



INTERNATIONAL CENTRE of NEWMAN FRIENDS



John Henry Newman and Benedict XVI: On the Friendship between two Giants in Faith

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Benedict XVI died on 31 December 2022, a shepherd who will go down in Church history as a theologian pope. In his modest way, he repeatedly emphasised that he is not a Newman expert and that he has not studied his writings thoroughly. He was, though, one of those theologians who looked up to Cardinal Newman throughout his life with admiration. He was inspired by Newman's thinking and recognised his outstanding relevance for our time, bringing it into words. A deep spiritual friendship connected him with the great English scholar.

1. First encounters with Newman

In 1946, after the turmoil of the Second World War, Joseph Ratzinger entered the Freising seminary. Three personalities introduced him to Newman in the early years of his studies. First, there was Alfred Läßle, an older student who was assigned as Prefect to the young theologians in the seminary. He and Joseph Ratzinger soon became friends. Before the war began, Läßle had started working on a dissertation on Newman's theology of conscience, and now took up this topic with renewed enthusiasm. His insights into Newman had a deep impression on the younger students: "For us at that time, Newman's teaching



Figure 1: Benedict XVI meets Newman. Painting by Timothy McLaughlin.

on conscience became an important foundation for theological personalism, which was drawing us all in its sway. Our image of the human being as well as our image of the Church was permeated by this point of departure. We had experienced the claim of a totalitarian party, which understood itself as the fulfilment of history and which negated the conscience of the individual. One of its leaders had said: 'I have no conscience. My conscience is Adolf Hitler.' The appalling devastation of humanity that followed was before our eyes. So it was liberating and essential for us to know that the 'we' of the Church does not rest on a cancellation of conscience, but that, exactly the opposite, it can only develop from conscience. Precisely because Newman interpreted the existence of the human being from conscience, that is, from the relationship between God and the soul, was it clear that this personalism is not individualism, and that being bound by conscience does not mean being free to make random choices; the exact opposite is the case."¹

The following year, the young seminarian met a second Newman expert: "When I continued my studies in Munich in 1947, I found a well read and enthusiastic follower of Newman in the Fundamental Theologian, Gottlieb Söhngen, who was my true teacher in theology. He opened up the *Grammar of Assent* to us and in doing so, the special manner and form of certainty in religious knowledge."² Joseph Ratzinger wrote his post-doctoral thesis under Professor Söhngen, a great expert on Newman.

A few years later he was struck by an article published by Professor Heinrich Fries in connection with the jubilee of the Council of Chalcedon (451): "Here I found access to Newman's teaching on the development of doctrine, which I regard along with his doctrine on conscience as his decisive contribution to the renewal of theology. With this he had placed the key in our hand to build historical thought into theology, or much more, he taught us to think historically in theology and so to recognise the identity of faith in all developments."³

Conscience, certainty of faith, and development: these three basic categories of Newman's theology found fertile ground and a lively echo from an early age in Joseph Ratzinger's thinking.

¹ JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER, *Newman is one of the great teachers of the Church*, Lecture given on April 28, 1990, in: MARIA KATHARINA STROLZ/MARGARETE BINDER, *John Henry Newman. Lover of Truth*, Rome 1991, 142.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

2. Expressions of spiritual friendship

For many decades, Joseph Ratzinger maintained contact with the International Centre of Newman Friends: "To see sisters who are seriously interested in John Henry Newman and, at the same time, have a great love for the kitchen, I found this combination very original!"⁴ With these words he described in retrospect his first encounter with the Newman Centre on September 28, 1975. This meeting for Professor Joseph Ratzinger, who was then in Rome for a meeting of the International Theological Commission, started a close friendship and cooperation with the sisters of the Spiritual Family The Work. They had organised the first Newman symposium in Rome (April 3-8, 1975). A little later, they were asked by Cardinal Luigi Raimondi, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, to continue their work of promoting the knowledge of Newman's life, thought and spirituality for the good of the Church. This is how the International Centre of Newman Friends was born. When Cardinal Ratzinger moved to Rome in 1982 as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he repeatedly participated in events at the Newman Centre. He celebrated services with Newman Friends, praying for good progress in the process of Newman's beatification. He lectured on the great English theologian at conferences and congresses. He regularly visited the Newman Centre, thus becoming a friend of The Work, and became acquainted with the spirituality of this community founded by Mother Julia Verhaeghe. At the Thanksgiving Mass for the papal recognition of The Work on November 10, 2001, he said in the homily at St. Peter's Basilica: "It is not by chance, I think, that The Work considers itself a friend of Newman, with his motto 'Cor ad cor loquitur'. Mother Julia thought from the heart and knew the Heart of Jesus, this pierced Heart, which is the source of the Covenant, the source of our life, from the heart."⁵



Figure 2: Mother Julia Verhaeghe, founder of The Spiritual Family The Work. Photo: FSO

On the subject of the doctrine of conscience, which is particularly controversial in the current discussion, Joseph Ratzinger dealt in more detail with Newman's position and updated his approach. In a study of the relationship between conscience and truth, he starts from the fact that conscience today is often identified with subjective certainty and detached from the objective claims of truth. This results, however, in man not becoming free, but only too quickly, a slave to his own self-righteousness or to the pressure of public opinion. In this context, Newman's concept of conscience is of great relevance: "Conscience for Newman does not mean that the subject is the standard vis-à-vis the claims of authority in a truthless world, a world that lives with a compromise between the claims of the subject and the claims of the social order. Much more than that, conscience signifies the perceptible and demanding presence of the voice of truth in the subject himself. It is the overcoming of mere subjectivity in the encounter of the inferiority of man with the truth from God."⁶ Undoubtedly, man must always follow his conscience. Acting against conscience is sin. Conscience, however, does not mean that each person determines his own

⁴ HERMANN GEISSLER, *Benedict XVI and the Newman Centre*, in: <https://www.newmanfriendsinternational.org/en/benedict-xvi-and-newman/>.

⁵ STROLZ MARIA KATHARINA/WILLI PETER, *She loved the Church. Mother Julia Verhaeghe and the Beginnings of The Spiritual Family The Work*, Oxford 2009, p. 19f.

⁶ JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER, *Conscience and Truth. Keynote address of the Tenth Bishops' Workshop of the National Catholic Bioethics Center, on: "Catholic Conscience: Foundation and Formation," February 1991*, in: ID., *On Conscience*, San Francisco 2007, 25.

standards, but that he opens himself in his innermost being to what is good and true, to God, orienting himself accordingly. As Newman shows through his life and thought, conscience is the advocate of truth in man's heart.

Newman was also a real role model in life for Cardinal Ratzinger. When Peter Seewald once asked him whether he was "a man of conscience", he replied, "I try to be. I'm not bold enough to claim that I am. But it does seem to me very important not to put seeking approval or accommodating the feelings of the group above the truth. That's always a big temptation. The appeal of conscience can, of course, shift into obstinacy, in which you think you always have to be against everything. But, understood in the proper sense, a man who listens to his conscience and for whom the truth, that he has recognised, the good, is above approval and acceptance, is really an ideal and model to me. And personalities such as Thomas More, Cardinal Newman, and other great witnesses [...] are great examples for me."⁷

Cardinal Ratzinger brought up a second aspect of proximity to Newman. Seewald recalled that it was repeatedly claimed that "there were two Ratzingers: one before Rome, the progressive Ratzinger, and one in Rome, the conservative Ratzinger and strict guardian of the faith". The cardinal replied: "[...] the basic decision of my life is continuous, that I believe in God, in Christ, in the Church, and try to orient my life accordingly. This decision unfolds in the process of life, and in that sense I think it's also good that it didn't freeze at some point or another. [...] I don't deny that there has been development and change in my life, but I hold firmly that it is a development and change within a fundamental identity and that I, precisely in changing, have tried to remain faithful to what I have always had at heart. Here I agree with Cardinal Newman, who says that to live is to change, and that the one who was capable of changing has lived much."⁸



Figure 3: Cross of Saint J. H. Newman and signature of Pope Benedict XVI in the Birmingham Oratory. Photo: FSO

It was a great joy for Benedict to be able to beatify Newman in 2010 because the late Pope saw in him a spiritual friend, an inspiring theologian and a true role model. At the beginning of his pontificate, he had decided to delegate in most cases the celebration of beatifications. He personally beatified only two outstanding figures: John Paul II and John Henry Newman. This fact alone shows his deep appreciation for Cardinal Newman. To duly honour this man of God, he travelled to Great Britain, led an impressive prayer

vigil in London's Hyde Park the evening before, and beatified Newman during a solemn Eucharistic celebration in Birmingham on September 19, 2010. In Hyde Park, he expressed his joy at Newman's beatification to a large crowd of mostly young people, with these words: "This is an evening of joy, of immense spiritual joy, for all of us. We are gathered

⁷ *Ibid.*, *Salt of the earth. The Church at the end of the Millennium. An interview with Peter Seewald*, San Francisco 1997, 67f.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 115f.

here in prayerful vigil to prepare for tomorrow's Mass, during which a great son of this nation, Cardinal John Henry Newman, will be declared Blessed. How many people, in England and throughout the world, have longed for this moment! It is also a great joy for me, personally, to share this experience with you. As you know, Newman has long been an important influence in my own life and thought, as he has been for so many people beyond these isles. The drama of Newman's life invites us to examine our lives, to see them against the vast horizon of God's plan, and to grow in communion with the Church of every time and place: the Church of the apostles, the Church of the martyrs, the Church of the saints, the Church which Newman loved and to whose mission he devoted his entire life."⁹

3. Importance of Newman for our time

Benedict XVI spoke on several occasions, around the time of the beatification, about Newman's lasting relevance for the Church in the 21st century. He referred above all to four central aspects of the English scholar's message, which were also close to his heart.

The first aspect he mentioned was the constant need for conversion to faith in the living God. Recalling Newman's first conversion at the age of 15, he commented: "Until that moment, Newman thought like the average men of his time and indeed like the average men of today, who do not simply exclude the existence of God, but consider it as something uncertain, something with no essential role to play in their lives. What appeared genuinely real to him, as to the men of his and our day, is the empirical, matter that can be grasped. This is the 'reality' according to which one finds one's bearings. The 'real' is what can be grasped, it is the things that can be calculated and taken in one's hand. In his conversion, Newman recognised that it is exactly the other way round: that God and the soul, man's spiritual identity, constitute what is genuinely real, what counts. These are much more real than objects that can be grasped. This conversion was a Copernican revolution. What had previously seemed unreal and secondary was now revealed to be the genuinely decisive element. Where such a conversion takes place, it is not just a person's theory that changes: the fundamental shape of life changes. We are all in constant need of such conversion: then we are on the right path."¹⁰ Newman emphasised again and again that it is important to put faith in God first and to "realise" it in everyday life, namely, to let it shape and transform our entire lives. Recalling this primacy of God was also an essential point in Benedict XVI's pontificate. "I was conscious," he said in retrospect, "that my task was of another kind: that I must try above all else to show what faith means in the contemporary world, and further, to highlight the centrality of faith in God, and give people the courage to have faith, courage to live concretely in the world with faith."¹¹ This is the best answer to the widespread God crisis of our days.

Connected to this is the second aspect, namely the right understanding of conscience, which Benedict XVI saw as the driving force behind Newman's conversion. But what is conscience? "In modern thinking, the word 'conscience' signifies that for moral and religious questions, it is the subjective dimension, the individual, that constitutes the final authority for decision. The world is divided into the realms of the objective and the subjective.

⁹ BENEDICT XVI., *Address at the Prayer Vigil on the Eve of the Beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman*, September 18, 2010.

¹⁰ ID., *Address on the occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia*, December 20, 2010.

¹¹ ID., *Last testament in his own words with Peter Seewald*, Bloomsbury 2017, 4.

To the objective realm belong things that can be calculated and verified by experiment. Religion and morals fall outside the scope of these methods and are therefore considered to lie within the subjective realm. Here, it is said, there are in the final analysis no objective criteria. The ultimate instance that can decide here is therefore the subject alone, and precisely this is what the word 'conscience' expresses: in this realm only the individual, with his intuitions and experiences, can decide. Newman's understanding of conscience is diametrically opposed to this. For him, 'conscience' means man's capacity for truth: the capacity to recognize precisely in the decision-making areas of his life – religion and morals – a truth, *the truth*. At the same time, conscience – man's capacity to recognize truth – thereby imposes on him the obligation to set out along the path towards truth, to seek it and to submit to it wherever he finds it. Conscience is both capacity for truth and obedience to the truth which manifests itself to anyone who seeks it with an open heart. The path of Newman's conversions is a path of conscience – not a path of self-asserting subjectivity but, on the contrary, a path of obedience to the truth that was gradually opening up to him.¹² Newman shows, and Cardinal Ratzinger has taken up and deepened this aspect, that conscience, at its very core, is not the voice of one's own self, but the echo of the voice of God, "the aboriginal Vicar of Christ"¹³. Recognising this voice and obeying it is what matters.

The third aspect, which follows almost automatically from what has been said, is the central importance of the question of truth. Every person is called to seek the truth, to follow it and to pass it on. Newman is a fascinating role model in this regard:

"At the end of his life, Newman would describe his life's work as a struggle against the growing tendency to view religion as a purely private and subjective matter, a question of personal opinion. Here is the first lesson we can learn from his life: in our day, when an intellectual and moral relativism threatens to sap the very foundations of our society, Newman reminds us that, as men and women made in the image and likeness of God, we were created to know the truth, to find in that truth our ultimate freedom and the fulfilment of our deepest human aspirations. In a word, we are meant to know Christ, who is himself 'the way, and the truth, and the life' (Jn 14:6).

Newman's life also teaches us that passion for the truth, intellectual honesty and genuine conversion are costly. The truth that sets us free cannot be kept to ourselves; it calls for testimony, it begs to be heard, and in the end its convincing power comes from itself and not from the human eloquence or arguments in which it may be couched. [...] In our own time, the price to be paid for fidelity to the Gospel is no longer being hanged, drawn and quartered but it often involves being dismissed out of hand, ridiculed or parodied. And yet, the Church cannot withdraw from the task of proclaiming Christ and his Gospel as saving truth, the source of our ultimate happiness as individuals and as the foundation of a just and humane society.

Finally, Newman teaches us that if we have accepted the truth of Christ and committed our lives to him, there can be no separation between what we believe and the way we live our lives. [...] Truth is passed on not merely by formal teaching, important as that is, but also by the witness of lives lived in integrity, fidelity and holiness; those who live in and by the

¹² ID., *Address on the occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia*, December 20, 2010.

¹³ JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, Vol. II, London 1896, 248.

truth instinctively recognise what is false and, precisely as false, inimical to the beauty and goodness which accompany the splendour of truth, *veritatis splendor*."¹⁴

Benedict XVI had chosen the motto for his pastoral ministry: *Cooperatores veritatis*. He consumed himself entirely in the service of the truth. In Newman he found a spiritual brother who teaches us masterfully "that the primacy of God is the primacy of truth and love"¹⁵.



Figure 4: Saint Philip Neri. Painting by Sebastiano Conca.

Finally, it must not be forgotten that Newman was a spiritual father, a son of Saint Philip Neri, a priest with a great heart for people. The motto *Cor ad cor loquitur*, which he adopted as a cardinal, expresses wonderfully this side of his personality. Benedict XVI concluded the homily during the Beatification Mass with some thoughts on Newman's ministry as a pastor:

"The warmth and humanity underlying his appreciation of the pastoral ministry is beautifully expressed in [one] of his [...] sermons: 'Had Angels been your priests, my brethren, they could not have consoled with you, sympathised with you, have had compassion on you, felt tenderly for you, and made allowances for you, as we can; they could not have been your patterns and guides, and have led you on from your old selves into a new life, as they can who come from the midst of you.' He lived out that profoundly human vision of priestly ministry in his devoted care for the people

of Birmingham during the years that he spent at the Oratory he founded, visiting the sick and the poor, comforting the bereaved, caring for those in prison. No wonder that on his death so many thousands of people lined the local streets as his body was taken to its place of burial not half a mile from here. One hundred and twenty years later, great crowds have assembled once again to rejoice in the Church's solemn recognition of the outstanding holiness of this much-loved father of souls."¹⁶ Such spiritual fathers and mothers are sorely needed in today's Church.

Benedict XVI saw in Newman a man of God, a witness of conscience, a herald of truth and a spiritual father. These characteristics of his person and his work are among the aspects that make the English Cardinal a great teacher for the Church of our time: "Conversion is the *iter* – the roadway of a whole lifetime. And faith is always 'development,' and precisely in this manner it is the maturation of the soul to truth, to God, who is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves. In the idea of 'development' Newman had written his own experience of a never finished conversion and interpreted for us, not only the way of Christian doctrine, but that of the Christian life. The characteristic of the great doctor of the Church, it seems to me, is that he teaches not only through his thought and speech, but also by his

¹⁴ BENEDICT XVI., *Address at the Prayer Vigil on the Eve of the Beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman*, September 18, 2010.

¹⁵ ID., *Message for the Symposium of the International Centre of the Friends of Newman*, November 18, 2010.

¹⁶ ID., *Homily at Holy Mass with Beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman*, September 19, 2010.



Figure 5: Pope Benedict XVI with the statue of the Patrona Bavariae. In the background Fr. Hermann Geissler FSO. Photo: FSO

life, because within him thought and life are interpenetrated and defined. If this is so, then Newman belongs to the great teachers of the Church, because he both touches our hearts and enlightens our thinking.¹⁷

Around the canonisation by Pope Francis on October 13, 2019, Square, voices, already heard in previous years, were raised again, which see in Newman a possible new Doctor of the Church. Without wanting to anticipate the judgment of the reigning Pope, Benedict XVI. shared this hope out of deep conviction. A few weeks before his departure, he said: "Newman: Doctor of the Church? That would be a light for the darkness of our time!"

¹⁷ JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER, *Newman is one of the great teachers of the Church*, Lecture given on April 28, 1990, in: MARIA KATHARINA STROLZ/MARGARETE BINDER, *John Henry Newman. Lover of Truth*, Rome 1991, 146.



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