

The Challenge of Catholic Higher Education Today

It is a real privilege to talk to members and friends of a society which dedicates its work and interest to the life and memory of a remarkable man of the 19th century – Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman – the very man who happens to be our patron; the patron of Newman University College at Bartley Green in Birmingham, an also remarkable institution which I have the honour and privilege to lead. We on September 19th last year celebrated our spiritual highlight in the 42 years history of Newman University College in Cofton Park at the Beatification Mass with His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI.



You asked me to talk about “*The Challenge of Catholic Higher Education Today*”. In fact, you will soon realise, the singular “challenge” is an understatement

par excellence; there are *many* of them and this is not surprising in the light of the fact that one civil servant from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, which has responsibility for higher education, although you would not necessarily guess that from its title, this senior civil servant called it what we are about to face in higher education over the next couple of years: “*The greatest experiment in higher education for a century*”.

When we look at higher education in the UK at this moment in time you could be forgiven for not even noticing that there is a Catholic element. We have about 140 higher education institutions of which only four have a decidedly Catholic background and outlook. Three of them are in England: Leeds Trinity University College, St Mary’s University College London and ourselves, Newman University College in Birmingham. The other one is in Northern Ireland: St Mary’s University College, a college of Queen’s University in Belfast.

To be complete, there are also Heythrop College (as part of the University of London) and Maryvale Institute here in Birmingham, although they are specialist institutions for programmes in theology only. In a broader sense one may also wish to include Liverpool Hope University, with its clear Christian ethos and a Catholic and Church of England heritage. The number of truly Catholic institutions is not only small, we note not one of them is a university, and in terms of student numbers the picture is not much better: in 2009-10 students at Catholic institutions only accounted for 0.5 per cent of the total UK student population. The picture is slightly better with regard to teacher education: ITE (initial teacher education) students at Catholic institutions accounted for 4 per cent of the total ITE population in the UK in 2009-10.

As individual institutions none of us have 4,000 fte (full-time equivalent) students and therefore we fail to satisfy the relatively arbitrary numbers criterion for university status in this country. So looking at just these few figures you have four stark and major challenges right away:

- first, what is the prospect for a Catholic university bearing in mind for the last two years we had a cap on student numbers and this is not going to change under the new tuition fees regime, starting in September 2012?
- secondly, how can the voice of the Catholic institutions amongst the 140 higher education institutions be heard?
- thirdly, who would actually notice if we all disappeared?
- and fourthly, can we attract enough students in order to survive under the new fees regime starting in September 2012?

I shall come back to these challenges and, most importantly, will try to convince you that although in quantitative terms we seem to make a minimal contribution to higher education in qualitative terms our contribution is actually highly relevant and not to be missed. Not surprisingly I shall exemplify most of this by focusing on our particular contribution at Newman University College.

Before I come to that, a brief reminder of history may be in order and set the context. Based on a 2,000-year tradition of the Catholic Church Catholic Higher Education has a long and proud history in the world. Some of the earliest universities in Europe started as Catholic institutions, including the oldest colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, and most of them remain world class institutions to this day. For instance, think of the Catholic University of Leuven, in Belgium, founded in 1425, the oldest still existing Catholic university in the world, from 1968 split into a Dutch-speaking part – *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* – and the French-speaking *Université Catholique de Louvain*. Interestingly, this is the only Catholic university in the first hundred universities of the World Reputation Ranking table for 2010 of the *Times Higher Education Supplement*.

Think of some powerful universities in the US: University of Notre Dame, Indiana, at position 63 the highest-ranked Catholic university in the THE table, and Georgetown University, Washington. Then think of several national ones such as the Catholic University of America in Washington, the Catholic University of Portugal or the Australian Catholic University (the last two are federated structures, and have campuses in different parts of Portugal or Australia) and think of some very small ones such as the University of Saint Joseph in Macau, which has just 900 students (interesting in the context of the 4,000-bar here in this country). Some of them are pontifical universities – i.e. the degrees are accredited by the Holy See – and some are state or private universities with simply a strong Catholic ethos of very different flavours.

It is all very different here in the UK. Access to higher education for Catholics, let alone access to a Catholic institution for higher education, came to an abrupt end with the Act of Supremacy in 1534. That Act required from every person, before proceeding to a university degree, an oath renouncing all papal authority with acknowledgment of royal supremacy and a declaration of allegiance to the Articles of the Church of England. Rich Catholics had the choice of emigrating and attending university abroad, predominantly to Leuven in those days, or alternatively staying and shunning university altogether, turning

to lucrative business and trade instead. The majority of rich Catholics did exactly that so the appetite for a Catholic University was not great amongst the Catholic establishment. Poor Catholics had no choice at all. Whilst English Catholic colleges were founded at Douay (Flanders), Rome, Madrid, Seville, Valladolid and Lisbon they were, at best, badly-run seminaries for the mission in England and had no real impact on higher education for Catholics in this country.

Catholics remained inferior citizens until the Catholic Relief Act in 1829 and undergraduate degrees to “dissenters” were not open until 1854 in Oxford and 1856 in Cambridge. The Benedictine monk Peter Augustine Baines from Ampleforth was the first of several pioneers who were concerned to provide institutions of higher education for the needs of English Catholics. In 1836 he opened St Paul’s at Prior Park near Bath; St Paul’s was affiliated with the University of London.

Unfortunately St Paul’s did not come to much: the University of London was perceived as providing education which was “godless” and in any case inferior to Oxford or Cambridge, so the numbers were small. Several other attempts were made: for example, Archbishop Manning opened Catholic University College in Kensington in 1873. Again this was doomed for failure. In a letter from the bishops in 1878 we read: *“It has been alleged at times that students of University College have been seen at theatres and other places of amusement and, in some instances, at places which, though commonly frequented, are nevertheless of a less desirable character.”*

Of course, we must not forget Newman’s attempt to create a Catholic university in Ireland. Unfortunately there seemed to be conflicting interests and profound misunderstandings right from the beginning. After encouragement from Rome the Irish bishops were keen to have a Catholic institution for the Catholic men in Ireland. Attendance at Trinity College Dublin was not exactly encouraged although Catholics could be admitted as long as they accepted that there was no access to any available bursaries; and the Queen’s Colleges in Belfast, Cork and Galway not only had no faculties of theology but were in general seen as providing “godless education”. The bishops, understandably, were particularly interested in the availability of professional routes into law, medicine and education; the country needed in their view more Irishmen in these professions in order to get a grip on society in general. This clearly could not be the starting-point for Newman, someone who had appreciated the liberal education at Oxford.

Newman came to Ireland in 1851 at the invitation of Archbishop Paul Cullen of Armagh. Cullen suggested initially a few lectures on higher education to a selected group in Dublin. Newman obliged and gave the first discourse in February 1852. By 1853 the Irish bishops were confident about the project and asked Newman to begin with the foundation of a Catholic University. After Easter 1854 he was finally named as its first Rector. The bishops had in mind something as confined as a seminary whereas Newman, thinking of his beloved Oxford, wanted an open collegiate institution with a common room debating atmosphere and was criticised by the bishops for allowing students to have such

things as billiard tables and the freedom to smoke while there were no fixed times of study. For Newman the ideal was the community of learning embracing staff and students, something we are keen to preserve at Newman University College.

Funds from wealthy Catholic source did not materialise, so Newman was seriously charged to attract plenty of students to the new institution. He put his hopes on the Catholics of England, particularly the sons of the Catholic aristocracy. In a letter of 7th March 1856 he writes: “*What is Ireland to me, except the University here is a University for England, as well as for Ireland? I have left England for what I consider to be a great English interest.....I would far rather do good to English Catholics in Oxford than in Dublin.*”

In the eyes of the Irish bishops Newman never delivered what they wanted and there was the constant irritation that he held on to his position as Provost of the Oratory in Birmingham. Between 1851 and 1858 he went regularly backwards and forwards between Dublin and Birmingham, all in all over sixty trips. Disillusioned, he wrote his letter of resignation in March 1857, which in spite of all the criticism shocked Cullen. Newman agreed to remain as a non-resident Rector with no salary for another year and retired completely in November 1858. So this episode in Ireland, although well-intended by Newman, clearly did not help Catholic higher education in England either.

All in all our historical overview has covered nearly 500 years of fragmented, in terms of the Church hierarchy *half-hearted*, and as far as a national higher education institution is concerned, *failed* attempts. We cannot ignore that in this country there are always potential tensions between national interests and the interests of Rome. This relates to the question of a pontifical institution. I think it is fair to say that in the UK, in clear contrast to many other countries, due to its historical and political constitution the appetite for a pontifical solution is minimal – even in the Church hierarchy. Please note that I say “minimal” and this is more than non-existent. As far as I am aware, Maryvale Institute seems to have the ambition of at least delivering pontifical degrees.

I turn now to the all-important question of what is the particular contribution of Catholic institutions to higher education in the UK and why should anybody notice if we were to disappear? For a start what are the benchmarks for our performance and ultimately for our claim for existence? The first one clearly is academic excellence. Whatever we do it must live up to the quality and standards of academic excellence in terms of our core activities and that means: learning and teaching and research.

There is still a major challenge and this is the future funding of research. The government is concentrating research funding on the so-called world-class institutions and with such a policy there is practically nothing left for institutions like us. That means that we will have to cross-subsidise research from other income. We have no alternative because a university, and we want to be one, has the aim to increase knowledge and our learning and teaching activities ought to be research-informed. Our students clearly benefit from our research activities. But there is a challenge to make this clear to our prospective

students under the new fees regime because, no doubt, further education colleges and private providers will want to undercut our prices.

Academic excellence is a given. But what is the specific contribution of Catholic higher education? We have two clear benchmarks: our own patron's *The Idea of a University* from 1856 and Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (from the heart of the Church) from 1990. Let us have a quick look at both of them.

Newman laid out very clearly his idea of a university. For him the rationale of a university is its students – something we wholeheartedly agree on, and we capture the concept when we say that we are a student-centred institution. He also sees the university as a place of teaching universal knowledge and the Church is necessary for its integrity. *“Not that its main characters are changed by this incorporation: it still has the office of intellectual education; but the Church steadies it in the performance of that office.”* Most importantly Newman sees the task of university education as the formation of the intellect and the character. This affects the whole person and is developmental and it expects an active contribution from the student. This is a far cry from all the too-common talk nowadays of a predominantly passive student experience. You will be pleased to hear that we at Newman University College are making no compromises in this regard, and Newman's idea of formation is the guiding principle for our learning and teaching approach. In *Discourse II: Theology a Branch of Knowledge* Newman airs the important connection of faith with truth and knowledge. We have adopted one of his sayings as our motto: *ex umbris in veritatem* (out of the shadows into truth). For me this motto expresses our passion about education.

Dissemination and enhancement of knowledge is always ultimately concerned with a search for truth, and as a Catholic institution, distinct from a secular institution and detached from prominent views in society, we pursue this aim in the full knowledge that we cannot complete this task in this world because eternal truth and the fount of truth are outside this world. I am always reminded here of the passage in St John's Gospel: *“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world does. Do not let your hearts be troubled.”* I personally find this knowledge of being in the hands of something which is out of this world immensely liberating and supporting of our own quest for truth.

Newman then advocates the idea of a learning community and says *“A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom”*. This, in his view, can only be achieved if the university is a place of education rather than a place of instruction. You will have gathered by now that at Newman University College we unashamedly plagiarise Newman's idea of a university and are confident that we are the institution which even under the new regime will keep 'education' in the practice of higher education and that we will not succumb to a purely utilitarian approach.

Looking at Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* it is especially Article 2 "The nature of a Catholic university" which provides the guidance and principles. We would certainly want to be judged by the following two:

- "A Catholic university, like every university, is a community of scholars representing various branches of human knowledge. It is dedicated to research, to teaching, and to various kinds of service in accordance with its cultural mission."
- "Every Catholic University is to make known its Catholic identity either in a mission statement or in some other appropriate public document."

I am confident that we live up to these criteria. In our Strategic Plan 2010-13 we have a clear expression of our vision and mission. We declare that our aim is *to be a student-centred university rooted in the community providing a formative education informed by the Catholic ethos.*

The *Catholic ethos* means that:

- we proudly stand in the tradition of Catholic education that values the process of respectful dialogue as a means of reaching new knowledge through teaching, scholarship and research
- we aim to respect and encourage the individual integrity of everyone who is a part of the life of the University College
- we will strive to be an inclusive community which emphasises the Christian practice of hospitality, cherishing the diverse traditions represented at Newman University College
- we are committed to promoting the Christian virtue of justice in our neighbouring community, nationally and internationally, and to seeking external partners that support this vision
- we place worship and reflection at the spiritual centre of our life and work
- we work to foster a sense of vocation in students and staff, so that we are able to take responsibility for the flourishing of our world

We add a distinctive voice to the higher education landscape. This is not just a nice touch but absolutely fundamental for the future of our nation and the common good of our society. Looking forward to the immediate future of September next year one may well get concerned. I am optimistic about our future but I accept that there are a few things we will have to get right or will need in order to survive.

These include trust in the younger generation in a sense that they will not all be blinded by a utilitarian approach; and support from the Catholic Education Service, the Bishops' Conference and friends like you in the Newman Association. Please keep us in your thoughts and prayers.

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Based on a talk given by Prof Peter Rolf Lutzeier to a conference organised by the Birmingham Circle of the Newman Association in March 2011