

PORTSMOUTH ABBEY

I would like to thank the Portsmouth Institute for inviting me to take part in this wonderful conference and to speak a little to you about the physical legacy of John Henry Newman at the Birmingham Oratory. Before I do let me say how very much at home I feel here. Having spent ten formative years of my own life in a beautiful, but exceptionally chilly valley with a monastery and a school in the North Riding of Yorkshire, I find that Portsmouth Abbey is Ampleforth with added comforts! And so far at least, nobody has sent me on a punishment run or in absolute desperation picked me for a house rugby fifteen. They really would have to be desperate now.

I think Newman would have been embarrassed by the very thought of having a conference devoted to his own life and thought. He was horrified by his own reputation for sanctity: “I have nothing of a Saint about me as every one knows, and it is a severe (and salutary) mortification to be thought next door to one.” But if there must be such a conference, then perhaps he would have said that a Benedictine monastery is a good place to do it.

In 1879, the English Benedictine Congregation, to which this monastery belongs, sent a formal letter of congratulation to the newly created Cardinal, John Henry Newman. They admired him, they said, like another St Bede: “You have loved to do your great intellectual work in retirement, and have been reluctant that any event should call you forth from your truly monastic cell.” The Cardinal replied: “There are none whose praise is more welcome to me than that of Benedictines.” Newman never gave an insincere compliment; his pleasure was entirely genuine.

Some twenty years earlier he had himself written extensively in praise of the Benedictine charism: “There have been great Religious Orders since, whose atmosphere has been conflict, and who have thriven in smiting or in being smitten. It has been their high calling; it has been their peculiar meritorious service; but, as for the Benedictine, the very air he breathes is peace.” Of course, *peace*, for Newman, is an ambivalent gift. One of the mottoes by which he lived his life from his adolescence was “Holiness, rather than peace”. Peace is not simply “quiet at any cost”, but the fruit of a life of fidelity to the truth.

So in the exchange of compliments, though wholly sincere, there is nevertheless some misunderstanding. Newman, although he was leading a rather quiet life by 1879, had never lived wholly in retirement or been afraid of conflict. He had founded two Oratories, a school and a university. He had engaged in controversy with some of the great minds of the day. While not having, say, Manning’s engagement in public affairs, nevertheless, he had known what it is to struggle in the world. If by 1879 he had found some peace in a retired life it had come at a cost.

For his part, Newman admired the Benedictine contemplative spirit, the scholarship and that tradition of meditative penetration to the very soul of the words of Scripture and of his beloved Fathers of the Church. But in 1879 the English Benedictines had returned to the missionary roots established by Ss Gregory and Augustine and were running parishes and schools like this one. As a teenager I shared the same buildings as a school of 800 boys and a monastery of sixty monks. The air we breathed was not peace! Newman's view of the monk, had more than a little Victorian romanticism about it.

But the misunderstanding is revealing. In their wholly sincere admiration for each other we can understand the peace that both monks and Cardinal aspired to. It is an aspiration which we share – not an empty peace that is merely quiet or the absence of noise or argument; rather the peace that comes from prayer; the peace that comes from the search for truth in scripture and tradition; and the deep peace that only comes after a life of sincere struggle to live in accordance with that truth; a peace which is the fruit of holiness.

I would like to make use of this occasion to convince you of the importance of preserving the physical legacy of John Henry Newman, in the form of his manuscripts, letters and diaries. And I would like to persuade you, in addition, that they should be preserved intact in the place where John Henry Newman made his home, the Birmingham Oratory. I am very grateful that the Cardinal Newman Society here in the United States recognises the importance of this goal and have pledged themselves to support us in achieving it.

I would like to begin by describing a political situation connected with our recent General Election campaign. In the U.K. as soon as an election is called, dozens of bills are rushed through parliament before it is dissolved. We call it 'doing the washing-up'! To get these bills through quickly, all their controversial elements are dropped.

One such Bill was the Personal, Social and Health Education Bill. It proposed, among other things, some changes to the National Curriculum. Children as young as 11 were to be taught about contraception and abortion, how to access contraception and abortion, and that same-sex unions are of equal status with traditional marriage within British society.

Against the background to this controversial issue, we have had to appoint new governors to our Birmingham Oratory Primary School who can be relied upon to support the orthodox Catholic position of the Oratory in battles such as these. We can be sure that this issue will come back again in some form or another. The Oratory is, of course, independent of the State. But significantly, it is also free from the pressures on the hierarchical Church that sometimes make it difficult for bishops make the stand that is required. Bt the Oratory is free to offer, as Newman offered, and as independent religious orders have offered down the ages, a prophetic voice against the compromises of the age.

Newman pointed out that during the controversies of the fourth century concerning the Divinity of Christ, it was in fact the lay Faithful who '*proclaimed, enforced, maintained, and (humanly speaking) preserved*' the orthodox doctrine, whereas '*in that time of immense confusion*' many Bishops, under political pressure, had publicly, though not in their hearts, departed from it. His point, of course, was not to undermine Bishops. On the contrary, Newman intended to show the true character of Episcopal authority. To be authentic, it had to be exercised purely and simply in union with the Faith of the Church. In the fourth century, the problem had been that, becoming entangled in secular power, the Bishops had allowed their authority to become compromised and had drifted into unorthodoxy, which the laity had rightly repudiated.

John Henry Newman's whole life was engaged in this kind of struggle both as an Anglican and as a Catholic. He defended the Church of England against the ever increasing encroachment of the State on its liberties. As a Catholic he provided the Church with trenchant arguments for religious belief, on the rights – and duties – of conscience, on education of the lay faithful, and on the complex area of the relationship between the individual Catholic and the State. In all of these controversies Newman's voice was prophetic, seeing deeper into the problems and further in regard to their consequences than any other thinkers of his time. His thought is of course more relevant now than it has ever been.

All this came at great personal cost, the loss of friends and influence, great personal labour and the suspicion first of the Anglican Communion and later of the Catholic Church. People do not like to have the consequences of their own compromises pointed out to them. It is for this willingness to suffer for standing out as a prophetic voice that Newman is about to be beatified.

Newman was a lone voice in his own time and in many ways the Oratory he founded continues that tradition. The Oratory discloses the heart of Newman: small and stable communities of priests, living together in charity, dedicated to prayer, to the liturgy, to preaching, teaching and the intellectual life. The authentic preservation of Newman's papers means preserving them in the context of the Oratory he founded.

WEIGEL QUOTE (Letters to a Young Catholic Chapter 5)

OK, so it doesn't have to be as uncomfortable as that. But George Weigel's account of his experience is accurate as well as entertaining and his interpretation of it is correct. The Birmingham Oratory even Birmingham itself, is vital to any understanding of Newman. It can seem eccentric and marginal but it was, and is, the condition for two essential qualities about Newman and the Oratory, that might at first appear contradictory.

The first is Newman's complete obedience to the Holy See. Blessed Pope Pius IX placed the newly founded Oratory in Birmingham, in those days even grimmer and more marginal to polite society than it is now.

Newman obeyed without demur. By doing so he was spared from the compromises and fevered activity that so often go with a ministry in the heart of the civilised and political world. [Mgr Talbot anecdote here – Birmingham people have souls and have neither the talent nor the inclination for the work you cut out for me.]

The anecdote leads to the second quality, Newman's independence of mind. Paradoxically, his complete obedience to the authority of the Church freed him from what would have become, had men like Talbot had their way, a subtle kind of slavery, slavery to the fashionable world, to money and to politics. Newman's home in Birmingham placed him in the heart of the utilitarian, laissez faire and morally ambivalent heart of the English industrial revolution. But it made him see the consequences of that ambivalence more clearly and to respond to it without fear or favour.

The Birmingham Oratory Library and Archives contain the books and manuscripts of John Henry, Cardinal Newman - soon to be declared *Blessed John Henry Newman* by Pope Benedict XVI. This small religious community houses one of the most important archives for the history of the 19th Century. Scholars today come from all over the world to read and study these papers. Not only does the Oratory preserve the manuscripts of Newman's own great works, the like the *Apologia pro Vita Sua* and *The Idea of University*, his thousands of letters and diaries, and the drafts and final versions of hundreds of sermons; it also contains many of the letters of his famous correspondents, Gladstone, Manning and Faber, to name only a few. The Oratory Library also houses a large number of early and rare books, and the original manuscript of Elgar's score of *The Dream of Gerontius*.

Researchers coming to the Birmingham Oratory do not see these treasures in isolation as they would if they were housed together with other collections in a large university or civic library. They read them in their context and so experience something of Newman's own life. In the Birmingham Oratory Newman's words are preserved in the heart of the Oratorian family he founded, in the house he built and the library he designed himself. Apart from the books and manuscripts, Newman's own room is preserved exactly as it was in his own lifetime, with all his effects: his desk and chair, his chapel, his breviaries and rosaries, his Cardinal's robes. This sense of completeness makes it most important that Newman's legacy should continue to be conserved in the community he himself founded.

Birmingham is not Oxford or Cambridge. It has not those attractions. As one of Jane Austen's characters said "One has no great hopes for Birmingham. I always say there is something direful in the sound" But this too reveals something of the unexpectedness of Newman, his obedience and his independence. And the scholar will encounter Newman's own community, eccentric, maybe, as George Weigel observed, but he will converse with people who have lived with Newman and his writings all their lives, part of a living tradition.

In the Birmingham Oratory there is much less danger that a one sided, misunderstood and selective version of Newman will be conveyed. The living tradition of the house ensures that the Fathers will always be able to provide a corrective to a limited or one-sided or partisan view of Newman, from whatever side it comes.

Beaumont Intro:

Not least among the virtues of this biography is the judicious choice of citations from Newman's own work so that Newman's thought is in almost every case conveyed in his own words. Newman is not well served by short and selective quotation. Indeed he is often misrepresented. If in his own time Newman was frequently misunderstood, this is even more the case today. For partisans of many divergent views the power of Newman's name is often more important than what he really says. But Newman resists recruitment by any one party. Fr Beaumont not only quotes from the well-known works, but also directs us to some lesser known sources to give us a balanced and complete view of the subtlety of Newman's thought.

I began by praising the virtues of Newman's and the Oratory's independence. This has undoubtedly kept the Oratory small (Oratories almost always are). This has meant an enormous financial struggle, in the process of fifty years of publishing the Letters and Diaries and pressing for the Canonisation. The Oratory's position in Birmingham has also kept it marginal in all kinds of ways. As I have said this has been advantageous in some respects; but from the point of view of fundraising it is problematic. In spite of these problems, many people have been caught up, directly or indirectly with the work of the house and have learnt to share in that independence of thought and fearlessness, that makes them able to withstand the fashionable opinions of the age, whether on the national level or simply as parents and governors in our parish school trying to resist the threats that an over mighty state or a weakened Church can bring to their children.

Now that Newman's beatification is at last to take place, uniquely celebrated in person by the Holy Father, I see one of my major tasks, as the newly appointed Provost to preserve Newman's legacy intact for future generations. We have tremendous plans for a purpose built archivium, temperature and humidity controlled, to preserve Newman's papers and some of his other possessions; we will need to employ a full time archivist to care for them; and we also plan to provide educational facilities for schools so as to make Newman's teaching better known for future generations. I am most grateful to the Cardinal Newman Society here in the US for helping us with this. It is not, as I have said, simply a question of physical preservation, but of a preservation of a whole institution that guards the legacy of John Henry Newman in all its spiritual context, in the heart of the Oratory he founded which is his most lasting legacy.