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Q & A: Father Komonchak

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

We conclude our week of examining Cardinal Newman's relevance to the 21st century Church with wisdom from Father Joseph Komonchak, who taught ecclesiology at Catholic University for many years, and who wrote his dissertation on Newman.

Additionally, Father Komonchak has been running excerpts from Newman's writings at Commonweal's blog, which are very much worth checking out.

The question: What would Newman have to say to the Church of the 21st Century?

Father Komonchak:

It's always risky, of course, to claim to know what a very intelligent and holy man would say, if you are yourself not as holy and as intelligent. Let me simply point to three things Newman stressed that seem particularly pertinent today.

From the days of his evangelical conversion at the age of fifteen to his death seventy-five years later, Newman insisted that one's Christianity had to be realized, made real. This meant not simply that one had to make real to one's self the sacred privileges Christ won for us, making him and them the light by which the world was revealed for what it is ; it meant also making one's faith real through one's obedience to its demands, by repentance, by regular prayer, by participation in the life of the Church, by fidelity in little things until the virtues become the spontaneous orientations of one's own nature.

Secondly, Newman wished to see the cultivation of the intellect the major goal of Catholic education. This meant, the development of critical faculties, an ability to examine closely and fully the opinions of the day, and the overcoming of mere "viewiness." He wanted a well-educated laity, confident and competent as much in the knowledge of their faith as in specialized areas of knowledge. He pointed out

how distorted a university education is that excludes or marginalizes theology.

Thirdly, Newman insisted upon the role of authority in the Church. To be a Christian is to be the heir of the faith once delivered to the saints, mediated from generation to generation by a Church guided by the successors of the Apostles. If this makes teachableness an integral part of Christian virtue, it is also true that Church authority rests on the people's "admiration, trust, and love of Christ and his Church," and that these must ever be earned, and can be made much more difficult, by the way in which authority is exercised.

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All this week in his Distinctly Catholic blog, Michael Sean Winters is interviewing a variety of Newman scholars:

- Fr. Joseph Komonchak, taught ecclesiology at Catholic University, wrote his dissertation on Newman
- Christopher Pramuk, Assistant professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati
- Ian Ker, Professor at Oxford University and author of a Newman biography
- The Very Reverend Richard Duffield, the Provost of the Birmingham Oratory
- Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster and Primate of England

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