

# The role of Cardinal Newman

By **THE VERY REVEREND RICHARD DUFFIELD**

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It will be a tremendous honour to welcome His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the Birmingham Oratory when he comes to visit after the Beatification of our founder, John Henry Newman. On Sunday 19th September, Pope Benedict will be the first pilgrim to pray in the shrine of the new 'Blessed'. Afterwards he will have the opportunity to visit the room where Newman lived from 1852 until his death in 1890, and (what should be a high point for a Pope who is also a scholar of international renown) he will be able to spend some time with Newman's own books and the original manuscripts in the place where most of them were written.

These few days in September will be a unique event. It is the first State Visit, and only the second visit by a reigning Pontiff to the United Kingdom. At first glance, the customary themes of diplomatic exchange – commerce and politics, development and mutual understanding – do not apply; or they appear at the very least to be insignificant when compared with the discussions that characterise other State Visits. How many battalions has the Pope? What is the gross domestic product of the Vatican? But in fact, on this visit, these categories are still more relevant, if on a more profound level. And they come together in the person of John Henry Newman.

England has produced comparatively few saints – especially in the last thousand years! But in this 'niche

market' we have specialised in one particular commodity all the more valuable for its rarity, the man of principle and conscience. Wherever in the world you find a church dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury (and you would be surprised how many there are) you can be fairly sure that those who built it were looking to the example of an Englishman who was not afraid of standing up for his rights – and the rights of the Church – against an authority that had over-reached its legitimate powers.

Without a doubt, when Pope Benedict speaks in Westminster Hall, in the very place where St John Fisher and St Thomas More were tried, he will call to mind the memory of the Cardinal Bishop of Rochester and the Lord Chancellor of England. They famously opposed King Henry VIII's divorce. Thomas More also strongly defended and developed the rights of Parliament. His memory is honoured wherever the Westminster parliamentary system has left its mark. Doubtless these great figures were a nuisance to the authorities of their time. But posterity has bought them global recognition. In the year 2000 Pope John Paul II proclaimed Thomas More to be the Patron Saint of Politicians throughout the world. That is some export achievement!

John Henry Newman was another such "man of principle and conscience". A large portion of his intellectual labours were concerned with matters exclusively ecclesiastical. But in many areas he made an outstanding contribution that is very much in accordance with the motivating factors behind any State Visit, the development of mutual sympathy, the exchange of resources (in this case spiritual, intellectual and moral, but no less important for that) and political understanding.

Perhaps I could give three examples, much more briefly than any of them deserve. I offer them as an invitation to sample of the goods on offer from John Henry Newman, a man who brought to the British establishment a deep, subtle and lasting understanding of Catholic thought; and to the Catholic Church a particularly Anglo-Saxon understanding of education, pragmatism and tradition. They are all three examples of Newman, the fearless "man of principle and conscience", in the peculiarly English pattern of sanctity.

Newman's great defence of his conversion, the *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, the history of his religious opinions, is one of the prose masterpieces of the English language. It was occasioned by an attack on his honesty by Charles Kingsley, Professor of History at Cambridge and still



The church altar in the Birmingham Oratory

more famous as the author of *The Water Babies*. The controversy, fierce in its time, was a battle between two well-known public figures and so attracted a large following. For Newman it was the defence of his good name, the right one Englishman owes to another. The victory was Newman's because in his lucid prose, his plain statement of facts, and his avoidance of complex argument, his was plainly the less prejudiced view. He appealed to an very English sense of justice and fairness. The controversy ensured a large circulation; and the wide readership in turn brought about a complete change in the attitudes of English speakers around the world to the Catholic Church. Newman, it can be fairly argued, made it possible to imagine the possibility of a Catholic being thoroughly English and loyal.

In his controversy with the Prime Minister W.E. Gladstone, this same argument was played out, not in the personal realm but in hard political facts. Gladstone argued that the declaration of papal infallibility made it impossible for Catholics to be truly loyal to the Crown. Newman replied in an open letter to the leading Catholic layman of the time and his former pupil, the young Duke of Norfolk. In the *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* Newman gives a brilliant and subtle analysis of the true extent of the papal claims; and along the way he exposes some of the contradictions of the Government's positions many of which, in the intervening years have been exposed and changed. It is best, perhaps, here to allow Newman to speak in his own words in three examples, all startlingly relevant, and the last prescient of the happy relations that now exist between the British Crown and the Holy See:

*Mr Gladstone asks us whether our political and civil life is not at the Pope's mercy; every act, he says, of at least three-quarters of the day, is under his control. No, not every, but any,*

*and this is all the difference – that is, we have no guarantee given us that there will never be a case, when the Pope's general utterances may come to have a bearing upon some personal act of ours. In the same way we are all of us in this age under the control of public opinion and the public prints; nay, much more intimately so. Journalism can be and is very personal; and, when it is in the right, more powerful just now than any Pope; yet we do not go into fits, as if we were slaves, because we are under a surveillance much more like tyranny than any sway, so indirect, so practically limited, so gentle, as [the Pope's] is.*

*Again, were I actually a soldier or sailor in Her Majesty's service, and sent to take part in a war which I could not in my conscience see to be unjust, and should the Pope suddenly bid all Catholic soldiers and sailors to retire from the service, here again, taking the advice of others, as best I could, I should not obey him.*

*I add, as before, that, if the Holy See were frankly recognised by England, as other Sovereignities are, direct quarrels between the two powers would in this age of the world be rare indeed; and still rarer, their becoming so energetic and urgent as to descend into the hearts of the community, and to disturb the consciences and the family unity of private Catholics.*

Thirdly, and still more briefly, I would like to refer to Newman's *Idea of a University* in which the ideals of a liberal education, which he himself received at Oxford, were propagated to the world. These lectures, given in Dublin in the 1850s still make those ideals take root beyond their natural bounds, the vast regions where the English language is spoken, and into the equally wide world where the Catholic faith is professed.

Perhaps we might put a word in the Holy Father's ear while he is here, that in addition to a patron saint for politicians, England has a plausible candidate for a patron saint of international understanding! E

**John Henry Newman was another such “man of principle and conscience”**



A section of the *Unfinished painting of Newman as a priest*, Oscott College, Birmingham