

Homily for October 10, 2019 <sup>1</sup>

Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> Week of Ordinary Time

When reading today's Gospel I was also thinking about the English Anglican Convert to Catholicism, John Henry Newman. Newman lived between 1801-1890, and this Sunday, October 13<sup>th</sup> Pope Francis will canonize him.

Soon to be, "St John Henry Newman" understood what it meant to "ask, seek and knock". His was one of the keenest minds in the 2000-year Catholic Tradition. Why is Newman so important?

He was someone who showed a way to be Catholic that was opposed to a kind of liberalism that was very prevalent in his day and still is today. When he was made a Cardinal in 1879, Newman bluntly announced that his entire professional career could be rightly characterized as a struggle against liberalism in matters of religion. By "liberalism" he meant the view that there is no objective and reliable truth in regard to religious claims.

He also famously said that:

*here below to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often."*

On the one hand Newman challenged the kind of liberalism that is so open to the culture that we lose our Catholic distinctiveness. But he also challenged the kind of conservatism that views Catholicism as a museum made up of objets d'arts that need to be protected and preserved against an antagonistic and hostile world.

Newman said no to both of these. What was needed was a robust orthodoxy that understood that there is objective and eternal truth which we encounter in our unfolding earthly lives. Not only are we changed by this truth, but we also develop ways in thinking about the truth.

Newman called this the *Development of Doctrine*. Therefore, we are not to be curators of a museum but those called to cultivate a flourishing garden of life. When we understand this, we see the great Catholic Tradition as the complex root system that allows for the flourishing garden.

So, what did John Henry Newman mean by the development of doctrine? Let me use an example. If you have ever been to Bow Lake, which is near Lake Louise, you will know these are the headwaters of the Bow River. The water source does not look like a river but from these headwaters the Bow River develops and grows so that by the time you follow the river to Calgary, it looks very different from Bow Lake originating 200 kilometres to the west of Calgary.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/video/bishop-barron-on-pope-francis-tradition-and-john-henry-newman/>

Newman taught that doctrines, that is the truths of our faith, develop in a similar way. Here is another organic example. This hand is my 58- year-old hand. It is the same hand I had when I was born, but over the years it has developed and matured, so that I could write my homily on the keyboard last evening and play Beethoven on the piano and mash potatoes for supper. In other words, this hand is continuous with my infant and childhood hand but also very different, it has developed and changed often.

Newman said doctrine does not exist dumbly on the printed page but exists in the play of lively minds. A mind receives an idea, assess it, questions it, wonders about it, turns it over and then that lively mind will toss the idea to another lively mind that will engage in an exchange like a tennis match. Different nuances appear and come into the light as ideas are shared and developed.

So, while opposed to the kind of liberalism that claims there is no reliable objective truth, Newman celebrated that to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often.

When something is alive it is always in the process of evaluating and assessing, questioning and answering and changing – kind of like an animal reacting and interacting with its environment. What keeps an animal itself? What keeps it integral, is its capacity to change. An animal that can't change or adapt, is a dead animal. If you are wanting to preserve the animal in its organic integrity it has open to its ongoing development. It changes to remain the same.

People who are taking Jesus to heart in today's parable will live their lives always governed by the truth but persistently desiring to grow, mature and change in accordance with that truth.

I can attest that like Newman I was captured by the Truth of Jesus Christ from my early twenties. And like Newman I came to see that within the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church the biblical teachings that I have loved for decades find their fullest development and expression.

Thanks be to God for the wisdom, intelligence of dedicated persistence of John Henry Newman. When we ask, seek and knock the door is opened so that we can in the words of today's Collect pray:

***Almighty ever living God, increase our faith, hope and charity, and make us love what you command, so that we may merit what you promise.***