

Blessed John Henry Newman (1801–1890)

Sermon Preached at the Toronto Oratory

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IT PLEASES ME greatly to return to the Toronto Oratory to celebrate the beatification of John Henry Newman. In 2004, at the invitation of the Provost, I preached on the feast day of Saint Philip Neri. Today I come to honor the latest of his sons to attain the honors of the altar. John Henry Newman now joins the company of those other Oratorians whose sanctity the Church recognizes: Saint Luigi Scrosoppi (1804–1884), herald of divine Providence and father of the poor; Blessed Juvenal Ancina (1545–1604), self-sacrificing bishop and defender of truth; Blessed Anthony Grassi (1592–1671), angel of peace and hidden hero of the confessional; Blessed Sebastian Valfrè (1629–1710), dedicated catechist and patron of military chaplains; and Blessed Joseph Vaz (1651–1711), the apostle of Sri Lanka, whose ministry fell during a period of anti-Catholic sentiment in what was then Dutch Ceylon, although “his heroic charity, shown in a particular way in his selfless devotion to the victims of [an] epidemic in 1697, earned him,” so declared Pope John Paul II, “the respect of everyone.”¹ All in all, an impressive list.

John Henry Newman of course died in 1890. According to my count, each century since the death in 1595 of Saint Philip Neri has produced a saint or blessed from the Oratory. Some from the twentieth century admittedly remain to emerge. But, as T. S. Eliot assures us, “There will be

¹ Homily of the Holy Father John Paul II at the Eucharistic Celebration for the Beatification of Father Joseph Vaz, Galle Face Green, Colombo, Saturday, 21 January 1995, no. 4.

time, there will be time.”² For when Pope Benedict XVI beatified Cardinal Newman, he also displayed before the Church the perennial grace of the Oratory. The Pope affirmed tacitly that the vocation of Philip Neri, when embraced authentically, produces saints. Who are these sons of Saint Philip Neri? They are priests, first of all, who give themselves over to the things that Catholic clerics have been doing for ages: prayer, study, preaching, and the sacraments. What theological gene distinguishes Oratorians from other forms of clerical life? Allow a Dominican to answer this question. The Oratory creates a unique environment wherein the Catholic priest can discover his primordial vocation. In a word, I refer to the priest’s specific vocation to holiness, a vocation based on the sacrament of Holy Orders.³ The Oratory’s close-knit community centered around silent meditations in common sustains a life of specifically priestly holiness and, as Newman and the others demonstrate, can shape a man to practice even heroic priestly virtue.

Within the daily *horarium* of the Oratory, time passes according to the rhythms of divine Providence and in the exercise of Godly charity. This consecration explains why so many of the Oratory’s recognized holy ones distinguish themselves both for trusting a wise and loving Father and for “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). The followers of Philip Neri waste no time preparing faces for the faces that they meet. They rather spend their days practicing headship, shepherding, and enacting the bridal love that caused the heart of their spiritual father to burst, ecstatically. No wonder Blessed Anthony Grassi exclaimed upon entering the Oratory, “Oh, what, what can make us worthy of the honour of being sons of St. Philip?”⁴

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Newman chose the Oratory on account of the unique place Filippone’s arrangement holds among priestly fraternities, “a middle way between a religious order and the diocesan priesthood.”⁵ On their way to study at the College of the Propaganda in Rome and during their sojourn there, Newman and Ambrose St. John inquired about the religious Orders. The recent converts from the Church of England concluded that these familiar

² T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 14.

³ See the 1992 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, “I Will Give You Shepherds,” *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 20.

⁴ Lady Amabel Kerr, *A Saint of the Oratory: The Life of Blessed Antony Grassi, of the Fermo Congregation* (London: Burns & Oates, 1901), 20. For the original Italian, “Oh quando ci rende degni d’onore e riverenza l’esser figliuoli di S. Filippo!” see Cristofaro Antici, *Vita del Beato Padre Antonio Grassi della Congregazione dell’Oratorio di Fermo* (Rome: Tipografia Vaticana, 1900).

⁵ Ian Kerr, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 328.

Roman Catholic institutions would not enable them to achieve their aspirations, namely, to live and work together as Catholic priests in England. While in Italy, these Englishmen even cast a furtive glance at the Dominicans, who effectively had disappeared from England after the Reformation. They were, I regret to inform you, not impressed. In an 1846 letter to his younger friend, J. D. Dalgairns, Newman wrote: "We hear no good whatever of the Dominicans."⁶ Newman then went on to explain: "We have been asking Ghianda about the Dominicans, and whether they had preserved their traditions any where. He said he thought they had at Florence, and some where else. We asked him what he meant—why that they were still Thomists etc. However, on further inquiry we found that the said Dominicans of Florence were manufacturers of scented water, etc and had very choice wines in their cellar. He [Ghianda] considered La Cordaire quite a new beginning, a sort of knight errant, and not a monk."⁷ Don Giovanni Ghianda was a Milanese priest on whom Newman and St. John relied for counsel during their brief sojourn in the Lombardic capital.⁸

Today historians agree that Jean-Baptiste-Henri-Dominique Lacordaire was about much more than knight-errantry. He restored the Dominicans in post-Revolutionary France, and so defended the liberty of religious orders to exist there alongside the diocesan clergy.⁹ It remains one of those mysteries of divine Providence that, during their time on earth, Newman and Lacordaire neither met nor corresponded.¹⁰ In the mid-nineteenth century however, God directed both Newman and Lacordaire to Italy so that each of them would accomplish what Nietzsche later in the same century ascribed only to the *Übermensch*, namely, "insatiably calling out

⁶ John Dobree Dalgairns was born in the island of Guernsey, 21 October 1818, and died 6 April 1876, at St. George's Retreat, Burgess Hill, near Brighton, England.

⁷ From a letter to J. D. Dalgairns, dated Milan, Oct. 18/46, in Charles Stephen Dessain, ed., *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Volume XI: Littlemore to Rome, October 1845 to December 1846 (London: Nelson, 1961), 263.

⁸ Giovanni Battista Ghianda (1803–70), Milanese priest, ordained in 1827. He was Alessandro Manzoni's chaplain, and from 1840 to 1846 acted as a confessor at the Church of San Fedele. In 1847 he became Rector of the Church of San Bernardo and of a college, but was removed, probably by the Austrians, in 1848. From 1858 until his death he was Prefect of the Basilica of Santa Maria presso San Celso. See Dessain, *Letters and Diaries*, Index, 341.

⁹ For further information, see *Lacordaire, son pays, ses amis et la liberté des ordres religieux en France*, ed. Guy Bedouelle (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1991).

¹⁰ Newman, however, knew of Lacordaire. In a letter to Emily Bowles, dated The Oyster Bay, March 31/65, he wrote: "Yet observe, Lacordaire, with whom I so much sympathize, was a fiery orator and a restless originator—yet he failed, as I have failed." See Dessain, *Letters and Diaries*, Volume XXI: The Apologia, January 1864 to June 1865 (London: Nelson, 1971), 440.

da capo, not only to himself, but to the whole piece and play.”¹¹ The “piece and play” that both Newman and Lacordaire confronted differed greatly from what the author of *Beyond Good and Evil* would describe. These giants of Catholic renewal took up their challenges before a daunting secularization that threatened to subordinate both God and religion to the cultural forces and political realities that dominated England and the Continent. Both Dominican and Oratorian wearied not of saying *Da capo*! “Take it from the top.” Lacordaire effectively restored the worldwide Dominican Order, while Cardinal Newman took up in an exemplary fashion the work of the Oratory so as to become its second founder.

In his illuminating study, *The Politics of Religion in Napoleonic Italy*, Michael Broers describes what he calls “the war against God,” the Enlightenment campaign that Napoleon conducted in Northern Italy starting in 1801, the year of Newman’s birth.¹² We learn that the French imperialist occupation gave the regular clergy, among them the Dominicans, a very hard time. Napoleon was swift to use confiscation and strong-arm tactics that overnight left the Dominicans homeless and without support. No surprise that the Friars Preachers had grown lukewarm. It takes more time to recover from a programmatic suppression than it does to replenish a wine cellar. The French regime in Northern Italy caused the Dominicans and other religious institutes great harm. Before Napoleon’s arrival, there were 750 Dominican houses in Italy; afterwards, there remained 105.¹³ In any event, Newman’s short-lived interest in a Dominican vocation may be ascribed to the designs of a divine Providence that orders all things sweetly.¹⁴ The Dominicans were not ready to receive Newman, and so he fell into the arms of Saint Philip Neri, into the three-hundred-year tradition of sanctity that, by then, the Oratory had enshrined.

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At the Mass in Cofton Park, Pope Benedict began his list of Newman’s virtues with reference to what Oratorians do best. As their name suggests, the sons of Philip Neri pray and pray together. “He [Newman] reminds us,” the Pope said, “that faithfulness to prayer gradually transforms us into the divine likeness. As he wrote in one of his many fine sermons, ‘a habit

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. H. Zimmern (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1907), no. 56, p. 74.

¹² Michael Broers, *The Politics of Religion in Napoleonic Italy: The War against God, 1801–1814* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹³ W.A. Hinnebusch, O.P., “Dominicans,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967) 4:974–82, at 980.

¹⁴ When he had ruled out the Dominicans, Newman wrote in 1846 to Archbishop Wiseman to ask “what he would think of the *third* order of St Dominic.” See Dessain, *Letters and Diaries*, XI, 305.

of prayer, the practice of turning to God and the unseen world in every season, in every place, in every emergency—prayer, I say, has what may be called a natural effect in spiritualizing and elevating the soul. A man is no longer what he was before; gradually . . . he has imbibed a new set of ideas, and become imbued with fresh principles’ (*Parochial and Plain Sermons*, iv, 230–231).¹⁵ The Pope draws our attention to Newman’s view of the connaturalizing effects of prayer. The Dominican Thomas Aquinas explains this transformation that personal prayer works in us by reference to the conversation that especially characterizes friendship. “Now, the conversation of man with God is by contemplation of Him,” Aquinas wrote, “just as the Apostle used to say: ‘Our conversation is in heaven’ (Phil 3:20).”¹⁶ Blessed Newman supplies one model for maintaining a prayerful, contemplative spirit.

The Pope, in the same homily, described the active life of Birmingham’s best-known Oratorian: “Newman helps us to understand what [service to God] means for our daily lives: he tells us that our divine Master has assigned a specific task to each one of us, a ‘definite service,’ committed uniquely to every single person: ‘I have my mission,’ he wrote, ‘I am a link in a chain, a bond of connexion between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do his work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place . . . if I do but keep his commandments and serve him in my calling’ (*Meditations and Devotions*, 301–2).”¹⁷ The Pope went on to draw our attention to the divine Providence that guides the devout Christian along the path of beatific fulfillment, “to rest forever after earthly strife/In the calm light of everlasting life.”¹⁸ Blessed John Henry’s “Lead, Kindly Light” suggests that our newly beatified Oratorian stood much closer to the authentic Dominican spirit than to certain of its nineteenth-century manifestations from which he shied away. No question about what he thought, however. Newman found us—the Dominicans—foreign to his ethos. On 31 December 1846, he again wrote to his friend Dalgairns, “I think that it would be impossible for me ever to be a Dominican.”¹⁹

Today we commemorate a newly beatified priest of the Oratory. To remark on the similarities between the Dominican ideal and Blessed John Henry Newman illustrates the common vision that the Church holds up

¹⁵ Mass with the Beatification of Venerable Cardinal John Henry Newman, Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Cofton Park of Rednal–Birmingham, Sunday, 19 September 2010.

¹⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, Bk. IV, trans. C. J. O’Neil (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), chap. 22. 2, p. 125.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, Beatification Homily.

¹⁸ John Henry Newman, “Lead, Kindly Light” (1833).

¹⁹ Dessain, *Letters and Diaries*, XI, 305.

for holy priests. The Dominican motto expresses it well: *contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere*. To contemplate, and to give to others the fruit of one's contemplation. Newman prayed, and he worked. While his biography contains countless examples of his charity, no one doubts that the Church best remembers John Henry Newman, as Pope Benedict XVI said on 19 September 2010, for "applying his keen intellect and his prolific pen to many of the most pressing 'subjects of the day.'" ²⁰ If his major works and treatises do not suffice, then let the thirty-two published volumes of his letters and diaries confirm that Newman unceasingly devoted himself to the sanctification of the intellect. A man of Newman's magnitude can never escape the scrutiny of critics. During his life and in the twelve decades since his death, one aspect or another of his life and work has grasped the attention of those who judge only from a purely human viewpoint. To critics such as these, our reply can only follow that of Christ to the Pharisees: "You judge according to the flesh, I judge no one" (Jn 8:15).

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The Holy Father closed his homily at the beatification Mass with words that Newman assigns to the "First Choir of Angelicals." Allow me to close by quoting also from *The Dream of Gerontius*. Now, however, citing words that Newman places on the lips of one Angel:

How, even now, the consummated Saints
See God in heaven, I may not explicate;
Meanwhile, let it suffice thee to possess
Such means of converse as are granted thee,
Though, till that Beatific Vision, thou art blind;
For e'en thy purgatory, which comes like fire,
Is fire without its light.²¹

At Rednal's Cofton Park, Pope Benedict declared that John Henry Newman now lives beyond the fire without light. Now he lives by the *lumen gloriae*, the divinizing light of glory that the citizens of heaven enjoy. Now he lives with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint Philip Neri and the other saints and blessed of the Oratory, and with the whole company of holy ones who enjoy the Beatific Vision to which we pray—Blessed John Henry Newman interceding—we all one day may attain.²² For ever and ever. Amen. N V

²⁰ Benedict XVI, Beatification Homily.

²¹ Newman, *The Dream of Gerontius*, §4. Soul.

²² See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 12, a. 5, ad 3: "Unde lumen gloriae non potest esse naturale creaturae, nisi creatura esset naturae divinae; quod est impossibile. Per hoc enim lumen fit creatura rationalis deiformis, ut dictum est."