

Getting to Know Newman

I think that I began to get to know John Henry Newman when, as a Church of England Vicar, I dropped an altar on my toe. The toe broke, the local A and E was overcome with mirth but it did hurt! So, dosed with painkillers, I sat in my vicarage garden reading a book, which teachers long years ago, had said that I should read – John Henry Newman's 'Apologia' an autobiographical fragment. 'One of the best examples of English literature' they claimed. And so I found it to be and far more! For here was a really interesting human being.

You know, when quite decent people get seized and turned into saints, they sometimes seem to lose their humanity – as if a real person had been sprayed with pious stardust. Newman wrote his 'Apologia' in response to a rather hearty clergyman, Charles Kingsley who had questioned his integrity. He alleged that Newman bent the truth, played at being a sort of theological spin-doctor. Newman replies by telling the story of his move from the Church of England into Catholic unity as honestly as he can. He emerges as a complex human being.

Pictures of Newman show him as a rather severe looking 19th century Oxford academic. There he stands at a lectern or in a pulpit, peering over glasses set on a rather long nose, preparing to lecture or to preach at us. But behind all this lies a quite battered human being. He had had a difficult childhood. His father had been a prosperous banker who fell victim to the 1816 bank disaster after the Napoleonic Wars. Father was to be declared bankrupt, his health declined and he died at an early age leaving his family to descend gracefully but painfully in the social pecking order. Failure loomed over John Henry from an early age and he had a good deal of propping up of the family to do. He was a bright student at Oxford but over-reached himself, had a bit of a breakdown and failed his exams. Picking himself up from failure was to become an all too familiar theme in his life. But this he did and achieved his ambition to become an Oxford don.

He loved the teaching work and the quiet life of a scholar but willy-nilly he seemed to be always drawn into public argument and conflict. In fact he could not resist an intellectual battle and, with pen in hand, Newman was not only a brilliant writer but also a sharp and abrasive opponent. This, of course, meant that angry arrows were shot back at him and that hurt, really hurt, for if Newman could fight fiercely, he fought as one ill armoured and with a very thin skin. He was by nature intensely reserved and yet was capable of deep passionate friendships. From an early age he seemed otherworldly – almost fey: 'I used to wish the Arabian Tales were true: my imagination ran on unknown influences, on magical powers... I thought life might be a dream, or I an angel, and all this world a deception.' And yet for all this, he could confide to his diaries moaning complaints about such earthy matters as poor service in south coast boarding houses. On the menu it said Cutlets, but all there was one poor scraggy bit of mutton! Yes Newman was very serious minded but he could delight in playing games with the children of his friends and loved nothing better than to steal away to play his treasured violin.

The real Newman, warts and all, is indeed a complex fascinating human being. As Pope Benedict has reminded us: ‘Saints don’t drop from heaven – they are people like us with complicated problems like us.’ It is said that they are going to make Newman a saint but they can’t. Only God can make saints and the only material he has got to work on is the raw material of real human beings. What will happen in Birmingham is not the making of a saint with a spray of stardust, it is simply the catholic family waking up to see what God has done with the raw material of John Henry Newman – to spot the hand of the divine craftsman and then to begin to celebrate his work.

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