

# The Newman Association's aid to Polish Catholic intellectuals in Britain, 1942-1962

By Jonathan Bush

*"The test of our sincerity in the cause of justice is our concern for the resurrection of Poland, no less nay, even more, than the liberation of every other persecuted people".*

This quote, taken from a radio broadcast delivered on Sunday September 13<sup>th</sup> 1941 by Arthur Hinsley, cardinal archbishop of Westminster, is a reminder of the important and enduring relationship between the Catholic Church in Britain and the Central European state of Poland. It was spoken within the context of the Second World War and the continuing devastation caused by the German occupation of the country two years previously. But it remained applicable to the Catholic Church's attitude in the period following that war, when the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe fell under the control of Soviet-influenced Communist governments.

Poles, along with Czechoslovakians, Hungarians, Latvians and Lithuanians, fled their homelands to escape from religious persecution, arriving in Britain in their thousands during the late 1940s and 1950s. Many lay Catholic associations, independent from hierarchical control, took it upon themselves to organise initiatives and raise funds for these exiles. The Newman Association was particularly active in supporting the tertiary education of Polish exiles in Britain in the Second World War and its aftermath by working closely with other Catholic and non-Catholic bodies to create an international centre for the dissemination of information to Polish and other Central and East European exiles; by raising money for grants to support Polish students in British and Polish universities; and by arranging cultural exchange programmes between British and Polish intellectuals.

Many readers will be familiar with the early history of the Newman Association. Its very foundation in 1942 was an expression of the growing confidence of the lay Catholic middle class during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The organisation was established as a graduate society for both laity and clergy, developing out of a student organisation, the University Catholic Societies Federation. It was heavily influenced by John Henry Newman's concept of an educated laity and its active involvement in the Catholic Church and the wider society. Indeed its main object, as set out in the memorandum of association, was "to further the mission to the world of the Christian religion with particular reference to the Roman Catholic Church and in the light of the life and work of John Henry Newman, by promoting greater understanding of the Christian faith and the application of its principles to the contemporary world".

From its inception, therefore, the Association wished to foster a deeper understanding of the Catholic faith within the context of the contemporary world,

actively encouraging its members to use their skills and knowledge to tackle the theological, social, political, and cultural questions of the day from a Catholic perspective. It was the purpose of the Association to utilise lay members of the Catholic Church in this mission and to seek “to bring greater recognition of the role of lay Catholics both as apostles to the church and as an important voice within the church for greater democracy and accountability”. In 1950 the Newman Association boasted a membership of 1,500 Catholic graduates “drawn from various professions and walks of life”. As well as a national Council it also formed local Circles, in most of the major British cities, with responsibility for organising events at the local level. Unlike the Catholic Union, which dated back to the 1870s, the Newman Association was not under the direct control of the Catholic hierarchy, seeing itself more as “a partner, if only a junior partner”.

From the very outset of the Newman Association international events were high on the agenda. Indeed, the history of the Newman Association began with a meeting of an “international committee” on 5 October 1941, formalised a year later in the drawing up of a constitution for the organisation. In February 1943, the Association responded to a request by the Government to set up “a body of voluntary organisations interested in material and moral relief in post-war Europe”.

It was not, however, until after the war that a more formal policy towards Polish exiles was instigated. In November 1945 Frank Aylward, the chairman and secretary of the Association’s International Committee, together with the MP for Birmingham Moseley, Sir Patrick Hannon, met a delegation from the Polish Catholic Graduate Group formed at the recent Pax Romana Congress. At this meeting it was agreed that the International Committee would provide English-language classes for the benefit of those Poles arriving in England who had recently been liberated from concentration camps in Europe. The International Committee also expressed an interest in establishing an academic assistance committee to provide financial assistance to seminary and university students. Almost from its very inception, therefore, the work of the Newman Association was tied to the fate of the Catholics of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Newman Association was just one of several organisations, lay Catholic and non-Catholic, whose aim was to assist in post-war European reconstruction. Rather than remain isolated working within their own spheres, such organisations soon realised that collaboration was essential to achieve their aims. The Newman Association, with its influential backing and professional contacts, was often in the vanguard of initiatives in this regard, receiving the backing of the Hierarchy. For example, it worked closely with the Anglo-Polish Catholic Society and the Catholic Council for Polish Welfare, in matters affecting Polish relief. The Association was also represented on governmental boards with three International Committee members,

sitting on the Central European Affairs Committee, and together drawing up a memorandum on the issue of Polish and other European exiles.

### **Newman Centre**

It was an undoubtedly a lay Catholic initiative, the opening of a “Newman Centre” by the Newman Association, which provided a focal point of support for exiled Central and Eastern Europeans. Acting as an international hub for overseas Catholic visitors, the Centre at 23 Hereford House, Park Street, London was made available to the Association by a generous benefactor. Opening on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1942, the Centre quickly established itself as the cultural nucleus of the Polish exiled community. It is important to point out that functions were not only held for Eastern European countries, but also for groups and individuals from elsewhere, including receptions for parties from France, Germany, the United States and India. Other receptions were arranged for delegates of conferences on all sorts of Catholic and non-Catholic topics, such as the Conference of Lawyers and the International Catholic Radio Movement.

In this sense, the Newman Centre reached out to Catholics and non-Catholics far beyond its initial remit and helped to establish the Centre’s “place in the intellectual life of London”. In 1948 the Centre moved to larger premises at 31 Portman Square. During the 1950s, the Association’s international events were included in “Today’s Arrangements” in *The Times* and, by 1957, it could claim that its Centre had, “become known over the past ten years to members of Pax Romana in more than 40 countries, and hundreds of visitors have called each year in search of information, advice and introductions”.

An important aspect of cultural activity at the Centre took the form of international lecture-discussion meetings, with the main meeting taking place on the first Sunday of each month after Mass. There were also regular weekly meetings to hear a range of respected international speakers lecturing on a variety of topics, as well as monthly “parliamentary evening” meetings. Central and Eastern Europe began to receive greater attention at many meetings following the Yalta Conference in February 1945, in which “members were left in no uncertainty...of the evils to come”. Talks were given on a variety of international topics but lectures on the situation in Central and Eastern Europe remained a popular choice of topic throughout the late 1940s and 1950s.

The Newman Centre also hosted major international conferences on similar themes, many of which proved to be extremely popular. One of the biggest conferences organised by the Newman Association was on “Communism” in 1952. Preparations began in March for a December conference with the Union of Catholic Students and also with noted authorities on the subject including Sir Desmond Morton, who was head of the Foreign Office’s counter-Bolshevist section in the early 1920s. The programme for the conference included as speakers Rev. D. J. B. Hawkins,

Richard O'Sullivan Q.C. and Sir David Kelly, amongst others, and papers were published in a special edition of *Blackfriars*, the Dominican journal. The conference, which made a profit of £14 7s 6d, was a very successful one for the International Committee. The number of delegates present was not recorded but temporary loudspeakers were installed in the library because the audience was too large to be accommodated in the lecture room.

An essential element of life at the Newman Centre was its social aspect for exiles from different countries. These "casual meetings" allowed the opportunity for people to form friendships and for networks to be established. In 1955, the "At Home" aspect of the Sunday afternoon meetings was expanded "in order to give Newman members and visitors from abroad the opportunity to meet one another". There were three large receptions during the year for members of Central and Eastern European countries, as well as students and graduates from Africa and Asia. Such events allowed Poles to feel integrated into the émigré community, thus inhibiting the possibility of developing mental illnesses, such as depression, schizophrenia or hysteria, common to migrant communities.

Financing the Centre remained a constant problem for the Newman Association's International Committee in its early years. On May 8<sup>th</sup> 1946 Hereford House was forced to close because the Committee could not afford for it to remain open. It was not until December 1948 that a new building, 31 Portman Square in London, was officially opened by Cardinal Griffin. To avoid the financial issues which had beset its previous home a charitable trust was established, the Newman International Foundation, on 8 April 1946, "to support the international programme of the Association and to acquire and administer an International Centre".

Contributions were required from members, who were urged to contribute an additional sum of money annually to the International Foundation on top of their Newman membership subscription. This was fully supported by the Hierarchy with the Cardinal promising £1,000 a year for two years for the maintenance of an international office and a further £1,000 a year for several years for the support of the proposed new International Centre. Regular collections were taken from churches in support of the International Centre. This allowed the Newman International Centre the financial stability to establish itself on a firmer footing, with the Newman International Fund trustees recording an annual turnover of £12,000 in 1952.

### **Newman Scholarships**

As well as providing a cultural hub for the Polish Catholic intellectual community, the Newman Association assisted those students unable to take their degrees in their home country because of the suppression of Polish universities by the communist government. In 1946, the Association decided to set up a programme to help fund

scholarships for undergraduate and postgraduate students to undertake a course at a British university, as well as aiding Polish graduates seeking employment in Britain. To fund the venture an additional charitable fund, the Newman Educational Foundation, was set up with a committee including Professor A. J. Allmand and the 12<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Lothian. This fund was active until 1949, when its functions were absorbed into the Newman International Foundation.

The aim of the Educational Foundation was twofold: firstly, “to enable the exiles to preserve the continuity of their Christian culture” and, secondly, “to enable them to make some useful contribution to their own countries when they returned and to the countries of their adoption while they were in exile”. The Association’s stance could thus be viewed as an attempt to bolster the defence of Christianity against the communist persecution of religion in the Soviet satellite states.

The educational assistance programme faced notable difficulties from the outset in post-war Britain. British universities were overcrowded and Central and Eastern European exiles were required to compete for university places with British servicemen returning from overseas. The first task of the Association was therefore to work with influential figures within the universities to allocate places for Polish exiles. Initial arrangements were made with Irish institutions with President A. O’Rahilly of University College, Cork, agreeing to the Foundation’s request for twelve Polish students to be given places and to be subsidised directly by the Newman Educational Foundation itself, with a further grant from official sources to be received later.

In December 1946, it was reported that Professor Conway of University College, Dublin, and Fr. Browne of Galway, had offered twenty fee-paying places to Polish students. The project was extended and, at one stage, 150 Polish students had been accepted on to courses at University College, Dublin, and other Irish universities alongside official grants totalling over £100,000. The money for the Foundation was raised through appeals to Newman members, as well as donations from the Apostolic Delegate, the Catholic Council for Polish Welfare and other bodies.

However, the reality was one of financial hardship for these students. Initial responsibility for postwar Polish education fell to the Interim Treasury Committee for Polish Questions, an administrative body within the Treasury, with significant Polish representation including Count Edward Raczyński. In December 1946, the Interim Treasury Committee could not afford to pay the Polish students arriving in Dublin and Galway. It was only the efforts of Count Belinski, who managed to divert funds earmarked for Cork to be used as a loan for Dublin, that prevented the students from effectively being abandoned. In July 1947, the CCPW provided a donation of £2,500 and the Interim Treasury Committee was also able to raise an additional £2,500 to ensure that sufficient money was available to maintain the Polish students until September 1947.

The Polish Resettlement Act in March 1947 transferred the responsibility for Polish education from the Interim Treasury Committee to the Committee for Education of Poles in Great Britain led by George Gator. This ensured that Polish students were eligible for Ministry of Education grants, with £50,000 provided for sixty scholarships for Irish universities. There would now be little need for the Educational Foundation to offer its scholarship programme to Polish undergraduates in Ireland but, as Dr Aylward pointed out, “it was clear that these 60 scholarships would not have been awarded if the Newman Educational Foundation had not taken the initiative with the Irish negotiations in the previous year”.

The Newman Educational Foundation turned its attention to English universities. In October 1948, two research students were being helped at the University of London with money available for a further student. Many of the exiles receiving aid to study in England were often in a similar precarious financial situation to those at Irish universities, particularly once the Educational Foundation was subsumed into the International Foundation and funds began to dry up. Between 1950 and 1952 the minutes of the Newman International Fund meetings regularly noted the difficulties faced by Polish beneficiaries and extra money was often allocated to relieve their financial difficulties. By the early 1950s, however, these endeavours were beginning to bear fruit. The Newman Association’s Annual Report confidently proclaimed a number of successes. The trustees noted that, with the exception of the Catholic Council of Polish Welfare, “no Catholic organisation in Britain has done so much to assist the Poles” with the scholarship programme.

### **Exchange Visits**

By the late 1950s and early 1960s the political situation in Eastern Europe was beginning to improve slowly and the Newman Association became more involved with facilitating tours to and from Poland. A three-week study tour of Britain, for example, was arranged by the International Committee for a group of Polish visitors from professional circles. This was organised by Dr F. Sawicki, a Warsaw physician, who invited the Klub Intelligencji Katolickiej (Warsaw Club of Catholic Intellectuals) to England. This club was one of a limited number of organisations established to provide a “discreet outlet for non-Marxist intellectuals in major Polish cities” following the appointment of Wladyslaw Gomulka as the Communist leader of Poland in October 1956.

The group arrived on April 28<sup>th</sup> 1960, meeting various representatives of the Polish community in London and they were entertained by Newman members in London, Oxford, Birmingham, Manchester, York, Cambridge and other places. The English Catholic community was, however, far from united in support of this visit. A report in the *Catholic Herald* questioned the Newman Association’s part in allowing “Communist collaborators” into the country. The International Committee’s response

was to “damp down any correspondence that may take place in the paper”, publishing a supportive article in *The Newman*, the Association’s own journal, to allay any fears of the provincial circles. Following the visit a hope was expressed for a return trip to Poland and this did indeed occur the following year.

In an article entitled “Lublin: so near and yet so far” by Dr J. M. Capes, a description was given of a visit by two Newman delegates to Lublin during August 5<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> 1961, as guests of the Klub Intelligencji Katolickiej. The purpose of the visit was “to attend a seminar organised by the Club, on ‘European Tradition and the Future’, to see something of Polish life and culture, and to consider some of the problems facing Polish Catholics today”.

The Newman Association also began to develop a strategy to assist students in the Catholic University of Lublin by providing grants to study in England. Mrs Vivienne Greene, the Hon Secretary of the Oxford Newman Circle (and also the estranged wife of the author Graham Greene), contacted the International Committee to ask if they could meet with Professor Mroczkowski, head of the Department of English at the Catholic University of Lublin. It was agreed that two one-year scholarships could be offered at Oxford University for post-graduate research assistants from Lublin. The two Lublin scholars, Miss Janicka and Mr Swieczkowski, arrived in England in February 1957, with Miss Janicka’s fees and expenses being paid jointly by the Catholic Women’s League and the Newman International Fund. Further links were cemented by the Association’s agreement with the Rector of Lublin University to provide a one-year lectureship in Lublin for a Polish scholar living in England. By the end of 1958, however, the Association handed over the financial management of the Polish students to Veritas.

### **Material support**

The Newman Association’s support for the education of Polish students was also supplemented by material aid in the purchase of books and other equipment. This had been taking place since the 1940s. In May 1946, the chaplain of Veritas, Fr Belch, required the Newman Association to act as an agent in the forwarding of translated religious books and papal encyclicals to Poland. Veritas had been unable to send the books themselves owing to difficulties with the Polish authorities but the Newman Association was able to negotiate with the Polish Red Cross for the delivery of regular batches to the Caritas organisation in Gdynia. In November, Miss Gunter reported that the plan had been working successfully with a total of £12,000 worth of books being sent from London to Gdynia, with Caritas distributing these books throughout Poland. Aside from books, the Association also agreed to send food parcels to the relations of Polish exiles so that the recipients could send these parcels on to others. Larger gifts were also offered, including a private automatic telephone exchange for

the use of Archbishop's House in Warsaw. In 1960, the Association even offered Lublin University machinery for a canteen.

### *Conclusion*

By the early 1960s, the Newman Association began to scale back its aid programme to exiles generally. As early as 1957, the Newman International Committee noted the decreased scale of activity which it put down to "declining needs", as well as "the difficulties in obtaining money for the purpose". Furthermore, Pax Romana was gradually subsuming the Association's work with Catholic exiles. Although the Newman Association (and the Union of Catholic Students) was to have representation on this committee, the Association appeared to hand over direct responsibility for aid to Catholic exiles to Pax Romana. Furthermore, in the same year, the Association also agreed to hand over all overseas non-university appointments work to the Catholic Overseas Appointments Bureau.

The Newman Association made a significant contribution to the lives of Polish exiles in the years following the Second World War. This support was inspired by a combination of anti-communism, pan-Europeanism and a genuine altruism informed by Catholic social teaching, but it also reflected a desire for lay educated Catholics to break out of the confines of their historically subordinate role within the Church, albeit with enthusiastic support and direction by the hierarchy. This encouraged the Newman Association, along with other Catholic lay organisations, to assume greater responsibility for undertaking ambitious initiatives unthinkable earlier in the century.

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