

Yellow Group Saturday presentation.

Harcourt Concannon

We talked about three main issues: Age and ageing, the website and the Newman Mission.

1. The question of age.

We accepted that Newman has in general a post-retirement age profile. This does mean that there is likely to a natural process of losing members but at the same time means that as other people approach retirement age we will be able to recruit new members. We saw this a continuing state of affairs and were not unduly disturbed at the lack of young members – which seems to be a factor across many different voluntary organizations. However, we were also aware of many examples of religious interest in schools and colleges, for instance in inspirational RE programmed, and we were hopeful that in the long run groups like Newman would see the benefit of that interest.

2.The Website.

We felt that the website was really important, as a way of communicating, as a theological resource and as a way of presenting Newman and what it stands for to the world at large. This importance should be reflected in the resources made available to support the website, financial resources, human resources and the way in which Council and Circles continually review their role in managing/improving the website. We felt that there should be a means for local input into the Website. Obvious examples are in using the website to list Circle meeting and events programmed, local membership information, etc. Encouraging Circles to submit texts of talks given locally could develop this. More generally we would like to see the website develop as a theological resource.

3. The Newman Mission

We accepted that the place of Mission in the work of the Church has tended to have lost the prominence it should have. We agreed that Newman needs to have a sense of Mission. We tried to express this in practical terms. We felt that our overall approach should be “What can we do for the Church” and we

considered the likely Newman contribution. While what Newman does by way of enabling critical understanding of the faith in sense serves the Church as part of adult formation (and is therefore valuable in itself) Newman is a different type of formation to e.g. the training of Catechists or the CCRS. A possible way of widening the Newman contribution would be to focus on ways of contributing to the New Evangelization. This addresses both the formation of existing churchgoers but also the need to address those who have left any active participation in the Church, or have never done so. In particular the Bishops Conference move to support New Evangelization, as set out in “Proclaim 15” ,suggests a way of offering the resources of Newman. If one also considers the “Year of Mercy”, we would have an area where the resources of Newman could be useful to Bishops. While the theme of “mercy” is wide, it could be interpreted very effectively in terms of critically understanding the problems for instance of homelessness or migration.

Report of proceedings Sunday AM session

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We looked first at the question “**What 3 changes would you make to enable Newman to fulfill its mission**”

It seemed to us that this issue interconnected with other questions put to us, especially in that any financial implication would necessarily involve **funding** (who pays, centre or circle, and how do they pay). Similarly consideration of the Newman mission quickly involved the question of the nature and extent of our **relationship with the Hierarchy**.

1. Our **first change** would be to clarify the Newman mission. We thought that any general consideration of “changes to fulfill mission” required clarification of the nature of that mission. Without a clear view of “What Newman is for” it is not possible to sensibly address what alterations in its present way of doing things is desirable. Again, without being clear about the mission, it is hard to address the

issue of “communication (communication about what, to what end) – which concerns both our second and third proposed “changes”. Moreover, alterations to the constitution – which would be involved in any alteration of the definition of membership (which we support as below) – would need to be firmly placed in the context of a clear Newman mission.

2. Our **second change** concerns communication. In general we felt that Newman needs to communicate more and better. This relates both to the way in which the Association carries out or enables communication within the organization and the way in which it relates to bodies outside the Association. The former includes communication between the centre and the circles, between the centre/circle and individual members, or between members or officers. The later includes communication with the Hierarchy or other Catholic organizations, with the media or with the public. Different approaches to communication are likely to be needed to tackle each of these cases.

For both we thought that there is a place for a greater use of information technology – into which we would subsume the particular role of the Newman website. Thus, for the website, there are possibilities of using the site to directly exchange messages or information between a member and the centre/circle, of promoting the pick-up of the Newman website by search engines such as Google. Again we thought that work such as that on Newman archives might be useful website resources. Most of us thought that social media offered good possibilities for Newman, for instance Facebook can be used to enable a group such as a Circle Membership to communicate privately between themselves. Again there may be possibilities in developing Newman Blogs (centre or circle) or in Twitter. But IT is a technical field and we would suggest that the Council would be helped in taking the matter forward by forming a bespoke working party prepared to get professional technical assistance where needed.

Using IT should not, however, detract attention from using more traditional means of communication. In the past Newman has used national or local advertising to promote its work and should be prepared to do so again. For instance in support of a major meeting organised by a Circle or group of circles, or to generate interest in establishing a new circle. Another aspect of traditional forms of

publicity is the display of banners promoting a Newman event. Here, we thought that the centre could commission an attractive and eye catching banner, in a format that could be used nationally but also be made available to circles.

3. Our **relations with the Hierarchy** should be re-developed (we use this word rather than “change”) so that we are seen to present ourselves to the Hierarchy proactively. But it is important that, however helpful to the Hierarchy we remain independent. We have in mind the need for a series of positive acts on our part geared especially to ways in which we might be able to make meaningful contributions to the work of New Evangelisation. It seemed to us that such an approach would be well suited to things that could be done by Circles as well as the centre because every diocese has its own style or approach to New Evangelisation and because different Circles have different human and other resources that could be deployed.

We then looked at the question of membership and subscriptions. We thought that any change in the status of associate membership would not only require constitutional change subject to a vote at an AGM, but that Circles should be involved by asking them to engage in a process of discernment to ascertain the feeling of their members. There was indeed a general feeling that associate membership should be ended. There should be “members” full stop. But (an important qualification) any such change may not be simple and probably involves a package of changes to the constitution. For instance the constitution contains a “faith” statement that would pose problems to a non-Catholic. It is suggested that Newman must be “Catholic led”. But what does this mean in practical terms? There would seem to be technical problems in constitutionally entrenching Newman as “Catholic led” - without re-introducing an associate membership status by the backdoor. Would one, for instance, introduce a religious “test” so that non-Catholic members were disqualified from certain offices? Moreover, any device that constitutionally discriminated against non-Catholics should be tested against the principles of the Second Vatican Council that built present day ecumenism and established a new understanding of the status of other Christian confessions.

On subscriptions we felt that discretion should be given to Circles to adjust rates of subscription in appropriate cases. But in general we

thought that there needed anyway to be more levels of subscription – for instance a young persons rate, an unwaged rate, etc.

We accepted that growing Newman membership was, for a variety of reasons, likely to be difficult. For instance Newman is likely to appeal to those who have a degree of theological knowledge and interest that probably exceeds that of the typical congregation and may well describe a constituency of older rather than younger people. There may also be some perception of Newman as “not for me”, as a group in which “I would not feel comfortable”. But this does not mean that there is not a real potential recruitment area for Newman, or indeed that Newman’s role in building an informed laity does not remain a crucial way in which we contribute to the future of the Church.