

The good words of John Henry Newman

His care with words stands as a reproach to simplistic, partisan, populist and polemical representations of Catholic life

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John Henry Newman (Photo courtesy: Catholic Church of England and Wales (Creative Commons))

It is fair to say that of English saints the newly canonised John Henry Newman is the most intellectual and active in public life since Thomas More. The number of Catholic educational institutions and professional guilds to be named after each man bears witness to that.

The title of Robert Bolt's searching play about More was *Man for All Seasons*. The same phrase could also be well referred to Newman, with the difference that for More winter came at the end of his life, whereas for Newman it came in the middle.

He had to negotiate through times of great personal and national change many of the anxieties and polarities that mark our own times. As a result he may bear reflection beyond the world of church today.

Newman crossed boundaries of temperament and culture.

He was a deeply private man who engaged fully in public life. He lived his faith in contact with the secularising trends that shaped politics and religious faith. He lost his faith at school after reading contemporary philosophical writing and returned to it through his contact with Evangelical teachers.

In the debates that marked the Anglican Church in the first half of the 19th century he had to deal with liberal ideas about faith and the place of church in society.

Through his reading during these debates he came to an understanding that continuity with the Christian tradition was represented most fully in the Catholic Church.

When he became a Catholic his path took him from the broad culture and ethos of the Britain in which he was raised into the narrower world of the Church to which he came.

Catholics who celebrate Newman's canonisation may do so for differing reasons. Some will find encouragement in the breadth of his faith and in his insistence on the primacy of conscience.

Others will be reassured by his insistence on the authority of scripture and of Church councils in matters of faith and church life. He held together strands of living faith that today are often opposed to one another. He also challenges both groups.

For him freedom of conscience meant more than making unforced choices about belief. It required work and had its costs.

The gift of finding good words

Before his decision to join the Catholic Church he read in the original language the many volumes of the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church. And his decision cost him friendships, the certainty of preferment in the Anglican Church and his cultural home.

His insistence on the authority of tradition, too, placed him in a continuing life of exploration within a community and not in a secure fortress of certainties over it. It made him a player, not a referee.

In this season of discontent in our public life the way in which he managed these tensions makes him of wider interest.

His wide reading, scholarship, respect for his arguing partners and care in finding right words enabled him to appeal to the heart as well as the head. He met his interlocutors as persons and equals, not merely as an impersonal collective.

When conversation turns to faith it is common to regard the gift of finding good words as no more than a decoration on the hard reasoning that faith demands. Newman stands as a reproach to that view.

The rhythms, images and music of his words opened the hearts of his readers and hearers to attend to his argument, and carried them through the complexities of the reality that he unfolded.

His famous sermon on the Second Spring of Catholicism in Great Britain encouraged and emboldened a small community to look beyond their poverty of resources to the great tradition that they represented. His care with words, too, stands as a reproach to simplistic, partisan, populist and polemical representations of Catholic life.

Newman's life points to the importance of finding a rhetoric appropriate for communicating religious and political ideas. His rhetorical store included single sentences of balanced clauses extending over a page and a half.

In our time political and religious rhetoric is often based on Twitter and the op ed — single sentence or single screen. That discipline is valuable for commending conciseness, but when reality is complex its balanced consideration requires a more ample treatment.

Newman's rhetoric corresponded to his vision of the reality of the world and of faith as organic.

For him reality, like trees, had deep roots and spreading branches, with all its parts related to and dependent on one another.

He consistently commended the organic connections within the faith of the early church and with other churches, and argued against the simple slogans and mutually exclusive alternatives offered both within and outside the Catholic Church. For him the health of the foliage and the depth of the roots were crucial.

As a theologian Newman's great gift was for finding images appropriate to his subject which stirred hope.

The penury of contemporary political and theological polemic is reflected in the tired and simplistic images for God's presence, for personal value and for social goods. To kindle hope, better images that generate more generous words are required.

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