News
Spirituality



Detail of a carbon print of John Newman by Herbert Rose Barraud, 1887, published 1888 (©National Portrait Gallery, London)



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When the convert-cardinal, Blessed John Henry Newman, is canonized by Pope Francis on Oct. 13, it will be the culmination of a remarkable religious odyssey stretching back over two centuries.

In his native Britain, Newman (1801-1890) will be the first confessor, or non-martyr, saint proclaimed for more than 600 years, honored for achievements in life rather than death. It will also be a crowning moment for worldwide devotees of a man widely seen as an architect of the modern church.

"Of course, Newman dealt with issues from a 19th-century viewpoint, but his views of the role of laity and development of church doctrine are still of considerable relevance," said Jesuit Fr. John W. O'Malley, theology professor at Georgetown University. "Though his canonization doesn't mean he was right in every area, it's certainly a firm vindication of Newman, and a clear statement that his ideas were not only orthodox but also meaningful for today."

When Newman was beatified in Birmingham, England, on Sept. 19, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI praised his "keen intellect and prolific pen," which continued "to inspire and enlighten many all over the world."

Sure enough, the one-time Oxford University don remains one of the Christian world's best-known philosophers and theologians, and is said to be the subject of more doctoral studies at Rome's pontifical universities than any other modern figure.



Plaque installed by the Bedford Estate at 17 Southampton Place, Holborn, London (Wikimedia Commons/Spudgun67)

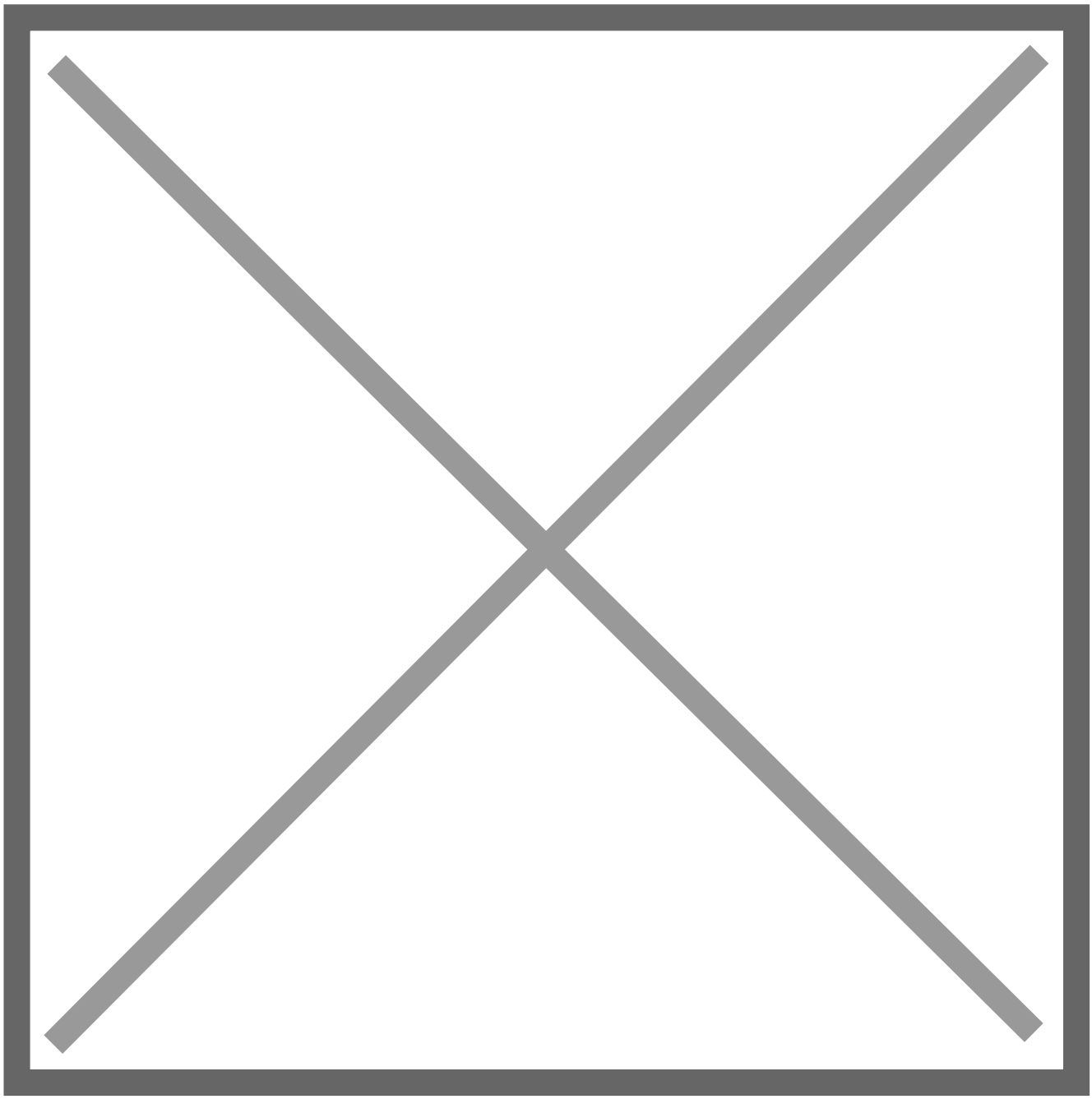
This may be due in part to his vast output in poetry, hymns, reflections and novels, and in classic works such as his *Meditations and Devotions, Parochial and Plain Sermons*, and autobiographical *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, which are still in print.

It took the Oxford University Press five decades to annotate and publish 32 large volumes of Newman's letters, while the first of 250,000 extra folios of correspondence, notes and photographs were published this summer, under an

interactive digitization program co-organized by Pittsburgh's National Institute for Newman Studies.

But Newman was also a deeply pastoral figure, experts stress, whose grasp of modern Christian dilemmas still teaches vital lessons.

"He wasn't just a lofty philosopher — he was also a priest and prophet, who foresaw the difficulties facing Christianity in a coming secular world," said Fr. Ignatius Harrison, provost of Birmingham's Oratory of St. Philip Neri, founded by the future saint in 1848. "He was loved in his lifetime not because everyone had read his intellectual masterpieces, for which he later became famous, but because of his pastoral kindness to the poor, unemployed and sick. All of this should become clear with his canonization."



Pope Benedict XVI leads Mass and the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman at Cofton Park in Birmingham, England, Sept. 19, 2010. Blessed Newman, a 19th-century theologian and a prolific writer on spiritual topics, left the Anglican Church and embraced Catholicism at the age of 44. An image of Newman appears at left. (CNS/Reuters/Andrew Winning)

Longstanding authority, appeal

Born the son of a London banker, Newman was raised in the Anglican Church of England, undergoing a conversion experience, aged 15, to a Calvinist-style faith.

He graduated and taught at Oxford University, serving as vicar of its St. Mary the Virgin church from 1828 to 1843, from where, with John Keble, Edmund Pusey and others, he co-led the Oxford Movement, which sought to rid the Church of England of state interference and revive its pre-Reformation beliefs and rituals.

In 1845, having concluded the Anglican via media, or middle way, between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism was a sham, Newman joined the Catholic Church, founding the oratory and helping set up a Catholic university in Ireland three years later.

Having been influential in Catholicism's revival in England after three centuries' repression and restriction, he was appointed a cardinal by Pope Leo XIII in 1879, and his thinking on church history, ecclesiology, the rights of conscience and role of laypeople is widely believed to have anticipated the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council.

O'Malley thinks Newman's deductions were badly needed by the Catholic Church in the 19th century, when new historical studies of the Bible and Christian history risked compromising its sacred claims.

Paradoxically, however, they had a greater effect in the 20th century, when issues of change and continuity took center stage, especially among English-speaking Catholics.

Disputes over Newman's intentions continued after his death from pneumonia, aged 89, on Aug. 11, 1890, while claims that he was a homosexual have also surfaced more recently, largely over his relationship with a fellow-Oratorian, Ambrose St. John, in whose grave he asked to be buried.

These have been dismissed by scholars such as Newman's foremost English biographer, Ian Ker, who insists Newman was called to celibacy and left no written hint of any gay inclination. Newman corresponded affectionately throughout his life with both men and women, Ker points out, while it was not unusual for close friends to wish to be interred together.

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He had "plenty of critics, not to say enemies," Ker noted in his biography. Yet not even the most casual observers read any significance "into an act of loving friendship, and indeed of humility, such as was left to the twentieth century to read into it."

"Newman's great achievements in literature, theology, philosophy and education stand firm — as does his important historical role in leading the Oxford Movement and later defining the relationship between faith and reason," Ker told NCR in an interview. "He saw how, in a pluralist society which was no longer religiously homogeneous, the church also had to adjust its teaching if it wasn't to become old and false. But he also brought to the church a deep understanding of the importance of personal conversion, giving him a stature which can only grow in years to come."

Newman's defense of personal conscience — described in his 1870 *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* as "a moral sense, and a sense of duty; a judgment of the reason and a magisterial dictate" — is acknowledged in the Catholic Church's 1992 Catechism, along with his writings on faith, Christian beatitude and the sense of the sacred.

It has also been used in a human rights context, and was cited by the White Rose student group of Sophie and Hans Scholl, which bravely opposed Nazi rule in wartime Munich.

Meanwhile, his defense of Catholic rights, set out in 1875 as *A Letter Addressed to His Grace The Duke of Norfolk on Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation*, have long since entered the Catholic mainstream. So have his thoughts on education, on freedom versus self-will, on the need for dogma as a counter to liberal ideology, and on the compatibility of science and theology as means of understanding the world.

When French theologians Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar and Jean Danielou launched a "nouvelle théologie," or ressourcement movement in the mid-20th century to shake the grip of dry, anti-modern neo-scholasticism over Catholic theology, they drew on Newman's appeal to Scripture and early church traditions, and for teachings grounded on real and concrete conditions.

> "Some saints are canonized who are models of Christian devotion but don't really have any significant impact on the church itself. But Newman should

> be viewed, by contrast, as the great theologian of post-Vatican II Catholicism." —Ian Ker, biographer of John Henry Newman

Great theologian saint

Newman's appeal has extended beyond the Catholic Church.

Orthodox theologians have appreciated his deep study of Greek fathers such as St. Athanasius, and detected an eastern flavor in his understanding of patristic tradition, Trinitarian theology and soteriology.

Thinkers from the Anglican Communion to which Newman once belonged, though troubled by his move to Rome, have also drawn heavily on his spiritual writings, as well as on his defense of doctrinal change and development.

It is, however, Newman's role as a precursor of Vatican II which is most often cited as proof his continuing importance.

In 1963, when the council was at its height, Pope Paul VI described Newman's spiritual journey as "the most toilsome, but also the greatest, the most meaningful, the most conclusive, that human thought ever travelled … during the modern era, to arrive at the fullness of wisdom and of peace."

Msgr. Roderick Strange, theology professor at London's Catholic St. Mary University, who edited Newman's letters, thinks many of his preoccupations came to the fore at the time, including "his championing of the church as a communion, of the rightful place of the laity, his concern for unity, and his recognition of the place of the church in the world, responding to the needs and challenges it finds there."

All such issues found their place in the council's work, Strange writes in a new book, making Newman's voice "prophetic."



Blessed John Henry Newman is seen in a portrait at a church in Rome. Although 32 annotated volumes of the cardinal's letters and diaries have been published over the last two decades, newly released material includes letters and correspondence to the future saint. (CNS/Crosiers)

Did not aim to be a saint

Although dozens of Catholic Reformation martyrs have been canonized in recent decades, Newman will be Britain's first saint to have lived in modern times.

His canonization was approved by Pope Francis in February, following recognition of two miracles at his intercession: the curing of Deacon Jack Sullivan of Marshfield, Massachusetts, from a severe spinal condition in 2001, and of Chicago's Melissa Villalobos from a subchorionic hematoma in 2013.

Though many saw him as a saint during his lifetime, prayers for his canonization were authorized by the church only in the 1940s, and his cause completed by the Birmingham Archdiocese in 1986 after two decades' work.

With much new material now being made available under the online database co-run by National Institute for Newman Studies, including Newman's hand-written prayer intentions, draft letters and personal notebooks, some devotees hope attention will now also focus on his simpler priestly role, beyond the world of lofty theological and philosophical pursuits.

When Benedict XVI beatified him nine years ago, the pope stressed that he also wished to go beyond Newman's "intellectual legacy" and reflect on "the warmth and humanity underlying his appreciation of the pastoral ministry."

That was the focus of a September statement by England's Cardinal Vincent Nichols, who praised Newman's "exploration of faith, depth of personal courage, intellectual clarity and cultural sensitivity," but also recalled how his ministry among the poor had provided "a permanent sign of the church's pastoral compassion."

A shrine to the saint is being restored at the Birmingham Oratory where he lived out his years, while a museum of his personal effects will also open there this autumn.

Harrison says requests for relics and mementos of Newman are now arriving from all over the world, as more Catholics pray to him and seek a personal link.

"Newman was often misunderstood during his life, but I think his time has come now and he'll emerge as a major saint for modern times," Harrison told NCR. "But he was primarily a priest and teacher, engaged in a lifelong quest for holiness. This will provide a boost for fellow pastors who aren't necessarily gifted intellectually but care for the souls of ordinary people in their parishes."

The new online database will incorporate material from the Birmingham Oratory that has remained hidden since Newman's death, including letters to the future saint from 19th-century figures such as British Prime Ministers Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone, and Cardinals Nicholas Wiseman and Henry Edward Manning, but also from ordinary people seeking his prayerful support.

All of this will facilitate further research into Newman's achievements. It also looks certain to spur calls for him to be declared a doctor of the church, placing him on a level with St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, of which Ker thinks is virtually certain.



Portrait of John Newman by Sir John Everett Millais, oil on canvas, 1881 (©National Portrait Gallery, London)

While Newman defended the place of the church and faith in the modern world with great intellectual and philosophical vigor, he was far from being a liberal, Ker points out, and could be abrasive and polemical.

But he grasped the complexity and vitality of the human mind, and instinctively sought to move minds and hearts by exploring the middle ground.

By his own account, it was Augustine's dictum, "*securus iudicat orbis terrarum*" (the verdict of the whole world is conclusive), which helped prompt Newman's choice for Rome over the Anglican via media.

But in so doing, he also proposed "a middle way between liberal Catholicism and Ultramontane papalism," Ker says, and continued to attach great importance "to personal conversion and evangelization, to knowing Christ through the Gospels."

"Newman was a complex and subtle thinker, who refused to see issues in black and white, and was both radical and conservative in his attitudes," Ker told NCR. "He would have backed the reformers at Vatican II but would also have anticipated how they would later divide into moderate and extreme factions. Although he certainly believed in objective truth, he also saw how people saw proofs differently, in a way which remains relevant to current debates on atheism, scientific reductionism and post-modernism."

Newman had inscribed on his Oratory cemetery gravestone the modest Latin slogan, "*ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*" (from shadows and images into the truth"), and insisted in a letter that he had "no tendency to be saint."

The Catholic Church has decided otherwise — a remarkable twist of fate which was famously foreseen by Britain's Foreign Secretary, Lord Rosebery, who travelled to Birmingham to see him laid out "just like saint" at his death.

"This was the end of the young Calvinist, the Oxford don, the austere vicar of St. Mary's," Rosebery recorded. "It seemed as if a whole cycle of human thought and life were concentrated in that repose. … Kindly light has led and guided Newman to this strange, brilliant, incomparable end."

[Jonathan Luxmoore covers church news from Oxford, England, and Warsaw, Poland. *The God of the Gulag* is his two-volume study of communist-era martyrs, published by Gracewing in 2016.]