

What I learned from Saint John Henry Newman

Tom Hiney



“...the way Newman said it made it clear. Like Saint Paul, he did not use complicated words to achieve this effect – it was his sheer integrity that made you think.”

“A prophet is not without honour except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own house-hold” (Mark 6:4). An Englishman discovering the pertinence and genius of Saint John Henry Newman today soon realises that the latter has been more fully appreciated abroad than at home.

While even his contemporary English enemies acknowledged the clear honesty of *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, and some even followed him across the Tiber as a result, it was probably a sign of our imperial vanity that the controversy

around his conversion was mostly considered in terms of the national trajectory (and the Church of England within that trajectory) than the extent to which Newman was answering wider questions raised by the Western Enlightenment.

It was only after I had begun reading him that I realised Edith Stein (Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) had translated him into German, that many international Catholic thinkers had been profoundly encouraged by him, and that he was being canonized. Having been already convinced about Catholicism by Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, as well as Ratzinger and Chesterton, my brain was catching up, and I was keen to see how Newman explained the thought process by which he came to accept the Communion of Saints and, above all, Marian devotion. I had been helped by (and had begun talking to) Mary long before I had any idea what I was doing, doctrinally speaking. She was a reliable friend, and I was not converting in an emotional vacuum, but in a difficult life in which trustworthy friends were in short supply. Nonetheless, it was confusing when Evangelical friends asked: Isn't Jesus enough for you?

I looked to Newman, and in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* read about his lightbulb moment, which in turn became the rationale which would permit me to delve deeper into encyclicals and other Magisterial writings. Newman explained how he realised that at the Council of Ephesus in 431AD, the Nestorian heresy, by which Christ is asserted to have had distinct human and divine persons, was only rebutted by a full theology of the Incarnation. Mary, the Council stated, was carrying nothing less than God Himself for nine months. She was literally ‘the God-bearer’, the *Theotokos*. Newman now understood as he explored the Church Fathers that Marian devotion was, at its purest, profoundly Christological. Far

from detracting from the status of Christ, her brilliance was due to her closeness to the source of divine light, a closeness it was impossible to think had ended.

Later, now in my capacity as a writer, I was drawn into the powerful landscape of Newman's poem *The Dream of Gerontius*. I was working on a biographical portrait of the Victorian general, Charles Gordon, for a collection of such portraits due to be published this year by Ignatius Press, called *The Song of Ascents*. Gordon was a deeply pious man who had been given a copy of Newman's poem before being sent on a peacekeeping mission to Khartoum on which he died. Fortuitously, his annotated copy of the poem was got out of Khartoum before his death and found its way to the attention of the Catholic composer Edward Elgar. Elgar was a strange man, but he would have a moment of supreme clarity in setting the poem to music, moved by both Gordon's heroism and Newman's poem. From both versions, but especially Elgar's *oratorio*, I appreciated the mercy of purgatory, which had hitherto seemed a rather transactional affair. The '39 Articles' which had bound Newman and me within the Church of England, rejected purgatory - Newman not only opened it up to me, but made it sublime.

Then, after my conversion, I found myself studying a course on Grace at my seminary, The Pontifical Bede College, here in Rome. I was a trained Protestant minister before my conversion, and was of course familiar with the idea of Grace, but I had never considered it alone and systematically. Now that I was doing that, it seemed almost too vast to define. I looked to Newman, and in his *Parochial and Plain Sermons, volume IV* found in 'Sermon 9: The State of Grace' the following insight: 'The glory of the Gospel is, not that it *destroys* the law, but

that it makes it *cease to be a bondage*; not that it gives us freedom from it, but *in it...*' (PS IV, p. 144). For some reason, the penny dropped with that insight. Surely, it was no more than either Saint Paul or my poor teacher had already said, but the way Newman said it made it clear. Like Saint Paul, he did not use complicated words to achieve this effect – it was his sheer integrity that made you think.

I must add here with all sincerity that it was a visit to Littlemore in Oxford and doing 'the Newman Walk' in Rome, both thanks to the hospitality of the sisters, priests and brothers of The Spiritual Family The Work, which brought Newman the man alive for me. Without engaging the heart and the imagination, and above all without prayer, even the most devotional reading can become dry. I am profoundly grateful to the members of The Work, who brought Newman's story alive for me in real places and actual history, as well as for the witness of their lives, and that of the saint who continues to sound so reasonable and true.

About the Author: Tom Hiney, born 1970 in London, is a journalist who has written for the *Spectator* and the *London Observer* and is the author of several books. He served as an Anglican minister, converted to Catholicism in 2020 and is now preparing for ordination to the priesthood.



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