

Q & A: Christopher Pramuk

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 16, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Q&A continues its celebration of Cardinal Newman's beatification. Today we hear from an American scholar of Newman who was kind enough to email us his comments, Professor Christopher Pramuk, Assistant professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati.

The question: What would Cardinal Newman say to the 21st century Church?

Professor Pramuk: First of all, I find it encouraging to remember that Newman lived in a time of polarization not unlike our own, and that he despised any form of what he called "bigotry," "dogmatism," or "partisanship" that would divide the Christian community into camps, each convinced of its own fidelity to truth. Against any such "narrow-mindedness," Newman urged his fellow Christians "most beautifully and brilliantly in the Oxford University Sermons" to nurture in themselves not only confidence in the doctrines of faith but also an intellectual humility that always expects to learn something new from others (including non-Christians). This combination of faith and humility he called "wisdom." For Newman, wisdom was the fruit of a vibrantly "catholic" imagination that always seeks after the whole of things, which strives prayerfully to see, and love, the world as God does.

What most concerns me today is not any single issue facing the Church so much as a kind of poverty of imagination that seems to be stunting our communal life and intellectual vitality at every turn. It is the same sort of cognitive dis-ease or malaise, I think, that dismayed Newman in the increasingly reactionary climate of the Church in the mid to late 19th century. But whether it comes from the "conservative" right or the "liberal" left, whether from hubris or from fear "and the longing for certainty in a sea of relativism" for Newman, the temptation to seize upon and elevate a fixed theological position or intractable vision of the Church at the expense of an ever more dynamic, tensive, and holistic vision of things is, in a word, fatal to the truly religious and Catholic imagination. Such a temptation not only risks foreclosing the necessary, if painful, dynamic of discernment and trust in the Spirit "a dynamism and, one might say, boldness of theological imagination that Newman cherished in the patristic Church. Even more, it risks foreclosing the possibility of conversion, that God might be calling us, in and through the labor pangs of discernment, toward ever more authentic and holy expressions of Christian belief and practice.

In short, Newman might gently (or not so gently) remind us that holiness in the life of the Church has never been simply about what we believe; it is also about how we discern and articulate those beliefs and, above all, strive to live them as a community bound together by faith. As he put it with disarming simplicity, hearkening to Jesus, our consummate Teacher and shepherd in faith, "We believe because we love." If we do not love, we give the lie to our professed beliefs.

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