St John Henry Newman: Dedicated to the search for truth

Historian Donald Prudlo says the canonisation is a definitive affirmation of what St John Henry Newman means for the Church.

By Christopher Wells

“John Henry Newman was a man who was dedicated to following the truth wherever it might lead”, says Dr Donald Prudlo, who holds the Warren Chair for Catholic Studies at the University of Tulsa. This included Newman’s conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism, which not only cost him his position at Oxford University, but also damaged his reputation and led to the loss of many friends.

Speaking with Vatican News prior to Newman’s canonisation on Sunday, Prudlo said that the key for Newman, and the key to his conversion, “was a search through the Fathers of the Church”. Newman “was a patristics scholar, he was a classical scholar”, he said, “and as he deepened his knowledge of the writings of the Fathers, as he looked into the early history of the Church, he discerned that it was the Catholic Church that had preserved all of these teachings, and that had taken them from their nascent stages in the Bible and among the early and primitive Christian community, and had developed them organically into the Christian faith that we receive today”.

Newman’s reflections on how Christian teaching developed found fruition in his book “An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine”, which he was writing at the time of his conversion; later, as a Catholic, he would revise the work. Prudlo described the Essay as one of the most important works in the post-Reformation period: “It is a thorough analysis of the historical [and] contextual development of Christian doctrines”. Newman, he explained, was very concerned to show how certain doctrines present in seed form at the early Church matured [or] blossomed into the fully formed doctrine and dogmas we have today”.

Prudlo said that Newman’s canonisation was “a final affirmation of what Newman meant for the Church – not necessarily doctrinally, but as a paragon of moral virtue; as a subject of veneration for the Christian people; and an example for all of us, but particularly for those living the intellectual life”. John Henry Newman, he said, in a singular way, “was able at the same time able to study the very riches and depths of theology, and also communicate it to others”.

Newman’s writing, Prudlo said, “recalls the work of Benedict XVI as both a pastor and an intellectual attempting to speak to his own age in ways that they can understand, but in ways that always are hedged about and protected and give us insights into the depth of truth itself”.

John Henry Newman, C.O. was a theologian and poet, first an Anglican priest and later a Catholic priest and cardinal, who was an important and controversial figure in the religious history of England in the 19th century. He was known nationally by the mid-1830s.

Originally an evangelical Oxford University academic and priest in the Church of England, Newman then became drawn to the high-church tradition of Anglicanism. He became known as a leader of, and an able polemicist for the Oxford Movement, an influential and controversial grouping of Anglicans who wished to return to the Church of England many Catholic beliefs and liturgical rituals from before the English Reformation. In this, the movement had some success. In 1845 Newman, joined by some but not all of his followers, officially left the Church of England and his teaching post at Oxford University and was received into the Catholic Church. He was quickly ordained as a priest and continued as an influential religious leader, based in Birmingham.

In 1879, he was created a cardinal by Pope Leo XIII in recognition of his services to the cause of the Catholic Church in England. He was instrumental in the founding of the Catholic University of Ireland in 1854, although he had left Dublin by 1859. CUI in time evolved into University College Dublin, today the largest university in Ireland.

Newman was also a literary figure of note: his major writings include the Tracts for the Times (1833–1841), his autobiography Apologia Pro Vita Sua (1865–1866), the Grammar of Assent (1870), and the poem “The Dream of Gerontius” (1865), which was set to music in 1900 by Edward Elgar. He wrote the popular hymns “Lead, Kindly Light” and “Praise to the Holiest in the Height” (taken from Gerontius).

Newman's beatification was officially proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI on 19 September 2010 during his visit to the United Kingdom. His canonisation was officially approved by Pope Francis on 12 February 2019. On 1 July 2019, the Vatican announced that he will be canonised with four others by Pope Francis on 13 October 2019.