OTA29 22 October 2017

***Above all else a Christian***

In 1879 our patron, John Henry Newman received a rare honour when he was named a Cardinal by Pope Leo XIII.   This came as surprise because Newman wasn’t a bishop and his ideas were not universally approved.

In line with a tradition that harks back to when the Bishop of Rome was elected by the clergy of the city, Newman was allocated as his titular church, San Giorgio in Velabro. A commemorative plaque on the wall lists some of Newman’s many achievements; but significantly it concludes with the words *sed ante omnia Christianus* (above all things a Christian).

These words reflect Newman’s appreciation that being called the children of God transcends all our personal qualities and achievements.

This insight about where our truest identity and deepest allegiance lies, underlies Jesus’ response to the hypocritical challenge in today’s gospel. He is responding to a truly unholy alliance. The Pharisees would not ordinarily be found in cahoots with Herodians, which probably explains why they sent their disciples rather than going themselves on this occasion. For while the Pharisees regarded themselves as the purest adherents to Jewish tradition, the Herodians had sold out to the Roman occupiers. They were usually poles apart.

So Jesus found himself being interrogated by an alliance of religious zealots and political stooges. Both want to trap him into taking sides. He steadfastly and deftly sidesteps the trap by forcing them to admit that the Roman empire and its symbols like coinage bearing the imprint of Caesar’s countenance, bears no comparison with God’s kingdom in which every soul bears the image of a loving Creator.

Awareness of this overriding dignity runs all through the rite of Baptism.

One of the first rituals is the signing of our forehead with the cross; when we are claimed for Christ; later, the white garment is heralded with the words: *see in this white garment an outward sign of your Christian dignity;* and as we are anointed with the oil of Chrism we receive our Christian calling with the words: *As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life*.

Baptism confirms that we each bear the image of God. This is not an achievement it is a gift and the only one deserving gratitude for this gift is God. We know not what life will bring for the newly baptized, but we believe that no one can erase God’s image.

We rightly encourage parents to bring their new born children for baptism, but as we do so we sometimes wonder what kind of life will follow. If we limit our hopes to active church membership we can become despondent because the evidence suggests that the future of the church will be very different from its past.

Marilynne Robinson strikes a more hopeful note by a fictional pastor in her novel *Gilead*. He is speaking about how Abraham had to surrender both his children to an uncertain future and says:

“Any father, particularly an old father, must finally give his child up to the wilderness and trust to the providence of God. … Great faith is required to give the child up, trusting God to honour the parents’ love for him by assuring that there will indeed be angels in that wilderness.”

He goes on to say how “Abraham himself had been sent into the wilderness, told to leave his father’s house also, [because] that was the narrative of all generations [for] it is only by the grace of God that we are instruments of his providence and participants in a fatherhood that is always ultimately his.”

Because we bear God’s image our future is simultaneously a mystery and a guarantee rooted in love and mercy.

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