

Homily for 28C, 13th October 2019

Let's convert England!

Today all eyes turn to Rome where the great Englishman Cardinal John Henry Newman is to be canonised. It's a significant moment in our history. One of the leading intellectuals of the nineteenth century, an Anglican clergyman and Oxford don, he famously converted to Catholicism, aged 44, when he found that within the Catholic Church alone could be found the unbroken link of apostolic teaching going back to Jesus himself. His conversion sparked enormous controversy in Victorian England not least because for many years Cardinal Newman had spearheaded the Oxford Movement which sought to generate within the Anglican Communion a stronger sense of connectedness to Church tradition.

Cardinal Newman described the development of his faith in a very powerful autobiography, *Apologia pro vita sua*. It's one of the best books I've ever read. It narrates how his early convictions as an evangelical Christian matured through his copious readings of the Fathers of the Church, those great figures of the early centuries. Eventually after much agonising, he perceived that the universality of the Catholic Church, the fact that Catholics in far-flung parts of the world are in full communion with each other, was an indisputable mark of the Catholic Church's unique authenticity. Having acknowledged this he could do no other than to become a Catholic. A Passionist priest, Blessed Dominic Barberi, called at the house where he was staying and received him into the Catholic Church. Cardinal Newman subsequently founded the Birmingham Oratory and spent nearly 40 years there, working as a parish priest for the salvation of souls in a poor area of the city, until his death in 1890.

One of my fellow seminarians at the English College in Rome in the 80s and 90s had read this book whilst being an unbeliever. He had wanted to improve his prose style and a friend had said, quite rightly, that Cardinal Newman wrote beautifully. By the time he had finished the book he wanted to become a Catholic.

Today's canonisation is a powerful reminder to us that, in the famous words of Pope St Paul VI, the Church "exists to evangelise." We are in the business of growing in holiness ourselves and making converts. We do this because that which we have received from God, our faith, grows precisely to the extent that we share it with others. It is not a private source of personal consolation. It is a resource entrusted to us by God which we are to use for his purposes.

During yesterday's Confirmation retreat I and the catechists and the children shared our faith with one another and it was truly life-giving. We reflected together on the gospel story that we have just heard using an ancient devotional practice known as *lectio divina*. When I asked the children what word or phrase in the text had struck them most forcibly, they mentioned two in particular: "faith" – "Your faith has saved you" and "foreigner" – "only this foreigner has come back to give thanks."

Returning to the presbytery yesterday afternoon, I considered Cardinal Newman's gospel witness in the light of the children's responses. His faith was remarkably strong: he spoke of the "certitude of faith." According to Cardinal Newman, we can be sure that what we believe is true because it is God, the source of all truth, who has revealed it to us. Not for nothing was he able to write the famous hymn beginning: "Firmly I believe and truly, God is three and God is one." And we may say that he was a "foreigner" in the sense that he was an outsider to the Catholic Church whom God blessed through enlightening his incredible intellect and who then, following the example of the cured leper, spent his life in continual thanksgiving for the precious gift of the fullness of faith which he had received.

Cardinal Newman's conversion confirmed Catholics at the time in the rightness of their belief and, without doubt, his canonisation today will have a similar, indeed we may say, a much greater effect. And as we look around our parishes we notice that God continues to enrich our community with adult converts and that they too, through their heartfelt, life-changing decision, bring new life to the community which they join. They are people whom the Holy Spirit has inspired with a holy dissatisfaction for lesser consolations. Through the vision granted to them by the same Spirit they perceive, as did Cardinal Newman, the inseparable connection between the Crucified and Risen Jesus and his apostolic Church and because they want to draw nearer to Jesus, so they want to enter more fully into communion with his Church. Through a supernatural insight granted to them by the Holy Spirit they recognise that God is inviting them to become a Catholic so that in this way their faith in Jesus might be more perfectly expressed and that they might receive all the help they need from the authoritative teaching of the Church and from the sacraments.

Many of them find it hard to settle subsequently for all sorts of reasons, not least, no doubt, because we struggle to make them feel properly welcome. But a good number, their hearts filled with gratitude, rejoice that through his unfathomable mercy, God has granted them a new home in this family. And

through their perseverance in the faith they stand in the person of the leper, who was a foreigner and who experienced the joy of being healed. Those who are received into the Catholic Church are healed of their sins (for they receive the Sacrament of Baptism or the absolution of their sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation) and perhaps too of the emotional and psychological wounds which their former unbelief inflicted upon them. Their witness very naturally causes those of us who have been Catholics for many years to ponder whether we are truly grateful for the blessing of faith which Jesus through his Spirit has conferred upon us.