

Homily for the Formal Renaming of the Church



One of the most poignant sermons preached by Newman wasn't preached in the rarefied setting of St Mary's University Church, Oxford where his skill as a preacher had earned him great renown. The sermon I'm speaking about was addressed to a humbler gathering of common folk in the more intimate setting of the church he had commissioned to be built in the small hamlet of Littlemore. It was the last sermon he was to deliver as a priest of the Church of England. And the theme he chose to preach was "*On the Parting of Friends*".

The sermon subtly acknowledged the situation he faced in his personal faith journey as well as recognising its consequences for the parishioners he had served so devotedly for several years.

In it, Newman surveyed some of the instances of separation recorded in the scriptures, including how Christ prepared his own friends for his departure; and Newman concluded his remarks with a beautifully measured expression of how he hoped his own ministry in Littlemore might be remembered saying:

And, O my brethren, O kind and affectionate hearts, O loving friends, should you know any one whose lot it has been, by writing or by word of mouth, in some degree to help you thus to act; if he has ever told you what you knew about yourselves, or what you did not know; has read to you your wants or feelings, and comforted you by the very reading; has made you feel that there was a higher life than this daily one, and a brighter world than that you see; or

encouraged you, or sobered you, or opened a way to the inquiring, or soothed the perplexed; if what he has said or done has ever made you take interest in him, and feel well inclined towards him; remember such a one in time to come, though you hear him not, and pray for him, that in all things he may know God's will, and at all times he may be ready to fulfil it.

Newman addresses his by now tearful parishioners with the same affection with which Paul wrote to communities such as at Philippi. Paul might have been writing from prison but he didn't hold back on letting his hearers know the strength of his feelings: *"I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy for all of you"* he wrote, and he is clearly aware that his affection is reciprocated because he adds: *"you hold me in your*

heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me".

Newman and Paul thus put into practice something that Jesus first taught the company of disciples. Namely, that we are Christ's friends, summoned to relate to one another as friends. Our status then is so much more than associates gathered together by chance or common interest. We are united in a bond of divine love through our common baptism. We are each part of the vine and can only bear fruit by remaining in communion with one another in Christ.

When Newman put his Anglican preaching stole aside for the last time he understood that the context of his life was changing but the substance, as a baptised disciple of Christ, remained the same. Which is why he was able to ask his listeners to remember him in the hope they might also continue to benefit from any small grace

his ministry at Littlemore might have accomplished. It was his earnest desire that those he addressed as *brethren, kind and affectionate hearts and loving friends* would continue to pray for him.

For although Newman's public renown was established in large part by his intellectual gifts he had a profound insight into the essential link between personal faith and friendship. Friendship with God and friendship between believers, as expressed in the motto he chose when appointed cardinal: *Cor ad cor loquitor*, heart speaks to heart.

The nurturing of deep personal friendship does not contradict the summons to love the whole human race. Indeed, Newman wrote that "*the best preparation for loving the world at large, and loving it duly and wisely, is to cultivate an intimate friendship*

and affection towards those who are immediately about us.”

As a teacher to his core, Newman understood that we learn how to live nobly and graciously by rehearsing such virtues in the conduct of our closest relationships and responsibilities.

No survey of Newman’s life could make any sense if it ignored the role that friendship played. This included life-long friendships, intense friendships, lost or compromised friendships, and friendships with women as well as men.

It was one of his Anglican friends who offered one of the most insightful and prophetic interpretations of Newman’s conversion to Catholicism. Edward Pusey was one of Newman’s greatest collaborators in what became known as the Oxford Movement which began and

continues to have a profound impact on how the Church of England recovers its Catholic roots and practices. As sad as he was to see Newman's direct influence on Anglicanism come to an end Pusey came to understand that Newman had as it were been transplanted to Catholic Church for God's own good reasons. He described Newman as a '*great instrument of God*' and wrote "*he seems then to me not so much gone from us, as transplanted into another part of the Vineyard, where the full energies of his powerful mind can be employed, which here they were not*". Like Ruth who chose to walk to same path as Naomi when she might just as easily have returned to her own people, Newman's life as a Catholic brought untold blessings to the Church. Pusey has surely been proved right in this and we have all benefited from the path he took.

It has been widely acknowledged that Newman was a great unseen influence over the reforms that took place long after his death at the Second Vatican Council. These included his emphasis on rediscovering treasures from the early church, welcoming the contribution of the laity in shaping and developing the way we talk about faith, and renewing bonds of connection with those who may not share fully in our own doctrine and practice. We are all the better for our willingness to cherish the roots we have in Judaism, the spiritual yearnings implicit in every authentic religious tradition and the sincerity of those who cannot yet believe.

New and re-established patterns of friendship offer a better future for all and provide a context in which to resolve differences, share insights and discover new paths to peace.