

Another aspect of the Newman Association's work which has changed markedly since the early days, and one reflecting a broader trend in twentieth-century Catholicism, was the relationship between the Circles and the Catholic clergy and hierarchy. The Association had wished to form a close connection, almost a deferential one, with the hierarchy in the first decades of its history. An article from the *Newman Newsletter* during the 1950s recommended that Newman Circles should make themselves known to the local Catholic clergy by inviting them to meetings and involving them in publicity campaigns. "Establishing a happy relationship with local clergy is very important", it argued and this "can only be achieved by personal contact".

Commenting on a report of the symposium of Committees of Council in November 1957, the National Secretary argued that the Circle "has a private duty in the life of the Church – it must be of service to the Church" and a Circle should "seek out the most profitable avenues for work under the guidance of its chaplain". The implication of this report was clear: that the Newman was subservient to the needs of the clergy and the hierarchy.

Circles were more than willing to put such advice into practice. The London Circle was particularly active in this regard. In 1954, for example, it organised Masses for the Circle led by the Ecclesiastical Assistant on the first Friday of every month, weekly Benedictions on Thursdays, together with days of Recollection and a summer pilgrimage to Lourdes. Other Circles were keen to impress the local hierarchy. In December 1954, for example, the Middlesbrough Circle held an informal dinner with the Rt Rev George Brunner, Bishop of Middlesbrough, as the guest of honour.

The York Newman Circle had a special relationship with the local clergy, particularly demonstrated during the Octave for Christian Unity in January 1955. With the co-operation of the clergy they helped to organise evening Masses in rotation in every parish church in the area. These Masses were well-publicised and well-attended. The minutes of a committee meeting of August 8<sup>th</sup> 1956 for the Coventry Circle noted that the Archbishop of Birmingham had been kept up to speed with the work of the Committee and was on hand to advise on the formalities of setting up the Circle with a view to attracting clerical support. As a result of this preparatory work, the Secretary reported that the parish priests were "unanimous in welcoming the formation of the Coventry Circle". Fr Carter was appointed Ecclesiastical Assistant and agreed to say Mass once a month for the Circle. Later in the year, the Archbishop was a special guest at a dinner held by the Circle.

The relationship between the laity on the one hand, and the clergy and hierarchy on the other, was transformed by the Second Vatican Council and the Newman Association was at the forefront of these developments. In a section clearly influenced by Vatican II the *Reference Book for Local Circles* (1964) called for a new

relationship between the two sides, one which was less deferential and more co-operative.

While accepting that “the Newman Association ... has a duty to provide for the Church a nucleus at least of people with a basic understanding of theology and scripture, of the teaching of the Church and trained in the work of the Apostolate which can only be obtained with the help of the clergy”, the handbook also argued that the Association could “provide a forum in which clergy and laity exchange views systematically and freely, from their different backgrounds” to discuss different aspects of Church teaching. More importantly it called on all Circles to contact their bishops to apply for permission to “enjoy the fullest degree of participation (in Mass), at least where this can be managed”.

Until the publication of *Apostolicam Actuositatem* in November 1965 most Catholic lay societies were viewed by the Holy See as effectively branches of the cleric-controlled group “Catholic Action”. The spirit of Vatican II had widened this rather limited perspective, with Pope Paul VI now speaking of all lay societies as exercising “an apostolate of great value for our times”. Such a spirit was being transferred to the local Circles, as the Association’s Annual Report for 1965/66 enthusiastically pointed out:

“A marked feature of the work of the local Circles during the year has been study and application of the major Council themes, particularly liturgical renewal, ecumenism, the lay apostolate and the development of a theologically literate laity, all of which would have delighted the heart of our illustrious patron John Henry Newman. Of particular note has been the formation of clergy/laity dialogue groups by the Glasgow and Birmingham Circles. Both groups are flourishing, and the successful spread of this activity to other circles could be of considerable significance in the life of the Church in this country.”

A major theme of discussion at the Circle Officers’ Conference in March 1967 was the COPECIAL Questionnaire on the subjects of Church communities and lay formation and the need to adapt to the changes brought about by Vatican II, both by the clergy and the laity. There were some early successes in this regard. The Sheffield Circle reported on their involvement in the work of Bishop Wheeler (Leeds diocese) who had established a centre to be used for “promoting a better understanding of the work of the (Vatican) Council among the clergy and, later on, among the leading members of the laity.” Most members agreed that it was the clergy who needed to take the initiative in Church organisation but that an educated laity had an obligation to assist the clergy with an education programme.

It was clear that the relationship had changed since the 1950s. A speech by Archbishop Heenan in December 1964, in which he argued that lay apostles should “put themselves humbly in the hands of priests for training in theology and ethics”,

was strongly criticised by a committee member of the Coventry Circle, who suggested that such training seemed designed to create “a minor order of clergy” subservient to the Church. Nevertheless, clerical training on the Vatican reforms was often welcomed. In November 1969, for example, the South East London Circle’s chaplain gave a talk and celebrated Mass “in the new form” which was so popular that there were plans to repeat it.

Indeed, in the decades following the Vatican Council, the Newman and its Circles became an increasingly respected source of information for the hierarchy. A special relationship with the Catholic Bishops Conference (CBC) was established with the Association regularly being called upon to review and respond to various CBC reports and initiatives. It was often the job of Circles to provide the critical engagement. In November 1970, the South East Circle asked its members to comment on the CBC’s views on the future of those Commissions established to carry out the implications of the Vatican Council. During the 1970s Peter Hambley remembered the North Staffordshire Circle’s members being asked to comment on a number of CBC documents including *Consultation in the Church*, *The Church 2000*, *A time for Building*, *Committee for the Review of Diocesan Boundaries*, and *The Common Good*. In responding to Lineamenta questions for Synod of Bishops – X Ordinary General Assembly, the Chairman of the Hertfordshire Circle forwarded the following message:

“We are grateful for the opportunity to comment on the Lineamenta questions. We have deliberately confined our replies/comments to those questions where Newman Association members are likely to have an informed view, but we appreciate the chance to set the wider agenda for the Synod.”

By far the largest attempt to encourage the Circles in their consultative role with the CBC occurred in 1985. The Newman President, Peter Nielson, initiated a survey of members to try to establish the specialist skills of its members, “with the particular aim of discovering the topics which could form the basis of specialist groups within the Association”. Each Circle would then be allocated a subject (or subjects) for study with the intention that Circles would become centres of expertise in a particular area and thus be able to respond to requests from the hierarchy in an informed and timely manner.

The Council received a mixed response from Circles to this initiative. The Chairman of the Worcester Circle, for example, was very enthusiastic, suggesting that his Circle should opt for the topic of “Bio-Ethics” because of the expertise of its members, which included a consultant paediatrician, a consultant pathologist, three other doctors, two barristers, a solicitor and a nurse. The Chairman of the Rainham Circle similarly commented on the positive response of the Circle towards the subjects for study, asking to be allocated “Nuclear Disarmament”. However, the Secretary of the North Gloucestershire Circle was less positive, claiming that she had

received no response from the Circle members because few members had the time to devote to such projects. She further added: "It is counter-productive to try to make them take an interest after a comparative hiatus of two years when we received no documents from the National Secretariat."

Some Circles, such as Maidenhead, felt that they had little time to get together and discuss the initiative, while others, such as the Sussex and Bristol Circles, did not feel themselves qualified to take on the task. The North Gloucestershire, Wimbledon and Tay Circles also criticised the choice of subjects. Nevertheless, some Circles did eventually respond, with the Sussex Circle producing a very detailed report on *The Role of Christian Women* which was then forwarded on to the hierarchy.

In spite of this special relationship with the hierarchy clerical support for Circles was not always forthcoming. In a 1972 National Council report on setting up a Circle, the author warned that members seeking clerical support may find it necessary to defend the Association against allegations that it is "recklessly avant garde". At the 1975 AGM of the Swansea Circle the secretary regretted the lack of support of clergy, arguing that "it was still caused by the old fear of intellectualism". In a letter to Circles on 10 September 1989, the National Chaplain noted this difficulty:

"Sometimes the support given to the Newman by the local clergy is non-existent or not such as to inspire interest or enthusiasm in prospective members. I am sorry about this. The support and encouragement of a priest who realises the possibility of a Newman Circle can and in fact does make a lot of difference to optimum functioning and of course to increasing membership or at least to attracting outsiders to attend events which may interest them."

He called on all Newman Circles to celebrate the start of the new season with an inaugural Mass and for every meeting to be preceded by Mass. By the end of the century, however, with the decline in membership and the difficulties of finding committee members, very few Circles were able to even carry out this basic requirement, with the AGM and the occasional Day of Recollection being one of the few occasions when Mass was celebrated.

Mirroring the Circle's involvement in the changing nature of the clergy-laity relationship was its increasingly ecumenical role. The Newman Association was established as a Catholic organisation whose membership was, at least at first, open to Catholics only. Ecumenical ideas were unthinkable in the early days, when Catholics were still viewed as a distinctive subculture in British society, a view often encouraged by the Catholic Church itself, with Cardinal Griffin using the platform of a national Circle event in 1955 to call for the Catholic conversion of England.

Indeed, until the 1960s, very few Circle events were organised with ecumenism in mind. What brought about change was again the Second Vatican Council with its

reforms and its call to ecumenism. In September 1963 the Christian Unity Working Party was established by the Association “in view of the increasing interest in ecumenical matters”, to advise local circles and lay groups. At the Circle Officers’ Committee meeting in March 1967 it was noted how much ecumenical work was being done by local Circles and that Newman members were particularly well-placed to open dialogues with other faiths because of their increased confidence and knowledge of their own faith in contrast to other Catholics.

Ecumenical action was now very much part of the Newman agenda and remained so during the following decades. The 1973-4 programme for the Tunbridge Wells Circle was themed around “Prayer and Spirituality of the Great Religions of the World”. In 1977 the Circle organised a Christmas party for all Christians, sponsored by the local churches of different denominations. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Chairman of the North Staffordshire Circle developed a close working relationship with members of the local Baptist ministries, organising large ecumenical meetings at the local schools. It was noted in *The Newman*, the Association’s journal, in January 1984 that the Papal visit eighteen months earlier had underlined the importance of working with other Christian faiths, in which “an ecumenical approach can no longer be thought of as an ‘optional extra’ for any Catholic”.

In 1997 the Hertfordshire Circle, who were particularly active in ecumenical matters, organised a one-day conference on *The Church and Today’s Culture*, bringing together the Roman Catholic bishop in Hertfordshire, the Rt Rev James O’Brien, and the Anglican Bishop of Hertford, Rt Rev Robin Smith. The speakers were the Rev Angela Tilby, Anglican priest, and John Wilkins, editor of *The Tablet*. Nearly 90 people attended, including Catholics and Anglicans. Such conferences have continued to be a feature of Herts Circle activities, more recently in partnership with the St Albans Christian Study Centre, as well as occasionally with the local University. The most prominent was a 2003 conference on *That they may all be one – but how?* which included as keynote speakers Dr Rowan Williams, then recently appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, and Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity.

This wider ecumenical role was echoed within the membership of the Association itself. In its early days, people of other Christian denominations were able to attend talks and other events organised by Circles but were not given rights of membership, including being able to vote in Council elections or the AGM. These “non-members” often outnumbered the Newman members at meetings resulting in some Circles bringing in charges for non-members to attend. In 1986 the national Newman AGM considered the possibility of regular non-Catholic attendees of meetings being given “formal recognition” by the Association. This was rejected on the basis that the Newman was, as constituted, specifically for Catholics and that admitting non-Catholics to membership would jeopardise the Newman’s

membership of other Catholic bodies, such as the National Council of the Lay Apostolate, the National Board of Catholic Women, and Pax Romana.

It was suggested that local Circles instead should be more welcoming to non-members at open meetings because “ecumenical discussion and activities are in the true spirit of the Association”. It was not until the 1993 AGM, when a special motion was passed, that non-Catholics were finally allowed to become Associate Members. Such a motion, as the Annual Report noted, may have caused “limited dissent”, but it has been “generally accepted as an important development in the age of ecumenism”. A year later, the President in the Annual Report noted that John Henry Newman himself would doubtless have approved of such a decision, being a key figure in first, the Anglican, and then the Catholic Church.