

The Newman Association Recalled

Some memories from the 1940s - 60s

In the 70th year since the Association was founded Council thought it a good idea to ask members who had joined 50 years ago or more to share some of their thoughts about the Association as it was. There is already a fascinating booklet *A Use of Gifts*¹, published in 1992, which provides a striking impression of the first fifty years of activity, but some additional personal impressions seemed welcome.

With the help of Bill White and his membership data base, I invited some seventy members who joined the Newman in its earlier years to share their thoughts. Many thanks to Philip Bagguley (PB), Judith Bennett (Tighe) (JBt), John Bryden (President 1965-7) (JBr), Mary Curtis (MC), Patrick Daniels (PD), Winnie Flanagan (WF), Alison Grady (AG), Frank Hewitt (FH), Maureen Jessiman (Smith) (MJ), Eric Poyser (President 1959-61) (EP), Ianthe Pratt (Hill) (IP), Helen Thomas (O'Neill) (HT), Keith Stephens (KS) and Moira Tárnoky (Cashman) (MT) for responding.

From their varied offerings, I have sought to distil some topics and to give some flavour by quotes attributed with reference to initials as above. I hope that some of the fuller responses may appear more completely in *The Newman* in their own right, and that this summary may encourage others to flood the editor with complaints of omission and with counter-reminders.

Joining the Association sixty years ago

Joining straight from University was the norm, and most responders had previously been active in university Catholic societies. The London Circle was something of a refuge from the 'soul-destroying' experience of Catholic parishes (MJ). Several (JBt, JBr and PD) referred to CLANG - the Committee for the Lay Apostolate for New Graduates, or some variant on the translation of the acronym. Some had exercised wider roles; JBr had been Sheffield University Catholic Society president, and then UCS president, and was subsequently president of the University Catholic Federation when it was the UCS's turn; PB had been an undergraduate and was then for a time chaplain of both the students and the Nottingham Circle; JBt, when a member of CathSoc in Bristol, had enjoyed the hospitality of Lance Wright (President 1951-3) and his wife, and joined when she came to London as the best way to find new friends; JBr, FH and PD all mentioned Student Cross, the Walsingham pilgrimage and its derivative, Graduate or Easter Cross.

31 Portman Square as an early focus

31 Portman Square, London W1, was HQ of the Association from 1948 to 1963 and features large in memory. An anonymous donor (whom KS remembers as the Catholic Brenninkmeyer family, owners of the C&A clothing retailers) funded the lease, continuing the provision of accommodation on the upper floors for European intellectuals displaced in the war, and thus giving a natural link to the Newman International Committee, of whom Philip Daniel was a driving force (KS and EP). The Association was a natural home for the new graduate, especially when Portman Square offered the facilities of a club, canteen included.

¹ *A Use of Gifts - The Newman Association 1942-92, published in place of The Newman September 1992*

As an early national treasurer, and therefore being in charge of the funding of the house committee, KS had to request a budget from the chairman of the Adult Education Committee, only to be met with the pained response that it was 'unheard of' for 'Education' to work to a budget.

JBt recalls: "Portman Square really was the London Circle, if not the Association. Having this splendid building, its full programme of activities was wonderful. There were weekly Thursday lectures on a very wide range of subjects – serious as well as some that were purely entertaining. I remember Ted Kavanagh of ITMA asking 'is it unlawful for an unmarried crab to have two nippers?'



Porchester Hall

"Subjects tackled were theological, literary and historical – the full range, including the daring topic of Mass in the vernacular. These were sometimes followed by a social event, or dancing lessons – this is where I met Alan! – and most Saturdays there was a dance. Then, on New Year's Eve, there was a splendid ball at the Porchester Hall. Also, of course, we had the philosophy of science group and courses of adult education lectures.

"I never belonged to the walking or theatre groups, but I went each week to play squash at Earls Court with a group. And of course the cafeteria in the basement of Portman Square was a draw. I was particularly impressed by the marble bathroom which had a bell push over the bath! Portman Square had a simple chapel, with the beautiful painting 'Threefold Epiphany' by Glyn Philpot – mysteriously lost over the years."

MJ also has "fond memories of many Newman friends who encouraged and supported me at that stage of my career. Philip Daniel was a great character who always seemed to be around. But, for me, one of the most influential figures was Fr Keldany, the chaplain. He lived in Portman Square, so he was always available to talk to. Some people found him a bit "square" but I thought that he did a good job. He was quite forward-looking' especially in matters of Christian unity, but sensible and moderate. Fr Keldany had a good influence on the atmosphere of Portman Square – it was very friendly and no-one felt left out.

"I spent many happy evenings there in the late 50s and 60s. I used to go there two or three times a week and have a poached egg in the buttery in the basement (I think that the cook was Bridget Fitzgerald.) It felt like a continuation of life at university, and I made a lot of friends at the time, although the friendships waned as people moved away.

"I seem to remember that Thursdays were the main meeting nights. The meetings were held in the big room on the first floor and there was always a good attendance. There was quite a spread of ages among members at the time, but there were certainly a lot of us in our 20s – all very jolly, keen types!".....she recalls John Bryden, Mary McCarthy

(née Lee), Mike Egan, Ianthe Pratt, Martin and Moira Redfern, Bill and Monica White and Peter Worden.

“The closure of Portman Square and the move to Soho marked the end of an era. It probably didn’t make much difference to circles outside London but the loss of Portman Square as a social centre made a big difference to those of us who had used it regularly. By then the whole atmosphere was changing, with more polarised views about Vatican II. Some Newman members were very active in groups like the Catholic Renewal Movement and some were involved in pray-ins.”

Early luminaries and personalities

Most responders remarked on Philip Daniel’s benign active influence over many years “together with his great friend Dr Kevin McDonnell, my main mentors in Newman matters, and Dr Oliver Pratt, a brilliant influence in managing the transition from more traditional to more liberal attitudes” (JBr).

EP with the assistance of his wife Pamela remembers “the stalwarts of those days, Frank Aylward, Patrick Cussons, Lawrence Roche, Tony Wilbourn, Kevin McDonnell, Michael Penty, who inspired the foundation of many Newman Circles, Nicole Hodgson, Margaret Feeny and our chaplains Fr Leycester King SJ and Fr Keldany, who defined members as having a growing tail to their minds”.

JBr adds: “Peter Hodgson, Tony Spencer, Miss Oddie, Arthur Fenlon the constant raiser of questions, Philip Daniel, Connie Chester, Ann Godfrey, Mary Cope, Rosemary Ellerbeck, Charles Conliffe, and of course the various chaplains – Bernard Fisher in particular.”

PD remembers the activities of CLANG in the 1960s, when Dr Monica Lawlor was chairman of the London Circle operating from St Patrick’s Soho Square and Carlisle Street, with a vigorous programme of activities, social as well as intellectual.

Memories of Circles

Several respondents had moved around the UK over the years, and there is mention of a variety of circles outside London, many having come and gone over the years. So JBr started in Sheffield, and moved through the Hull, London, and Croydon Circles, before ending up now in Norfolk where potential members, it seems, are too thin on the ground for a viable Circle. HT recalls “Soon after moving to Reading (1954?) I think my husband Don and I joined the Reading Circle. This used to meet in the house of the Reading University Catholic Chaplain in a very small, crowded room. Some students came along as well as older people and it was quite lively. By the time I had three small children life got more complicated but my husband became Chairman for a time and we had some inspirational speakers e.g. Bruce Kent and Peter Benenson (who stayed overnight with us)”.

JBr started in London in the 1950s, and then moved with her husband Alan through Coventry Circle, before spending 28 years in the South East London Circle up till 1993. She then held office in Coventry and London before becoming national Secretary and President in the 1990s.



15 Carlisle Street

FH contributes “the jottings of a Newman ‘foot soldier’. As a student ...walked the first Student Cross (and the next three years as a student, thereafter as a member of Easter Cross for most of the next sixty years). On finishing research I wanted to continue “Catholic Education” so joined Liverpool Newman which met at the Chaplaincy... Eventually joined Chester circle, helped (e.g. with conference organising). Chester stopped meeting so went to South Manchester. There the meeting date was changed to an inconvenient day so went to Wrexham”.

MT (sister-in law of Tony Wilbourn) joined the Association in 1951, after graduation from medical school at Newcastle University where she had been a member of the Catholic Society. As a student she had joined in the Pax Romana conference in Rome in 1947. She first joined the Newcastle Circle but in 1956 she moved to Reading; by then married and with a family she was less involved with Circle issues.

PB has a unique perspective on Nottingham Circle: “When I was first involved with the Newman in 1955-56 I was never quite sure to what extent I was a member. I was appointed chaplain to the Nottingham Circle (founded in the 1940s by Felicity and Hilary Armstrong and Fr Sebastian Redmond, A.A.), at the same time as I became chaplain to the University of Nottingham. And it was taken for granted that I sat in on Committee meetings, took part in all the Circle activities, even initiated some of them, but paid no subscription. I have to say, I felt very honoured to be part of the Newman and enjoyed the friendship of its members.

“We held monthly meetings, with visiting speakers (Paul Crane, SJ, and Abbot Christopher Butler were two I remember) as well as talks by local members. We had an annual Mass and the Circle always joined in, as far as it could, with the annual Academic Mass of the University Catholic Society. Eventually I organised a course of Lenten lectures with Mass too.

“The Circle wasn’t large in numbers - we probably had about thirty fairly active members....our members were academics, teachers, a doctor or two, a dentist, businessmen. The age range was roughly 30 to 50. There were Circles in Derby, Leicester and Sheffield but we had little contact with one another. Fr Keldany came every year to talk to us but, for the majority of members, London and the national scene (the international scene even more so) seemed rather remote and somewhat irrelevant, despite the presence of people like Eric and Pamela Poyser at the centre of our group.”

MC, who joined as postgraduate in London in 1959, spoke of her late husband Dominic and herself reviving the Manchester Circle, and how being in the Newman allowed women to say what they thought about things in the Church; before Vatican II “the atmosphere was very stuffy”. She refers to the continuing difficulty of maintaining a fixed central meeting-point for Manchester people, and the growing importance of the Journal for many members.

WF, having been in London from 1961-4, has subsequently been a major influence in the Birmingham Circle. She confirms that London, with its then hub, was always in a different position, but refers to the later influence of the Newman Centre Trust which enabled visits for



Edward Schillebeeckx

local Circles to hear speakers such as Edward Schillebeeckx.

In 1957 AG started off in the Coventry Circle which was lively and active, changing chairmen every year, so all had a turn on the Committee. Ecumenical activities were given a push from the activities of the newly rebuilt Coventry Cathedral. In 1966 she moved to Hertfordshire, also being active within the committee there.

Conferences, Study Groups, Summer Schools and Pax Romana

WF remembers particularly the activities of the Family Committee and the Theological Studies Group (organised respectively by Ianthe and Oliver Pratt) and sighs for the days of summer conferences at Spode House. Others remember Biblical study groups, the Philosophy of Science Group (with Peter Hodgson and Tony Wilbourn) and a psychology group with Seymour Spencer.

PB comments: "There were the Newman annual summer schools, which could gather 30 - 40 people at places like Keele. It was here that one met and made friends with the national figures - I almost said "characters" – such as the Mercer sisters from Wigan, Kevin MacDonnell and Philip Daniel. I attended a number of these and enjoyed them immensely."

Ianthe Pratt remembers: "I met Oliver, my husband-to-be, at evening classes on the "Psychological basis of moral behaviour" at the Newman Association in Portman Square. He was a recent convert to Catholicism and we cut our teeth together on issues of the philosophy of science, at that time almost the only theme open to lay involvement. This was not the only pioneering work of the Newman in the decade before Vatican II.

Inspired by a call made by the well-known author Frank Sheed for all to understand the faith better, the Newman Theological Studies Group was started up by Laurence Bright, the influential Dominican, and by Oliver. For many years the TSG offered a good grounding in biblical theology. There were theologians running groups up and down the country: Laurence worked with two London ones, one of which had as refreshment cups of tea, the other glasses of wine. Laurence used to say the wine drinkers outshone the tea drinkers in the quality of their discussion"².

One activity of some fame was the Newman Demographic Survey³ (NDS), directed by Anthony Spencer, which is mentioned by several respondents. JBt comments: "The mid-1950s were the time of the Newman Demographic Survey: I used to go into Portman Square on Wednesday evenings to help Tony Spencer in the office, among other things cutting the stencil for the survey which had to have a very long section for "children" because of the Pakenhams. The neglect of this survey by the hierarchy was symptomatic of their attitudes at that time."

PB remembers the difficult latter days of the NDS. "One issue that did raise a furore, though not for long, was the Newman Demographic Survey run by AECW Spencer. This was well covered in his account in *A Use of Gifts*, p 34. The only touch I can add is that I was present at the Nottingham regional conference on 26/7 October 1963 at which he delivered his memorable paper. At the end of the afternoon session I went

² This is an excerpt from Ianthe's Pratt's paper: *The Search for Renewal over 50 Years* (The Newman January 2010), also available on the website www.newman.org.uk. The paper describes the ferment of activity before and after Vatican II

³ The Newman Demographic Survey, 1953-64 by AECW Spencer is one of the papers in *A Use of Gifts* 1992 referenced above. It is hoped that a paper on the subsequent work of The Pastoral Research Centre will appear in *The Newman*.

up to Tony and commiserated with him and assured him of my support, feeble though it was, for his efforts. Many years later he assured me of his recollection of the event and the comfort he drew from my words."

Pax Romana is commonly mentioned as a presence in past days, though with less general involvement. However JBr "was involved in Student Pax Romana.... I then did a post-doctoral fellowship in the USA for a year and was very involved with Pax Romana there. In fact, I was the acting representative of Pax Romana to the UN in New York for 3 months in the absence of the permanent representative". MT had as a student joined in the Pax Romana conference in Rome in 1947.

PB has a special memory of 1955 when Pax Romana held its World Congress in Nottingham and between 800 and 1000 people gathered in the University from all over the world to take part... "We took over the university campus. The organising secretary was a former colonial civil servant (Africa) named, if I'm not mistaken, Geoffrey Jansen-Smith. I was in my final year as an undergraduate and was appointed (I don't quite know how) to be his assistant. There are a few stories to tell about the Congress, but I saw little evidence of any significant effect upon the subsequent activities or ethos of the local circle. In 1958 (I think) there was a Pax Romana congress in Vienna attended by a sizeable English contingent from UCS including myself. I remember Dom Julius Caesar OSB from Cardiff (?) being present."

Vatican II and after

The Second Vatican Council and its stimulus for change was obviously a high point for the respondents. Thus JBT: (there was) "tremendous excitement as those cobwebs were blown away revealing the true glory of Catholicism – it was no longer a place where you safely followed a set of rules but one of challenge – the People of God". WF felt "great new things were happening: we felt energised and happy to be part of it". JBr: "In 1965 I was elected as National President, a post I held for the usual 2 years. These were exciting times for the Church and the Association as a result of Vatican 2. Through the good offices of Mgr (later Archbishop) Worlock a number of senior members of the Association, including myself, went to Rome during the Council, dined with the entire English Hierarchy in the English College, and attended Mass in St Peter's with the entire Hierarchy of the Church".

Perhaps inevitably disillusion set in for some, and IP describes in her Newman journal paper (referenced above) a series of controversies and conflicts between laity and some clergy, and other clergy and their bishops. JBr also refers to the formation of the Catholic Renewal Movement. "We did not split from the Newman...it was difficult for the Newman to get engaged in public controversy in Church matters, although we could discuss the issues in private, whereas CRM could do as it saw fit". The Association itself had its own share of controversy in those days and Oliver Pratt (President 1963-65) won a contested (!) election as part of a reforming liberalising group on Council.

Humanae Vitae and the surrounding controversy loomed large at the time. JBr remembers "Most of the Priests and people one met through the Newman were of a liberal kind whereas in many parishes clericalism was common. Obviously birth control was a hot topic and many welcomed Pope John's Commission on the matter which voted for a change in the teaching. A number of senior members of the Association had a long meeting with Cardinal Heenan and he agreed that it was

entirely a matter for individual consciences.

We later learnt that he, as a member of the Commission, had voted for change. The Association organised a very well attended teach-in on the matter in Westminster". MT remarks that *Humanae Vitae* seemed an unexpected reversal of an opinion for change, though she does not remember any particular Newman Association controversy then. She remembers Herbert McCabe OP and Laurence Bright OP as vigorous leaders for change in the Church, and remembers a prayer vigil for McCabe (also mentioned more fully by IP in her paper) when he fell foul of Cardinal Heenan and others and temporarily lost the editorship of Blackfriars journal. JBr mentions organising a visit to Rome to appeal successfully for Herbert McCabe's reinstatement, with his opening resumed editorial - "As I was saying....."

Sadly too this period of controversy had its casualties in (full) communion with the Catholic Church. So MJ (who had become a Catholic at Oxford) comments "mainly as a result of *Humanae Vitae* I became an Anglican at the end of the 70s, and therefore I now see the situation from a slightly different angle", and PD observes that he is now a churchwarden at the Anglican parish church in Clare. But loyalty and conscientious loyal dissent co-exist and JBr comments: "Knowing many Newman members across the country it is obvious that so many of us, even into our late 70s, are still providing some sort of lay leadership in the Church!

Contrasts and Similarities: then and now

The main point that comes across with startling clarity is JBr's sigh: "I joined an Association of young Catholics. Where are they now?" The flow-on from active membership of a University Catholic society has gone. Do student Catholics no longer lead lives of intellectual enquiry, and if so, where do they go after graduation? Probably to a life full of work meetings, travel and family commitments. The not-infrequent role as a marriage-broker has also disappeared with the flow from student life. The Association's appeal has now to be to Catholics and sympathisers of the Third Age of life, those with some time for intellectual religious enquiry and debate, and the recognition that the average parish cannot provide this.

All the responders were, perhaps unsurprisingly, of the view that the Association was ever more needed, some particularly emphasising the need to be active at a time when there is a centralising pressure to conform. All value the Association for its spirit of friendship and being able to provide a secure atmosphere where people may debate issues without fear of denunciation. As JBr says "The Church must be in the world, not of the world and must relate its theology to science, economics, medicine etc., which the Newman and Pax Romana have always done without the enthusiastic support of the institutional Church".

We may leave a last word with EP: "It is hardly surprising that the notion of a Catholic Association devoting itself to the intellectual pursuit of permeating contemporary thought can irritate those burdened with immediate practical issues, and this has given rise to lack of confidence, sometimes within and outside the Newman, but the needs - for continuous education and association - are there. It seems to me that Circles will inevitably depend on a core, and will develop in different ways, meeting places will vary widely, and there will always be tensions between young and old, active and passive; no matter. One thing they have in common: some members will always need a personal invitation from another member to come to a meeting". **Anthony Baker**