find in the following beautiful words: “*To have a virgin soul means to love nothing on earth in comparison of God, or except of His sake. That soul is virginal which is ever looking for its Beloved who is in heaven, and which sees Him in whatever is lovely upon earth, loving earthly friends very dearly, but in their proper place as His gifts and His representatives ... loving Jesus alone with sovereign affection, and bearing to lose all ... [to] keep Him.*”¹¹ How would he have been able to find his way into the Catholic Church, if he had not been ready “*to lose everything to keep Him?*” His, as Mother Julia’s love, was a very pure, unselfish love, a love which was hidden in his love for and fidelity to prayer, in His untiring commitment for souls, in His labours and struggles. In his Catholic time, his love for Our Lord found expression in his devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He wrote to a friend: “*Ever since I have been a Catholic, I have had a great devotion to the Sacred Heart.*”¹²

Her love of God inspired Mother Julia so much that she was ready to accept many sufferings, both physical and spiritual, as wells as trials freely and in a joyful spirit. Much she had learned from St Paul, so revered and loved by Cardinal Newman, too. Mother Julia found a brother in Cardinal Newman also in this regard: Newman experienced many hardships in his life, many disappointments, many difficulties. His strength like hers was the love of Christ whom both embraced fully. “*Life passes, riches fly away, popularity is fickle, the senses decay, the world changes, friends die. One alone is constant; One alone is true to us; One alone can be true; One alone can be all things to us; One alone can supply our needs; One alone can train us up to our*

¹⁰ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons Vol V*, Longmans, Green & Co, London 1907, 32.

¹¹ MD, 221.

¹² Charles Stephen Dessain and Thomas Gornall (Eds.), *The Letter and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Vol. XXVI, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1974, 352.

*full perfection; One alone can give meaning to our complex and intricate nature; One alone can give us tune and harmony; One alone can form and possess us.”*¹³

Mother Julia wrote once in a letter: *“I strive for perfection in everything. ... I long only to love Jesus sincerely and completely and to strive to make others love Him.... Is it not simple to do every day what he demands, to fulfil one’s duty to God and one’s neighbour faithfully and promptly? Good and beautiful thoughts, feelings and resolutions alone will not bring me peace.”*¹⁴ That she lived up to these words, anybody can testify who was in close contact with her. She was very near to God in prayer and her contemplative life motivated her to fulfil her daily duties with great care, with a sincere striving for perfection.

How much did Newman stress, too, that the fulfilment of one’s daily duties is the expression of our love of God and the way to holiness. *“He is perfect who does the duties of the day perfectly”*¹⁵, he teaches in his *“Short Road to Perfection”*.

Mother Julia’s longing to love Jesus became manifest in her longing for unity. Our Lord’s words, *“Ut omnes unum sint”* – *“That all may be one”* were deeply rooted in her heart and have become a guiding idea for The Spiritual Family The Work. Love of God and love of neighbour are intrinsically interwoven: *“Enlightened and strengthened by giving love we look to our Beloved, in whom we have our being, live and move. True bridal love lives in peace and joy for others, focuses on one’s neighbour in heartfelt complementarity, and sees the most sublime, beautiful and pure features in him, which only love can reveal when it gives itself and gladly gives up everything in joyful readiness for sacrifice.”*



Once she wrote: *“My dear Sisters, I ask you out of love for God and for the sake of the grace of our vocation: Love one another in simplicity and sincerity with the supernatural love proper to those who are consecrated to God.”*¹⁶ She gave to her spiritual family the following practical summary of what it means to live in love: *“To serve in gratitude and love without damaging unity through unkind criticism.”* For us who are marked by original sin, it is very easy to look at others in an unkind criticising way, to be blinded in our judgement by a lack of love. Love does not mean to be blind to the mistakes of others. Love means to serve others so that that which is good in them, can grow, and so that life in community and a communal thinking are possible.

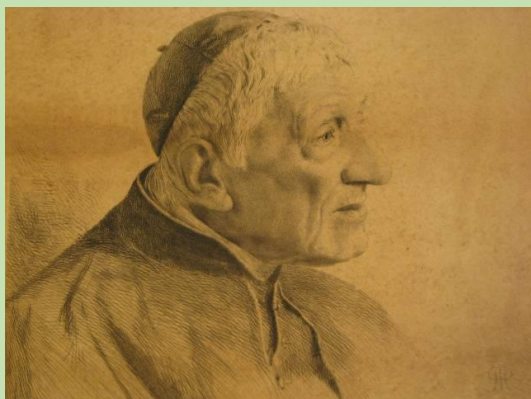
¹³ PPS V, 326.

¹⁴ Mother Katharina Strolz FSO and Fr Peter Willi FSO (Eds.), *She loved the Church. Mother Julia Verhaeghe and the Beginnings of The Spiritual Family The Work*, Family Publications 2009, 82.

¹⁵ MD, 382.

¹⁶ *She loved the Church*, 166.

6. Conclusion



The spiritual kinship between Mother Julia and Cardinal Newman extends to many aspects of their thinking and living, some of which have been mentioned: both of them had a great love for the Church and a deep sense for true developments in her as well as a keen awareness of how much the conscience of every Christian needs to be formed according to truth. They acted in a heroic faith and with amazing trust in God's providence and in the merciful and just love of Our Lord. Above all, they

possessed a burning love for Christ and the Church and an extraordinary readiness to give everything for God. The following words of Mother Julia can be applied to both of them: *“Yes, they loved Jesus in various ways, according to the different degrees of grace received and according to the generosity with which they responded to graces received.”* Blessed John Henry Newman and Mother Julia lived their lives to the full on this earth and now they – in regard to Newman the Church has officially proclaimed it, in regard to our Foundress this is our hope – enjoy the fullness of the life of God in eternity. Their example and prayers help us to come to a greater fullness in our lives, to build them more and more on the three fundamentals of life, the three pillars of faith, hope and love.

Sr. Mary-Birgit Dechant, FSO

© International Centre of Newman Friends
Via Aurelia 257, 00165 Roma
newman.roma@newman-friends.org
www.newmanfriendsinternational.org