

Newman: a witness of holiness

By **MONSIGNOR RODERICK STRANGE**

RECTOR OF THE PONTIFICAL BEDA COLLEGE, ROME



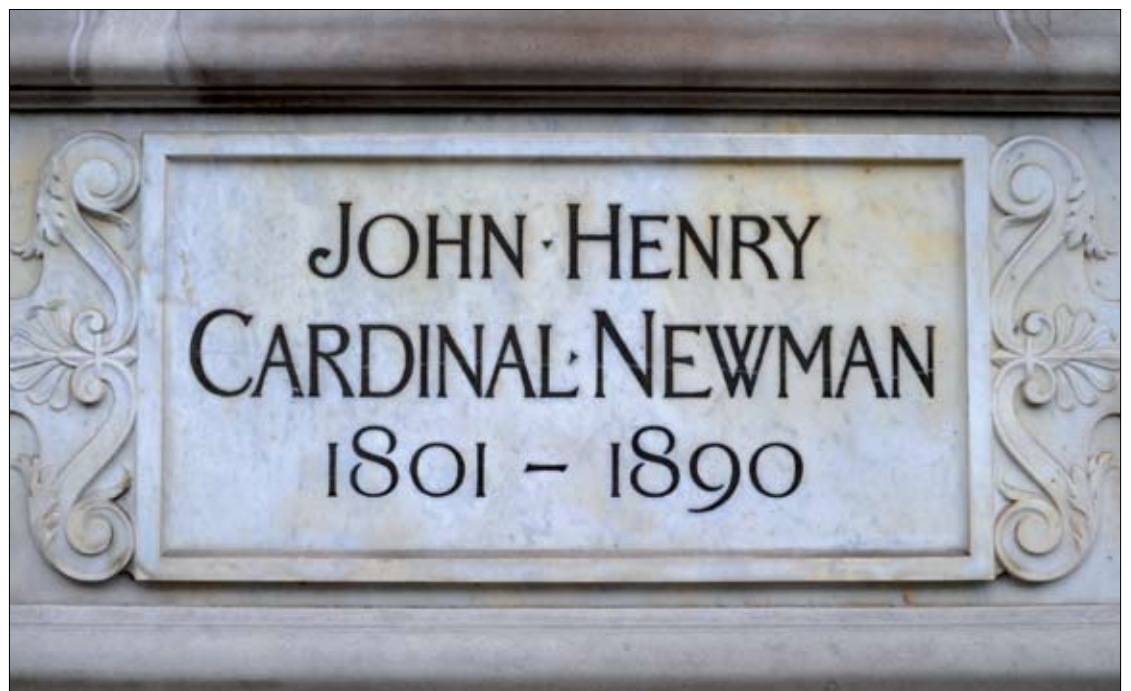
RODERICK STRANGE was ordained a priest of the Catholic Diocese of Shrewsbury in 1969. He studied at Rome and Oxford and was one of the Catholic Chaplains in Oxford from 1977-89. He has spent 11 years in parish ministry, and since 1998 has been Rector of the Pontifical Beda College in Rome. He has written and lectured on Newman extensively. His most recent book is *John Henry Newman: A Mind Alive*.

When people are canonised, they are being offered as models of holiness for the whole Church. Those who are beatified are not to be regarded as any the less holy, but they are being offered rather as models for a local Church, a particular place or country. The Church proceeds gradually, confirming the local before affirming the universal. John Henry Newman's beatification, therefore, holds him up as a model for Great Britain and Ireland. He is, of course, renowned worldwide and his influence internationally has been extraordinary, but all the same this beatification in the first place is a matter for the British and the Irish. So what can be learnt from Newman's example?

Newman was a formidably original thinker. He declared once that education in the large sense was his line (*Autobiographical Writings*, p.259). And if his views on education can seem outdated in an age of targets, outcomes, and value for money, he nevertheless, as the historian, John Roberts, has remarked, offered 'a vision with which those of us who are concerned with education should from time to time try to refresh ourselves' (see *Ian Ker and Alan G. Gill, eds., Newman after a Hundred Years, Oxford, 1990, p.221*). Again, he

formulated an understanding of the way Christian doctrine has developed 14 years before Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published and was unperturbed by Darwin's theory of evolution: "It does not seem to me to follow that creation is denied because the Creator, millions of years ago, gave laws to matter." And he added that, whether true or not, "Mr Darwin's theory need not be atheistical" (*Letters and Diaries*, xxiv, p.77). There are other examples that could be given and if, as many people believe, Newman will eventually be canonised and declared a Doctor of the Church, one of its outstanding teachers, his approach to these issues will receive still further attention.

But people are not beatified for their ideas. Holiness is not locked in the head. Holiness points to the person and, in the Christian tradition, to the person's relationship with God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. So what of Newman's holiness? He was a man of deep faith. From the age of 15 he came to believe that, were he to doubt everything else, he could not doubt the existence of "two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator" (*Apologia pro Vita Sua*, p.4). That faith in God was fundamental for him. It guided his life. His story is remarkable.



Inscription beneath the sculpture of Cardinal Newman at the London Oratory

In his Anglican days he was a fellow of Oriel, then the most intellectually prestigious of Oxford's Colleges, he was Vicar of the University Church, and he became leader of the Oxford Movement that sought to revive within the Church of England its Catholic tradition. He was held in high regard. But his own studies and other events combined to undermine his confidence in his Anglican position and so in obedience to conscience he abandoned it and turned to Rome in 1845. That move made no sense to most English people at that time. Many friends abandoned him. There was a painful parting of the ways.

Newman spoke later of this conversion as coming into port after a rough sea, but in fact there were storms ahead. The small, despised Catholic community he had joined was at a loss to know what to do with so talented a man. They invited him to take up projects, to found a University in Dublin, to oversee a new translation of the Bible, and to edit the distinguished, but controversial, periodical, *The Rambler*. He accepted these invitations, but then found himself denied the support and resources to achieve what had been asked of him. By 1863 he felt overwhelmed. In January that year, he wrote in his Journal, "since I have been a Catholic, I seem to myself to have had nothing but failure, personally" (*Autobiographical Writings*, p.255).

To some extent the situation improved in 1864, after Charles Kingsley's gratuitous slur that "Truth, for its own sake, had never been a virtue with the Roman clergy. Father Newman informs us that it need not, and on the whole ought not to be". It gave him at long last the opportunity to defend his behaviour. It led him

to write his most famous book, his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. People might not agree with him, but at least they should be able to see that he had not acted dishonestly. The book proved to be a great success, healing past hurts and renewing friendships. And yet there were further controversies. When Pope Leo XIII made him a Cardinal in 1879, it came as a complete surprise.

If Christian holiness is revealed by bearing burdens for Christ's sake, by carrying the cross, Newman was certainly holy. His cross was not dramatic like a martyr's; it was rather cumulative, carved out of disappointment, frustration, and the frequent thwarting of hopes and plans. Many people live undramatic lives and can identify with that. But if, like Newman, they remain faithful and steadfast, they may also discover the truth of his claim: 'The planting of Christ's Cross in the heart is sharp and trying; but the stately tree rears itself aloft, and has fair branches and rich fruit, and is good to look upon' (*Parochial and Plain Sermons iv*, p.262).

Was Newman a saint? He once remarked light-heartedly, 'I have nothing of a Saint about me' (*Letters and Diaries xiii*, p.419). But when in old age his bishop, William Ullathorne, paid him a visit, something extraordinary took place. As the old Bishop made his leave, the old Cardinal sank to his knees and asked for a blessing. Ullathorne, reluctant because of propriety, but deeply moved, blessed him. Later, he observed, 'I felt annihilated in his presence: there is a Saint in that man.'

Newman might not agree, but his life, marked throughout by faith and fidelity, whatever the cost, can still be a source of inspiration. E

John Henry Newman's beatification, therefore, holds him up as a model for Great Britain and Ireland



Sculpture of Cardinal Newman at the London Oratory