

28th Sunday (C)

13th October 2019

‘Cardinal Newman: Saint!’

2Kings 5: “*accept a present from your servant.*”

Ps 97: *Ring out your joy!*

2Tim 2: Remember the Good News that I carry

Lk 17:11–19: Finding himself

cured, one of them turned back ... and thanked Him.

Quite a few of my friends are in Rome this weekend, enjoying not just the lovely 25C temperatures, but more importantly the wonderful events surrounding the canonization of Cardinal John Henry Newman this/tomorrow morning at St Peter’s. It’s almost 130 years since Cardinal Newman died in Birmingham, at the Oratory of St Philip Neri which he founded — but it’s only 9 years since his beatification, which took place on the outskirts of Birmingham, at Mass celebrated by the Pope himself, Pope Benedict, during his great visit to our country.

It is a wonderful moment for the Catholic church in this country, and many have been waiting long years for this canonization to come. Newman’s influence in Victorian England was huge; his fame in and around Oxford in his Anglican years as a fellow of Oriel College and Vicar of the University church was immense, and his power as a softly-spoken but persuasive preacher was renowned. No wonder,

then, that after the accolades awarded him in the first half of his life, his decisions in the early 1840s — to renounce his oxford fellowship, to resign as Vicar of St Mary’s, and to move out of central oxford to the quiet retreat of Littlemore, to some converted cottages and stables — came as a great shock to the Establishment. But all this was to give him the time and space to pray, study and reflect on what would be the most momentous decision of his life, and one whose echoes would ring out across England, and across the years!

I have often visited and stayed at Littlemore, ‘the College,’ as Newman called it, where he lived for those 4 crucial middle years of his life, 1842–46. It’s a place of great tranquillity, a place bathed in the quiet sanctity of the one who founded it. It was in this place, one very wet night in 1845 — 8th to 9th October — that Newman finally took the decision to become a Catholic. He took the opportunity of a visit by Blessed Dominic Barberi, an Italian Passionist missionary priest, who had been in England about 4 years by then, preaching and encouraging the Catholic faithful up and down the country. It is said that Newman didn’t even

wait for Barberi to recover fully from the ordeal of arriving atop a stagecoach in the driving rain, but that while he was still warming himself by the fire, Newman fell to his knees at Barberi's feet and requested Confession, and admittance into the Catholic Church. It was far from an easy decision: Newman had been in the Anglican establishment for some 20 years, and in the Oxford academic life for 28 years; he had many friends in that life, and only a very few followed him in his conversion to the Catholic faith. It was a decision, then, that cost him dearly, and he had almost to 'start again' in his life, and rebuild friendships and carve out a new way of life as a Catholic. But never at any point did he doubt he had made the right decision, and that, as he put it, at the age of 44 he had now entered the "one true fold of the Redeemer."

As a Catholic, and then as a Catholic priest, Newman still had huge challenges to face. Obviously, in some ways he was a celebrity name entering the Church, which itself set up tensions with other Catholics. But more significantly were the debates he had to enter into with those who

denounced his conversion. Not all his projects were successful — his founding of a Catholic University in Dublin was a mixed blessing, though it lives on today as 'University College Dublin'; and at one point in the 1850s he had to defend himself in a libel trial, which he lost; his founding of the Oratory School in Birmingham also proved contentious, though it too still exists today. Even his establishing of the religious order in England of the Oratorians of St Philip Neri — principally the Birmingham Oratory — was not without its headaches, and some of its members broke away to found a separate London Oratory, but it did prove to be the mainstay of his life as priest, pastor, scholar and — in his last 11 years — Cardinal.

But throughout his 45 Catholic years, he was a herald for the truth of Catholicism, the faith that for 300 years since the turbulence of the Reformation had been persecuted. Newman showed with great rigour, and personal patience and kindness that Catholicism was in England to stay, and to re-found itself with confidence. We need his prayers today, to maintain that vigour of spreading

the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus to our fellow countrymen. He gives us much hope, and his canonization today is a cause of much rejoicing for the whole Church, but most especially for ourselves, in the land which Newman loved.

In particular, I feel, we should implore this new saint for his prayers for our national and political life. Newman was a quiet, diplomatic man, one who could argue firmly, rigorously, but respectfully, and with great learning. May his prayers help all those charged with political office and the attempts at negotiation and resolution, and reconciliation that are so needed in these very days of October 2019. May his intercession bring about what indeed may seem like a miracle, an agreement between our country and the EU, in this week ahead.

Cardinal Newman, saint and scholar, priest and pastor, pray for us, for our country, and for the Catholic people of our nation: may we live our faith in Jesus Christ with love and compassion, and great humility, as you did.