

John Henry Newman's influence on my life

Philip Boyce, OCD

At times, some students prepare a Dissertation on Cardinal Newman with much reading and long research. Then in later years they may not follow it up with further study and publications. I was fortunate that experts and friends kept asking me to write essays on the life and works of the great, now canonised cardinal. I got to know the Sisters of the Spiritual Family The Work at the beginning of my association with Newman. This, as well as other circumstances, kept my interest alive in the subject of my Dissertation. I was frequently asked to write some papers on various aspects of Newman, especially on his spirituality.

I met Sister Lutgart Govaert, FSO, of the Spiritual Family The Work in October 1974. The Community was preparing a Symposium on Cardinal John Henry Newman. Sr. Lutgart had defended her own thesis on Newman's Mariology one year previously in 1973 at the Gregorian University in Rome and published it in 1975. The Sisters set up the International Centre of Newman Friends in their house, called Piccola Casa on the Via Aurelia in that same year (1975). This was in answer to the suggestion of Cardinal Raimondi, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, who requested them to keep in touch with the many students and specialists they had met at the Symposium, and also to further the Cause of Newman's Beatification and Canonisation. Thereafter, nearly every student working on John Henry Newman in Rome visited their library in Via Aurelia that was specialised in writings by or about Newman. The members of The Work continued all this when the Newman Centre was transferred to Via di Val Cannuta, 32c, in 2020.

It would be difficult to describe all that Newman meant for me since the Centre started in 1975, fifty years ago. In the preparatory meetings that took place before the Symposium I met, among others, Fr. Stephen Dessain, the renowned Newman specialist who was a member of the Congregation of the Oratory, and also Professor Joseph Ratzinger, the well-known theologian who would later become Cardinal and Pope, and Mother Maria Katharina Strolz, the then International Superior of The Work. I also met other Newman specialists such as Jean Stern and Giovanni Velocci. Thus began for me a long association with Cardinal Newman, and with specialists on his life and work.

Among Newman's influence on me, the following points are worthy of note.

A living theology

I came to know Newman as a preacher of the truth and a teacher of a living theology. He did not regard himself as a theologian in the strict sense of having mastered theology, as one "who can say how many opinions there are on every point, what authors have taken which, and which is the best – who can discriminate exactly between proposition and proposition, argument and argument, who can pronounce which are safe, which allowable, which dangerous – who can trace the history of doctrines in successive centuries, and apply the principles of former times to the conditions of the present" (*Letters and Diaries*, XXIV, p. 212). He preferred, as he said, to go his own way. Yet, at the

moment of his death he was acclaimed by different voices in England as one of the greatest theologians of the 19th century, at least in English-speaking countries. The truth is that Newman was an outstanding, but not systematic, scholar of theology, philosophy, and of religious themes. He wrote when and as much as a concrete situation gave him the duty, or at least the stimulus, to do so. He has few systematic treatises about single topics. On the other hand, he has a multitude of sermons, discourses, lectures, conferences, and a vast correspondence.

The foundation of his spiritual theology is the awareness of the holiness of a personal God. Though not explicitly enunciated, this fundamental truth always shows itself implicitly in his teaching and preaching. From this primary awareness flow some great themes of his spirituality, as for example, the total dependence of the creature on God; the duty to obey; the privilege of prayer; the call to imitate the holiness of God according to one's own mission and vocation.

I soon came to see how Cardinal Newman treated truth with the greatest respect – almost as something holy. For him, truth had an absolute value. Henry J. Coleridge, who was so influenced by Newman that he converted to the Catholic Church and later became a Jesuit, said that “Truth was for him the one thing in the world to live for and to die for.” Indeed, he followed it, even at the cost of the most severe trials. He not only preached it, he lived according to it in daily life. Pope John Paul II called him “an ardent disciple of truth.”

In his life it is easy to see the relation between truth in words and uprightness in life. Truth demands that a person who preaches it should also lead a holy life. Otherwise his life will contradict the words he preaches to others. “For surely those only can preach the truth duly who feel it personally; those only transmit it fully from God to man, who have in the transmission made it their own” (*Discourses to Mixed Congregations*, p. 364).

I admired Newman as a servant of the truth, a genuine theologian and a distinguished teacher of the spiritual life.

A man of prayer

What strikes a person who delves into the works and life of Newman is the importance he attributes to prayer. Indeed it constituted the spiritual texture of his life. He was without doubt a man endowed with brilliant intellectual gifts – his theological essays, his philosophical investigations, his spiritual writings. Yet, side by side with these more intellectual compositions there was in his life a religious and spiritual dimension guiding the latter keeping it from error and conferring on his writings their power of attraction and persuasiveness. This spiritual core was simply Newman's own personal life, sustained and enlivened by constant prayer.

His book *Meditations and Devotions* gives us plenty of examples of Newman's own prayers. They show us that Newman prayed at all times of his life. In his childhood days he prayed from his awareness of God's presence and holiness. His private journals contain lists of prayers and petitions written down by him throughout the years. The Fathers of the Birmingham Oratory still have three small notebooks, thumb-soiled and worn, which were constantly used by him and which contain the intentions of prayers he said and the names of people he prayed for. The first entry is dated 1817

when he was sixteen years of age. It was for his first Communion in the Anglican Church. The last entry is dated seventy-two years later – the year before his death. Few people preserve and use their prayers for over a period of seven decades!

From the life and writings of J.H. Newman I learned to appreciate more the prayer life I had been taught in my Carmelite formation. Indeed, all teachers of the spiritual life place prayer at the heart of their instructions.

Guidance on the journey to union with God

Newman's teaching on the road to holiness of life came from the pages of Scripture, particularly from the New Testament. Holiness of life is the goal: "You shall be holy, as I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). This is the perfection to which he aspired and which he often preached in his sermons, both to his parishioners, but also to the students of Oxford University who flocked to his sermons. He did not water down the strict demands of the Gospel but spoke them in all clarity. People sensed that what he said came from the heart and saw that in his own life he practised what he taught.

An early conversion grace which he received in his teens led him, as he said, to rest in the "thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator" (*Apologia*, p. 4). The awareness of the presence of God would remain with him throughout his life and help him in days of trial and sorrow. It helped me in my life also reminding me of what Saint Teresa says "to be alone with Him alone."

At the start of prayer he urges us to place ourselves in God's presence, or rather to become aware of that divine Presence in which we already are. In a meditation to be used for a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, he begins with the words: "I place myself in the presence of Him in whose Incarnate Presence I am before I place myself there" (*Meditations and Devotions*, p. 293). From these and similar words in his writings I gained much benefit. They fitted well into my own Carmelite vocation, as they would into the life of any believer.

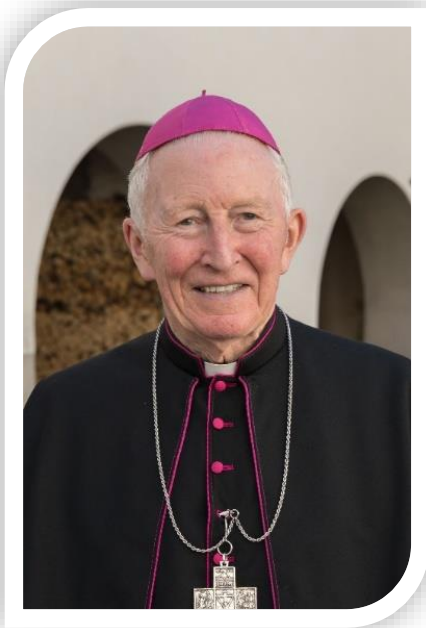
A man of resilient hope

I also saw Newman as a man of resilient hope. It stemmed from his deep faith in a caring God who is not merely all-powerful but also infinitely merciful and loving. Easier for Newman would it be "to believe that there is no God at all than to think He does not care" This hope is often expressed in beautiful lines such as the following: "God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. Somehow I am necessary for His purposes, as necessary in my place as an Archangel in his – if indeed, I fail, He can raise another, as He could make the stones children of Abraham. Yet I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling. Therefore, I will trust Him" (*Meditations and Devotions*, p. 301).

For these and for many other reasons, Newman has meant so much for me in my life.



About the author:



Most Rev. Dr. Philip Boyce, OCD, born 1940, from Co. Donegal, Ireland, joined the Discalced Carmelite Order and was ordained a priest in Rome on 17 April 1966. He received a doctorate in theology with a dissertation on *Christian perfection in the writings of John Henry Newman*. During his twenty years at the Pontifical Theological Faculty of the Carmelites in Rome, he taught spirituality and dogmatic theology, and for many years was engaged in the work of formation of students preparing for the priesthood and doing postgraduate studies. Ordained bishop on 1 October 1995, he served in his native diocese of Raphoe. He retired as Bishop of Raphoe on 9 June 2017. During his retirement Pope Francis appointed him Apostolic Administrator of the diocese of Dromore on 26 March 2018 until 26 March 2019.

He is the author of numerous publications on Newman's life and spirituality.