Newman’s Personality

During this year we shall of course be celebrating John Henry Newman’s sanctity. We shall, therefore, be celebrating the work God called him to do for the maintenance, the spread and the reform of Christianity in England. Saints are of different kinds and he was called to work out in the world, to study, write and preach – and to exert a direct and powerful influence on the Anglican Church and then on the Roman Catholic Church. Inspired by his close reading of the early Fathers, he first, with John Keble and Edward Pusey, set about the task of revitalising the Church of England, to remind people of its roots and to restore its sacramental life. He then worked hard for the small community of Catholics in England, countered the No-Popery outcry in the 1850s, brought in and counselled many converts, set up the Oratory of St Philip Neri and worked tirelessly for Catholic education. He has done much for all Catholics, not simply for English people. He always gave thanks for his conversion to Rome and was always faithful – but he saw that reform was needed, most particularly in the matter of the rôle of the laity. He prophesised that one day another Council would follow that of Vatican I – “We must be patient in our time; but God will take care of His Church – and when the hour strikes, the reform will begin. Perhaps it has struck, though we can’t yet tell.” 1

Newman’s achievements are not simply in the realm of theology. He spread his net more widely, as is shown in the introduction to the first published volume of his letters written by Father Stephen Dessain. He explained the plan to publish *all* the extant letters because of all the classes of people who would be interested. “There are the students of English literature; the historians, both secular and ecclesiastical; the educationalists, the psychologists, the social scientists, those interested in the theory or the practice of politics; the philosophers and theologians, the men of religion and those concerned for the spiritual life and perfection; the controversialists and…not least the general reader.”

Now, there is a danger here in outlining what Newman achieved, a danger for those general readers. We have a picture of a very clever, bookish man, given to intense study, a man who has done much and written an enormous amount. We may bow our heads in acknowledgement of his wisdom and his religious earnestness of his capacity for work – but we can be alienated by the sheer weight of it all.

This sense of alienation may be increased when we see the photographs of Newman in old age, overworked and convinced that his life as a Catholic had been largely a failure. As an Anglican he had been successful and renowned but as a Catholic he was given a range of projects: the setting up of the Irish University, the editing of the *Rambler* – but not given the means for carrying them out. He was distrusted by Cardinals Wiseman and Manning and he was in many ways isolated. So we see that sad and bony face with its great nose, the very image of dejection. No wonder that von Hügel said that Newman was too sad a character to be canonised.

There is, however, much more to be said about him. It must be noted that his was a singularly complex personality. He said himself, as a young man, that he was surprised that he enjoyed solitude and also loved to be with friends – and this pattern was established very early on. There is a passage in the *Apologia* where he describes himself as a child abstracting himself from the world about him. “I thought life might be a dream, or I an Angel and all this world a deception, my fellow angels by a playful device concealing themselves from me, and deceiving me with the semblance of a material world.” However, he lived happily in a large family and showed the usual characteristics of small boys longing to be home at the end of the winter term in order to enjoy “mince Pies, Turkies and the other good things of Christmas.” As Sheridan Gilley said in his biography 2: “The angel had a normal earthy side.” Yes, he was a solitary student, a prodigious worker at intellectual pursuits and at times a sad man profoundly discouraged but he was also warmly human and had a more cheerful side.

He was happy at school and seems to have got on well with his schoolmates even though he took no part in outdoor games. But it was at Oxford, as a boy of fifteen, that he found his first great friend, John Bowden. Much is made of his later intimate friendship with Ambrose St John but there were other important friendships. Keble, at Oriel, was mentor and colleague and a most valued friend. Pusey was an important influence but not so close to Newman. Hurrell Froude came to Oriel in 1826 and he too may be counted among the intimate friends. We are now approaching the start of the Oxford Movement which began and continued with men who had strong personal ties, not simply connected by the same religious ideas. Newman had what may be called a genius for friendship.

He was, of course, by this time, an ordained minister in the Church of England. The story of his first years in the ministry when he had a parish in St Clement’s, Oxford, shows another facet of his character and illustrates his ability to relate to people. His Christianity, consciously embraced when he was fifteen, was then of an evangelical kind and he was in youth very strict, critical of others and something of a prig. While he was having his mind formed by his mentors at Oriel, he was also learning from his poor and ill-educated parishioners. He observed, for instance, that the evangelical idea of a strict division between the saved and the unsaved simply did not match with the reality of peoples’ lives.

He was young when he learned the pain of loss. His father died and his youngest sister, Mary, a delightful girl, died at nineteen. John Bowden and Hurrell Froude died young – as so many did then, stricken with what we call tuberculosis and what they called consumption. He felt those losses deeply.

His close involvement with other people shows in his attitude to his pupils at Oriel, an attitude he shared with Hurrell Froude. They both believed that the relationship of tutor to student was a pastoral one and they held this view against the opinion of the senior authorities at Oriel.

The Oxford Movement had its high summer, then troubles began and the time of doubt and reappraisal. Then there was the long retreat at Littlemore in the little cottages grouped round the garden. It was a quasi-monastic life that Newman had there with his friends – a life that gave him time for prayer, study and reflection and also one that gave him a community life that was more intense than the life in the Oxford colleges. It was there that he was received into the Catholic Church and there that he had the grief of parting from friends.

In Birmingham (first of course in Maryvale) he set up the Oratory – a kind of Littlemore repeated but now under a specific Rule, that of St Philip Neri. He loved St Philip, noted his playfulness of spirit and his insistence that his followers should have friendship and a deep sense of community as the gentle fetters to bind them together rather than the stricter rules of religious Orders such as the Benedictines or the Jesuits. Newman had the ability to set up institutions – a school, a university, the English Oratory. All this implies practical skills – the ability to acquire property, manage finances, negotiate with authorities. The hardest part must be the management of people. Some of Newman's Oratorians were not easy subjects. Dalgairns, for example, was a nuisance, letting youths into the Oratory and not supervising them. Newman listed their offences as he uttered rebukes – they had strummed on the piano, eaten the jam and sugar, flung ink round the guest room, broken the chairs…3 Dalgairns was left in no doubt of Father Newman's opinion. The carpeting he got was rare – Newman said he was slow to rebuke because he knew that when he began he was apt to "let out and blow them out of the water." 4

Frederick Faber's community came to join the Oratory and there was much work, many arguments and anxieties about the arrangements for setting up the two communities, one in London and one in Birmingham. Newman believed he was right to stay in Birmingham where he would have time for study and writing and also be able to engage in what he called "missionary work." He was both scholar and active priest, a solitary and a community man.

His pastoral work was not only in Birmingham or by means of theological writing. He counselled hundreds of people by means of letters. Those who were thinking about becoming Catholics, those who were recent converts and in need of help, sought him out. He had a rule that all advice must be tailored to personal needs – each man and each woman was unique. His friendships were not confined to those he could be most intimate with, like Ambrose St John. After the deaths of his earlier great friends he took in their families. He was, for instance, constantly in touch with John Bowden's widow and children and he was friend and counsellor to the Froudes – not Hurrell's family for he died single, but of William Froude, a younger brother who had been Newman's pupil. These families valued the friendship highly. He kept up with a woman who had, when they were all young, been his sister's friend and who had been courted by his brother Frank. This was Maria Giberne, a Catholic convert devoted to Newman who eventually became a nun in France. She was, in many ways, needy, full of sentimental affection and often more of a nuisance than a delight but he was always a faithful friend.

Sometimes he wrote about his own difficulties, seeking help by sharing them. He wrote thus at times to a Catholic convert, Emily Bowles, a devout woman who wrote religious novels and worked to help the poor in London. He gave a great deal to his friends but was not above admitting his own needs and seeking human sympathy.

He had good relationships with many children, with the children of his friends, both girls and boys, and he was imaginative about the needs of his Oratory School boys. Despite his detachment from sports when he was a boy he made ample provision for them in the school curriculum and he saw to it that young boys and delicate boys had matrons to care for them. This was a new idea in schools for Catholic boys. His contacts were mostly with the children of the educated and comparatively wealthy but he also showed imagination when, as a young Anglican clergyman at Littlemore, he had to deal with the children of the poor. He played to them on his violin and bribed the older girls with new pinafores to wash themselves and their younger siblings before they came to church.

This deeply serious man was certainly possessed of a sense of humour and von Hügel never discovered it. Ian Ker rightly praises him for the way he used his wit to pour scorn on the nonsense propagated by the No-Popery movement of the eighteen fifties. How wonderfully he countered the theory that the cellars of the Birmingham oratory were used for nefarious purposes and might well be secret dungeons for a local Inquisition! A Protestant mob, he said, might one day storm those cellars "to rescue certain legs of mutton and pats of butter from imprisonment, and to hold an inquest over a dozen packing-cases, some old hampers, a knife-board and a range of empty blacking-bottles".5

However, he did not keep his humour just for putting down the anti-Catholic faction. He was amused at the ordinary incidents of life and he had a great gift for the apt phrase when he shared his amusement. In one letter he commented on a friend's false teeth and his habit of "throwing the whole set out of the gums upon his tongue and chewing them as an infant might a coral." Some of his funniest letters came from Ireland when he was wresting with difficulties over the university –trouble that did not stop him relishing some funny incident and writing a vivid account for his community in Birmingham.

This joking priest is a different figure from the stern Evangelical of his young days. It is true of Newman that he, so to speak, lived out his own theories. He thought much of the laity and a large proportion of his circle of friends were lay people. He believed in growth, development, the need for change and he himself illustrated the process.

There is an interesting anecdote about one lady who came to Birmingham to talk to him in the eighteen fifties. She was Lady Lothian, a recent convert. She saw him first when he was saying Mass and wondered how approachable he would be because he made her aware of the reality of an unseen world "it appeared to me very unearthly".

However, she found she had no cause to be nervous. "He was most kind," she wrote, "… so full of sympathy and Christian love that he is the last person one would need to be afraid of. That which struck me most was his childlike sympathy and humility, and next to that, the vivid clearness with which he gives an opinion."

What were Newman's faults? Of course he had them. He has been accused of being too introspective, even self-regarding. Certainly he was forever writing his own history. There is, of course, the *Apologia*, not strictly an autobiography, but still a rare piece of personal biography. There is a collection of *seven* documents made years ago by Father Henry Tristram and published as "Autobiographical writings". The letters and diaries are an account of his life. His short poem, "The Pillar of the Cloud", generally known as "Lead Kindly Light" and sung as a hymn is full of references to his own experiences, more particularly his time in Sicily in 1832. Here is another paradox in his character for he could be both reserved and shy and yet he was self-revelatory. He could remember details of his life, of his childhood and of places he had not seen for years and he wondered about what he called "the ten thousand little details and complications of daily life and family history". He thought that these apparently small things might well be "reflections, as in an earthly mirror of some greater truths above". To meditate on the connection between one's earthly life and the world beyond it is to see God in the circumstances of one's life. Moreover, the great record of the Diaries and Letters, we should note, is full of fragments of the histories of other people. He moved from contemplating his own life to a great understanding of the lives and needs of others.

There is an interesting analysis of some faults of Newman in the fairly recent book by Mgr Roderick Strange, *John Henry Newman, A Mind Alive*. He mentions the criticism which has often been made that in the famous *Apologia* Newman was too slick in marshalling his arguments against Kingsley – a sad paradox if wholly true because Kingsley's attack had been against the Roman priests and Newman in particular *because* he thought them a sly lot with scant regard for the truth. Roderick Strange goes no further than saying that "the suspicion lingers that Kingsley pointed to a real weakness". Then there is the question of Newman's sensitivity which made him tetchy at times in his dealings with others.

If I were to make a charge sheet against him I should instance the times when he was more than tetchy – when he spoke unfairly and with a real lack of charity. There is, for instance, his treatment of Keble's wife. He was very upset, in the days of the Oxford Movement, when Keble decided to marry. He was thus leaving the ranks of real fighting men who were stronger because they were free, unattached. When Keble died, years later, Mrs Keble was ill and likely to die soon but she lingered for some months. Newman wrote "(I trust it is a really charitable thought) that she was to be kept awhile to do penance for having kept Keble from being a Catholic." However, there were times when Newman blew someone out of the water (to use his own phrase) and very few would accuse him of a lack of charity. Most people, and especially Birmingham people, wanted to raise a cheer when they read the famous snub to the insufferable Mgr Talbot.

John Cornwell in a recent article in *The Times* pays tribute most to Newman's talent as a writer. He is, of course, not alone in admiring incomparable style but he does also make much of his energy, his determination to make each paragraph, each sentence as clear and as telling as possible, writing and re-writing, toiling at it with a kind of gritty strength. This is very much part of Newman's character. His life, particularly his Catholic life, was not easy – but he never gave up. He did not expect recognition and the honour paid to him with the cardinalate he described as "a great turn-up."

Those last years, when he was Cardinal Newman, have a harmony like the music of his best writing. He had already recovered some of his old Anglican friends and reconciliation continued. It is wonderful that in his very last days there was a family reconciliation. He was too frail to find it easy to appear in public and to be fêted here and there and indeed the Oratorians provided him with a kind of nanny – the much younger, faithful Father

William Neville – but he could still make his presence felt, still act as a good pastor as he did when he went to Bournville to talk to the Quaker employers about the needs of Catholic employees.

We all know his Cardinal's motto – *Cor ad cor loquitur*. It meant primarily that the heart of God speaks to human hearts but it has other resonances. He had spoken to many hearts and they responded – the Brummagems who welcomed him home when he returned from Rome as a cardinal, and the Brummagems who escorted his coffin to Rednal. According to the newspapers of the day the people of Britain claimed him as theirs, Catholic cardinal as he was.

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Notes

1 The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman (afterwards LD) xxv pps. 326–7
2 '*Newman and his Age'* Darton, Longman and Todd, London 2002
3 LD xiii p.130.
4 LD xiv p.143.
5 Quoted in Ian Ker '*Newman'* Oxford University Press 1988 pp 367–8 (paperback edition).