



The Cardinal Vanishes: John Henry Newman and the Nature of Sainthood

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It was as if he was playing a saintly, practical joke, that John Henry Newman's grave at Rednal was found to be virtually empty. The Cardinal had vanished, and the relic seekers stumped. Is it that, as in life, Newman was once more exhibiting that diffidence, almost a shyness, for anything resembling glory? This present writer is also reminded of a remark made by Monsignor Roderick Strange during the Newman Centenary Symposium, held in Sydney in 1979. On that occasion, the then Rev. Dr. Rod Strange said that he rather hoped that Newman would not be canonised, fearing that canonisation might wrap Newman in a kind of saintly cellophane, so to speak, putting him at a distance from both the believer and the scholar. Monsignor Strange may have modified this view since, but the beatification of Newman makes it timely to say something about the nature of Sainthood.

What is a Saint?

The very foundations of sainthood, of God's holiness manifest in the human being, are clearest in martyrdom. Whether this is understood in terms of death or in the wider sense of willingness to live and die for Christ (Romans 14:8), the saint or the martyr is a witness to Christ, and the power of the witness given also comes exclusively from Christ without whom we can do nothing (John 15:5)² But the whole business of "saint making" has always been open to misunderstanding, ever since the first formal canonisation of a saint by the Pope of Rome in the tenth century.³

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² G. Bonner, *Martyrdom: Its place in the Church*, Sobornost, Series 5, No.2 (1983) 21.

³ The first formal canonisation occurred in 993, in the late tenth century. In this year John XV solemnly canonised St Ulric or Udalric, onetime bishop of Augsburg. However, some scholars believe that the first canonisation occurred in the early ninth century when

Before this tenth-century innovation the process for proclaiming a saint was both popular and local. It was certainly not the exclusive function of the clergy. Indeed, when the people of the Church in those first thousand years discerned the presence of the saint in their midst, and with their pastors instituted the *cultus* of that saint, they were expressing an aspect of the much-neglected infallibility of the laity, the infallibility of the Church in its most popular expression. When they discerned and acclaimed the saint who lived and died in their midst, or when they received the veneration of a saint from another local Church as a gift,⁴ they were expressing infallibility. In the latter case it was both an expression of infallibility in its most popular form, as well as an expression of the Church's catholicity.

Should we be surprised, therefore, to see just how easy it is for present day commentators and would-be hagiographers to reduce the characteristics of saintly lives to their constituent psychological parts in order to understand the wellsprings of the saints' actions and personalities? Don't they know, or have they forgotten, that the saint is precisely the one in whom conventional wisdom encounters its limits? It might be very interesting indeed to penetrate the psychological world of John Henry Newman, but that is not at all the same thing as his spirituality. For example, his deep calm and purposefulness, even in the face of misunderstanding, vilification and humiliation, may indeed be attributed to certain temperamental resources, but within the horizon of the spiritual life, psychological considerations are but the threshold of the spiritual. The spiritual life has begun and the life of holiness appears when psychology and temperament, soma and heredity, environment and nurture, have all been baptised into Christ and come under the power of his life-giving Cross.

To speak like this is doubtless puzzling to the British, post-Christian politician or civic dignitary who believes that Newman's significance is as a role model for leadership within the smaller communities which make up the life of the United Kingdom. It may also be unsatisfying to those who want to present John Henry Newman anachronistically as a lonely figure exerting opposition to the rising tide of liberalism on the one hand, and dead authoritarianism in the Church on the other. Then, as now, one of the chief functions of the saint in the Church is to "demolish sophistries, and the arrogance that tries to resist the knowledge of God" (2 Cor 10:4) by the witness of their lives which go beyond the bounds of merely conventional and humanistic values.

it is said that St Swibert was canonised by Pope Leo III in 804. The tenth century is more probable.

⁴ The Church of early Kiev-Rus is a good example, receiving and venerating saints of both East and West.

Distortions and misunderstandings of the theological nature of the saints in the life of the Church began early. Julian the Apostate, Emperor of the Romans, as part of his program to restore the worship of the gods, also tried to create his own pagan Church with hierarchy and saints. He was also one of the first and most famous of men to pour scorn on Christians and upon the veneration they offered to the martyrs and saints. He did this largely because these disturbing figures represented another source of power which rebuked the present order. Full of disdain he wrote,

You have filled the whole world with tombs and sepulchres, and yet in your Scriptures it is nowhere said that you must grovel among tombs and pay them honour.”⁵

Today Julian’s hostility has been largely replaced by blank incomprehension as to the meaning and nature of the saint and martyr. The meaning of the saint, however, is not to be found in the idea of “role model”, or even as inspiring hero. The martyr and saint represent a much deeper reality, a theological mystery of grace. Viewed from one angle, they may indeed be heroic, but the saints are not to be compared with worldly, secular heroes, worthy and admirable as these may be. As Maurice Bowra put it,

Heroes are the champions of man’s ambition to pass beyond the oppressive limits of human frailty to a fuller and more vivid life, to win as far as possible a self-sufficient manhood, which refuses to admit that anything is too difficult for it, and is content, even in failure, provided it has made every effort of which it is capable.⁶

The hero attempts “to win as far as possible a self-sufficient manhood”, while the saint is one who has passed through “the narrow gate that leads to life” (Mt. 7:13–14).

During the days of Newman’s impending beatification such a distinction is probably a long way from the minds of some. These could be heard to murmur that there were plenty more people in the British experience who could be held up for admiration and celebration besides John Henry Newman. Of course there are. But canonisation is not admiration and celebration of the worthy. In so murmuring they show that they do not know what constitutes a Christian saint. As lovable and as admirable as they proved to be, Elizabeth Fry and Moses Montefiore are not Christian saints. Nor would they want to be. The saint is not the hero of open-countenanced endurance or of philanthropic energy. The saint’s life may also embrace these very same heroic values and experiences – Newman is just such a

⁵ Julian, *Against the Galilaeans*, 335C (Loeb ed. iii. 915).

⁶ C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1952) 4.

case – but essentially it points with specific, active faith to the Christ. The vital difference between the hero and the saint is that the saint relies wholly upon Christ in whom she does all things and who strengthens her (Phil 4:13). We always understand and rightly approve of the hero, but the saint remains an embarrassment.

The veneration offered to a saint, the veneration of their bodies and even of the personal things which they used and valued in their daily life, is something of a problem even for otherwise informed Christians. Many a modern Christian might agree with Julian that this is indeed so much “grovelling among tombs”. They much prefer endurance and philanthropic energy. However, from an Eastern Christian viewpoint this incomprehension of the meaning of even the saint’s physical person may reveal the development of a rather bloodless and moralistic Christianity whose appreciation of the mystery of the Incarnation lives more in theological textbooks than in the actual, material, daily existence of men and women. Such a misunderstanding also means that they do not understand even the meaning of their own death. The body of the saint is not a cadaver, rather, this body-person is the one in whom Christ has acted and suffered. The Church declares them blessed, which means that it declares that they are human persons who now live in the eternal embrace of the divine community of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, filled with the light of God which shines through Christ. Their bodies, as part of the world to come, they are sacraments of eternity. This is living dust in which the foolishness of Christianity comes embarrassingly close. It is indeed much easier to speak of role models and leadership in community.

Challenged by Holiness

How many people feel cowed and daunted when they hear Galatians 2:20 read in Church, or when they come upon it in their reading of the Scriptures? “It is no longer I, but Christ living in me”. Intimidated by St Paul’s exclamation, they see in this verse the far-off goal of sainthood, a goal which is beyond their strength and capability. Paul himself said that this was a superficial outlook and he insisted that the reality of the indwelling Christ was the common starting point of life in Christ. The baptised have all put on Christ and have the same calling. Therefore “if you are confident that you belong to Christ, remind yourself of this, that just as you belong to Christ, so also do we” (2 Cor 10:7).

Nevertheless, many find what they believe to be the far-off goal much too exhausting to reach. What they do not realise is that this is not the end of Christian life. The indwelling presence of Christ is where Christian life begins, as expressed in 1 John 3: 12: “Just as long as we love one another God will live in us and his love will be

complete in us". This is something realised in the present moment. However, many Christians secretly believe that salvation is something to be won by their goodness, their holiness, their moral straining and striving. They believe that their problem is that they are not energized sufficiently to get on with the task of spiritual self-improvement. They see it as a motivational problem, not a constitutional problem. They need motivation, not salvation, which is not the view that Paul expressed so emphatically to the Corinthian Church: "For anyone who is in Christ there is a new creation: the old order is gone and a new being is there to see" (2 Cor 5: 17). As the Church said fifteen centuries ago, Pelagian theology connives to accommodate us to our exile and is a worldly wisdom. In contrast the saint represents "a wisdom that none of the masters of this age have ever known." The saint represents "things beyond human understanding" (1 Cor 2:8).

Christians of the Byzantine tradition have very little excuse for misunderstanding Paul's message. At every baptism they sing many times over, "Everyone baptised in Christ has put on Christ, Alleluia!" The Church emphatically reminds them that the miracle of salvation and the life of grace is God's gift, the gracious renewal of our entire being. To be thus reassured is part of the antidote to the spiritual exhaustion that so daunts the modern Christian. The Eastern Christian approach to the redeeming, sacramental power of baptism stands upon 2 Cor 6:17–18: "And for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation, the old creation is gone and the new creation is here. It is all God's work."

In the Eastern Christian view we all enter the path to sainthood when we are baptised. As 1 John 3: 17 puts it: "Even in this world we have become as he is." Nicholas Cabasilas, the fourteenth-century Byzantine theologian developed this theology further:

As soon as we are baptised our soul, purified by the Holy Spirit, is more glorious than the sun, and not only do we contemplate the glory of God, but we receive of its brilliance. . . . Even in the bodies of the saints the light of divine grace is reflected. Nothing can compare with that interior glory, "the skin of Moses' face shone" (Ex 35:35), but the saints carry this light within their souls with even more brilliance; for the shining forth in Moses belongs to the senses, that of the Apostles was of the spirit. These luminosities coming from bodies full of light are spread abroad on surrounding objects and reflect their light: so it is with the faithful souls. This is why souls thus blessed desire no more of the things earthly but dream only of heaven.⁷

This illumination is above all a fruit of baptism, which is itself represented as Light in all the baptismal catecheses of the Fathers. How is it then that I feel at such a distance from the things of heaven?

⁷ Nicholas Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, PO 150, 564 CD.

How is it that I find myself in a far country having squandered my patrimony upon the acquisition of rubbish? St John Chrysostom explains what I have done:

We allow ourselves to be seduced by the things of earth; this ineffable and unspeakable glory remains with us a day or two: and then we extinguish it by introducing within us the whirl of secularity and blot out the rays by a thick cloud.⁸

In the Eastern view it is the function of the sacraments to strengthen the Christian in the “whirl of secularity”, where she struggles to conform herself to Christ with a love that is “not mere talk, but real and active” (1 Jn 3: 18). As Nicholas Cabasilas put it:

Through the intermediary of the sacraments, as through a great opening, the sun of righteousness shines in this dark world. . . . And the Light of the world conquers the world. . . . When the rays of the sun penetrate a room, this draws all eyes to them, and the light of the candle grows dim: so likewise the glory of the life to come, entering this world by the sacraments, [being communicated and diffused personally by the saints in community] triumphs in those souls over the earthly life and blots out the brilliance of this world.⁹

The glory of the life to come, which is given to all the baptised and truly makes them “saints” in the New Testament usage of the term, is present in the world chiefly in the Eucharist, the source of the spiritual transformation of the believer. Fed upon the bread of the Eucharist, all human senses are transfigured and awakened by the light and the power of grace. Indeed, “The life of the world to come flows into the life here on earth and the Sun of celestial glory shines even on us with great compassion, and the heavenly perfume invades the earthly sphere, and the bread of angels is given to human beings.”¹⁰

However, the Eucharist is the work of the local Church. Universally it is the one Eucharist of Christ that is communicated to all Christians, but it is necessarily expressed locally. Consequently, the saint receives the same Eucharist from the same altar as the struggling sinner. The saint is at our level and most particularly in that fellowship of the Eucharist where she becomes for me an icon of the world to come, an evangelical sign in the “whirl of secularity”. The saint is the one whose example and intercession teaches me to say at the moment of crisis “Here am I” (Is 6:8). In the East, the saints maintain a constant and immediate presence in the community and in

⁸ St John Chrysostom, *Hom. 7 in 2 Cor.*, PO 61, 448.

⁹ Nicholas Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, PO 150, 504 BC.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, PG 496 CD.

the liturgical assembly, a presence particularly expressed and realised in the icon.

Saints and the Local Church: A Note

Naturally everyone wants Newman's beatification to be a joyous and Church affirming occasion, but along with the hundreds of canonisations and beatifications 'put through' particularly under John Paul II, it is also a symbol of how things have changed in the operations of the Western Church in the last 1000 years. The canonisation of saints is a symptom of deeper structural and ecclesiological problems and it is not inappropriate to raise this matter now that this great man of the Church, who happened to value and write on the 'infallibility of the laity', has been beatified and on the path to canonisation. However, the canonisation of saints and its history touches on this and more deeply than at first appears.

Who canonised Swithun of Winchester (d.862), Cuthbert of Lindesfarne (d.687), David of Wales (730), St Alban, or even St Augustine of Canterbury? In fact, none of the ancient Celtic and British saints were ever 'canonised'. It was the local Church who recognised and proclaimed their heroic sanctity, and not the hierarchs of the Church only. The people of God played their part in the discernment, proclamation and veneration of the local saints. Other Churches of the Catholic world received them and they joined the galaxy of saints in the universal communion. But today, saint-making is a virtual ecclesiastical industry and centred entirely in Rome. It is a truism that from later modern times the local Church has been progressively out of the power and decision making loop in the Roman communion. What was once a communion of Churches gathered around Peter's Chair at Rome, is now more a conglomerate than a communion, a corporation with dioceses merely parts, large and small, of an international religious organisation. There have been many respected and voices commenting on and attempting to address this situation, including the Second Vatican Council. While respecting its good intentions, Rome's response has been more centralisation and international papal visits a plenty. These latter were doubtless intended to strengthen the local Church, but the outcome is paradoxical. These tend to generate even more Rome-centredness, rather like overusing a drug, helpful at first, but finally encouraging deeper dependence. Maybe the day will come when the Church of New York can proclaim for itself the holiness of a Dorothy Day, or the Church of Sydney a Caroline Chisholm. But they can only do this when they once again realise that where ever the faithful are gathered around their bishop, there is the Catholic Church, whole and entire in that place, needing no other validation. The English Church has known for more than a century

that John Henry Newman is a saint. Why could it not proclaim him such?

On writing about the Saints

“It has always been a valuable work to write about the noble lives of the saints so that they may be a mirror and example and, as it were, a seasoning for human life on earth. In this way it is as if they continued to live after their death, challenging many who were in a state of living death, and summoning them to true life.”

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Life of Saint Malachy*.90

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