

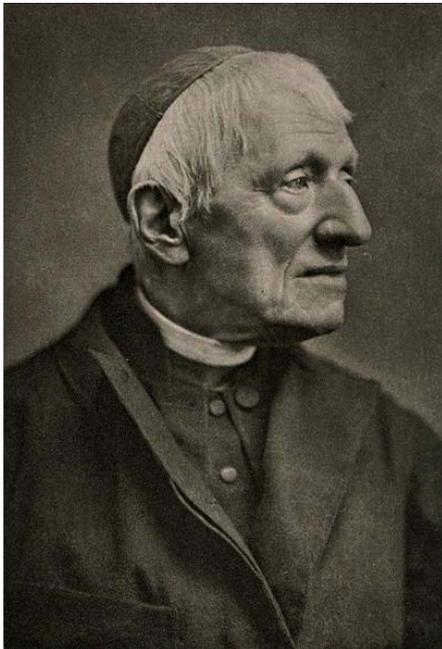
CARDINAL JOHN HENRY NEWMAN: 21 FEBRUARY 1801 – 11 AUGUST 1890

**“To live is to change,
and to be perfect is to have changed often.”**

Some views the Newman, and the speech of the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger about his personal appreciation of Cardinal Newman (1990)

11 August 2020 marks the 130th anniversary of the death of Cardinal JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, who was beatified on 19 September 2010 by Pope BENEDICT XVI and canonized on 13 October 2019 by Pope FRANCIS.

His conversion from the Anglican to the Roman Catholic Church was an event of profound significance—not only for himself. His decision raised fundamental questions about our understanding of faith and our duty to uphold the truth once it has been recognized as such. His decision also raised questions that could not be ignored for ecumenical initiatives and the self-understanding of the various Christian denominations. In a note on Newman’s life, the homepage of the Archdiocese of Vienna¹ has the following to say about this:



Today, we can barely imagine how serious this step was. Newman was one of the best known persons in the Church of England, professor at Oxford, an example for a generation of students and clergymen, and at the height of his creative activity. The Catholic Church was considered by the bourgeois establishment of Victorian England as a foreign, sectarian group the members of which came from the lowest echelons of society, mainly from Irish immigrants. In a generally liberal and progressive climate such a conversion caused astonishment or even contempt. Even his family disapproved of Newman’s conversion.”

¹ <https://www.erzdioezese-wien.at/site/glaubenfeiern/spirituelles/grossechristen/article/77449.html>.
The photo above was taken by Herbert Rose Barraud, 1887.

The British author JOANNA BOGLE stated, on the occasion of the canonization, that NEWMAN was very popular in Germany during the time between the World Wars: works by him were translated into German by EDITH STEIN and were read by young people, among them the founders of the “White Rose” movement, HANS and SOPHIE SCHOLL. *“It is very interesting to see that they were influenced by this great thinker and theologian. His understanding of freedom and truth had impressed them deeply; it had encouraged them in their resistance as well and in the courage they showed, above all, at their end. Newman had understood that truth is so much more important than power. Sometimes even the Church has valued power more than truth. [...] But for Newman nothing was more important than the truth.”*²

In May 1879 Pope LEO XIII elevated to NEWMAN cardinal. In his response to that elevation, the so-called Biglietto-speech, the new cardinal wrote: *“And, I rejoice to say, to one great mischief I have from the first opposed myself. For thirty, forty, fifty years I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of liberalism in religion. Never did Holy Church need champions against it more sorely than now, when, alas! it is an error overspreading, as a snare, the whole earth; and on this great occasion, when it is natural for one who is in my place to look out upon the world, and upon Holy Church as it is, and upon her future, it will not, I hope, be considered out of place, if I renew the protest against it which I have made so often.*

*Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another, and this is the teaching which is gaining substance and force daily. It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion, as true. It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion. Revealed religion is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous; and it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy.”*³

On the eve of the beatification, Pope BENEDICT XVI stated: *“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 fulfillment of our deepest human aspirations.”*⁴

On the eve of the canonization a conference took place in the Angelicum in Rome with the subject “Newman, the prophet: a saint for our time.” The Archbishop

2 <https://www.vaticannews.va/de/welt/news/2019-10/kirche-heiligspredung-newman-interview.html>.

3 Quoted from <http://www.newmanfriendsinternational.org/en/speech-of-cardinal-newmanon-receiving-the-biglietto-in-rome-12th-may-1879/>.

4 http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100918_veglia-card-newman.html.

of Sydney, ANTHONY FISHER OP, gave a talk under the title: “Conscience, Relativism, and Truth: the Witness of Newman.” He concluded with the statement: “[...] *the authority of conscience lies in its pointing us to moral and religious truth, prompting us to follow the divine will. Far from being a cause or excuse for relativism, then, conscience is its ultimate rejection. But because conscience is also relativism’s most vulnerable target, Newman insists on the Church’s role as its defender and formator. This brought a young peritus at the Second Vatican Council named Father Ratzinger to see that, without Church authority, conscience is the ready slave of personal passion and social fashion—what he would famously dub ‘the dictatorship of relativism.’*

On the centenary of the saint’s death, the now grown-up Cardinal Ratzinger paid tribute to Newman’s ‘liberating and essential’ truth that the ‘we’ of the Church develops from and guarantees the ‘me’ of personal conscience. For conscience, on Newman’s account, is above all about discipleship: the implicit discipleship of those who hear and respond to God unknowing, as they follow their best reason in their choices; and the explicit discipleship of the faithful, who know that conscience, guided by the Gospel and the Church, is our surest guide.”⁵

100 years after the death of Cardinal JOHN HENRY NEWMAN an academic symposium took place at the Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome (26-28 April 1990), arranged by the International Centre of Newman Friends. There the then cardinal JOSEPH RATZINGER spoke about his personal approach to NEWMAN. This speech is reproduced below.⁶

⁵ <https://www.sydneycatholic.org/addresses-and-statements/2019/conscience-relativism-and-truth-the-witness-of-newman/>.

⁶ For ease of reading, we have added subheadings.

PRESENTATION BY HIS EMINENCE CARD. JOSEPH RATZINGER ON THE OCCASION OF THE FIRST CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF CARD. JOHN HENRY NEWMAN (1990)

Encounter with Newman at the beginning of my studies

I do not feel competent to speak on Newman's figure or work, but perhaps it is meaningful if I tell a little about my own way to Newman, in which indeed something is reflected of the presence of this great English theologian in the intellectual and spiritual struggle of our time.

In January 1946, when I began my study of theology in the Seminary in Freising which had finally reopened after the confusion of the war, an older student was assigned as prefect to our group, who had begun to work on a dissertation on Newman's theology of conscience even before the beginning of the war. In all the years of his military service he had not lost sight of this theme, which he now turned to with new enthusiasm and energy.

We were soon bonded by a personal friendship, wholly centred on the great problems of philosophy and theology. Of course, Newman was always present. Alfred Läßle—the name of the above-mentioned prefect—published his dissertation in 1952 with the title: "Der Einzelne in der Kirche" (The Individual in the Church).

Conscience - a key term for Newman

For us at that time, Newman's teaching 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.

It was from Newman that we learned to understand the primacy of the Pope. Freedom of conscience, Newman told us, is not identical with the right *“to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations.”*

Thus, conscience in its true sense is the bedrock of Papal authority; its power comes from revelation that completes natural conscience, which is imperfectly enlightened, and *“the championship of the Moral Law and of conscience is its raison d’être.”*

“A way of obedience to objective truth”

I certainly need not explicitly mention that this teaching on conscience has become ever more important for me in the continued development of the Church and the world. Ever more I see how it first opens in the context of the biography of the Cardinal, which is only to be understood in connection with the drama of his century and so speaks to us.

Newman had become a convert as a man of conscience; it was his conscience that led him out of the old ties and securities into the world of Catholicism, which was difficult and strange for him. But this way of conscience is everything except a way of self-sufficient subjectivity: it is a way of obedience to objective truth.

The second step in Newman’s lifelong journey of conversion was overcoming the subjective evangelical position in favour of an understanding of Christendom based on the objectivity of dogma. In this connection I find a formulation from one of his early sermons to be especially significant today:

“True Christendom is shown ... in obedience and not through a state of consciousness. Thus, the whole duty and work of a Christian is made up of these two parts, Faith and Obedience; „looking unto Jesus’ (Heb 2:9) ... and acting according to His will. ... I conceive that we are in danger, in this day, of insisting on neither of these as we ought; regarding all true and careful consideration of the Object of faith as barren orthodoxy, technical subtlety ... and ... making the test of our being religious to consist in our having what is called a spiritual state of heart...”

In this context some sentences from “The Arians of the Fourth Century”, which may sound rather astonishing at first, seem important to me: *“... to detect and to approve the principle on which ... peace is grounded in Scripture; to submit to the dictation of truth, as such, as a primary authority in matters of political and private*

conduct; to understand ... zeal to be prior in the succession of Christian graces to benevolence."

For me it is always fascinating to see and consider how in just this way and only in this way, through commitment to the truth, to God, conscience receives its rank, dignity and strength.

I would like in this context to add but one sentence from the "Apologia," which shows the realism in this idea of person and Church: "*Living movements do not come of committees.*"

Newman's theory of development

Very briefly I would like to return to the autobiographical thread. 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.

Even deeper for me was the contribution which Heinrich Fries published in connection with the Jubilee of Chalcedon. 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 recognize the identity of faith in all developments.

Here I have to refrain from deepening these ideas further. It seems to me that Newman's starting point, also in modern theology, has not yet been fully evaluated. Fruitful possibilities awaiting development are still hidden in it. At this point I would only like to refer again to the biographical background of this concept.

It is known how Newman's insight into the ideas of development influenced his way to Catholicism. But it is not just a matter of an unfolding of ideas. In the concept of development, Newman's own life plays a role. That seems to become visible to me in his well-known words: "*... to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.*" Throughout his entire life, Newman was a person converting, a person being transformed, and thus he always remained and became ever more himself.

A never finished conversion

Here the figure of St Augustine comes to my mind, with whom Newman was so associated. When Augustine was converted in the garden at Cassiciacum he

understood conversion according to the system of the revered master Plotin and the Neo-Platonic philosophers. He thought that his past sinful life would now be definitively cast off; from now on the convert would be someone wholly new and different, and his further journey would be a steady climb to the ever purer heights of closeness to God.

It was something like that which Gregory of Nyssa described in his “Ascent of Moses”: *“Just as bodies, after having received the first push downwards, fall effortlessly into the depths with ever greater speed, so, on the contrary, the soul which has loosed itself from earthly passion rises up in a rapid upward movement ... constantly overcoming itself in a steady upward flight.”*

Augustine’s actual experience was a different one. He had to learn that being a Christian is always a difficult journey with all its heights and depths.

The image of *ascensus* is exchanged for that of *iter*, whose tiring weight is lightened and borne up by moments of light which we may receive now and then. 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 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.⁷

7 https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900428_ratzinger-newman_en.html.