



# The Holy See

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**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM  
ON THE FIRST CENTENARY OF THE DEATH  
OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN**

1. At the approach of the first Centenary of the death of John Henry Newman and in response to your kind invitation, I gladly associate myself with the celebrations that mark this event in England and indeed in many countries throughout the world. The memory of the great Cardinal's noble life and his copious writings seem to touch the minds and hearts of many people today with a freshness and relevance that has scarcely faded with the passing of a century.

The Centenary year coincides with the beginning of a period of profound change in world events. This period has begun with new prospects for genuine freedom and signs of a renewed awareness of the need to build life, both individual and social, on the solid foundation of unfailing respect for the human person and his inalienable God-given dignity. To all searching minds in this present historical context, Newman's voice speaks with a timely message.

2. Newman's long life shows him to have been *an ardent disciple of truth*. The unfolding of his career confirms the single-heartedness of his aims as expressed in the following words which he made his own: "My desire hath been to have Truth for my chiefest friend, and no enemy but error" (J. H. Newman *The Via Media*, London 1911, vol. 1, pp. XII-XIII). In periods of trial and suffering he persevered with confidence, knowing that time was on the side of truth.

Newman's quest for the truth led him to search for a voice that would speak to him the authority of the living Christ. *His example holds a lasting appeal* for all sincere scholars and disciples of truth. He urges them to keep asking the deeper, more basic questions about the meaning of life and of all human history; not to be content with a partial response to the great mystery that is man himself; to have the intellectual honesty and moral courage to accept the light of truth, no matter what personal sacrifice it may involve. Above all, Newman is a magnificent guide for all those who perceive that the key, the focal point and the goal of all human history is to be found in Christ (Cfr.

*Gaudium et Spes*, 10) and in union with him in that community of faith, hope and charity, which is his holy Church, through which he communicates truth and grace to all (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 8).

3. Closely connected with this call is John Henry Newman's teaching on the importance of conscience as a means to the acquisition of truth. His doctrine on conscience, like his teaching in general, is subtle and whole, and ought not to be oversimplified in its presentation. He sets out from the basic affirmation that conscience is not simply a sense of propriety, self-respect or good taste, formed by general culture, education and social custom. Rather is it the echo of God's voice within the heart of man, the pulse of the divine law beating within each person as a standard of right and wrong, with an unquestionable authority.

The inner light of conscience puts a person in contact with the reality of a personal God. In one of his books he wrote: "My nature feels towards the voice of conscience as towards a person. When I obey it, I feel a satisfaction; when I disobey, a soreness - just like that which I feel in pleasing or offending some revered friend... An echo implies a voice; a voice a speaker. That speaker I love and revere"(J. H. Newman *Callista*, London 1910, pp. 314-315).

Moreover, according to Newman, religious obedience to this inner voice puts a person on the look-out for a divine revelation, leads from light to light and ultimately to Christian faith. "Obedience to conscience leads to obedience to the Gospel, which, instead of being something different altogether, is but the completion and perfection of that religion which natural conscience teaches" (*Eiusdem Parochial and Plain Sermons*, London 1908, vol. VIII, p. 202).

4. One of Cardinal Newman's lasting merits, in fact, is his struggle to make clear and uphold the vital principle that revealed religion, with its content of doctrine and morals, is the bearer of objective truths which can be known with certitude and assented to with joy and ease (Cfr. *Dei Verbum*, 5). Few people championed the full rights of conscience as he did; few writers pleaded so persuasively on behalf of its authority and liberty, yet *he never allowed any trace of subjectivism or relativism to taint his teaching*.

For this reason he taught that although conscience is within the human heart before it receives any training, it is still the duty of a Christian to inform and educate it through the guidance of an authority in order to bring it to maturity and perfection. Left to itself and disregarded, it can become a counterfeit of the sacred power it is, and turn into a kind of self-confidence and deference to a person's own subjective judgment. Newman's words are unequivocal and perennially valid: "Conscience has its rights because it has its duties"(J. H. Newman *Difficulties felt by Anglicans*, London 1910, vol. II, p. 250).

5. By following the light of his conscience, Newman made a journey of faith which he has described with force and clarity in his writings. After spending the first half of his life in generous service to the Church of England which he deeply loved, he spent the second half in the service of

the Catholic Church, showing a like sincerity and unflinching loyalty. The thoughts and convictions which gave rise to his conversion found their roots and inspiration in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, which are the common patrimony of all Christians. I have often urged that Christians need to rediscover together their common heritage of faith if we are to see the reintegration of Christ's followers in the unity for which he prayed. This is a process that can be remarkably furthered by attention to the work of Newman.

It was characteristic of him to be firmly faithful to the truth once grasped, while being always ready to develop and deepen his understanding of the deposit of faith. It might be added, moreover, that he combined fidelity to the truth with *an attitude of respect and receptivity* to the ideas and testimony of those with whom he disagreed. Both in his person and in his work, therefore, Cardinal Newman illuminates the ecumenical journey that we undertake in obedience to the will of Christ (Cfr. *Io.* 17, 21). His life and witness furnish us today with a vital resource for understanding and carrying forward the ecumenical movement which has developed so richly in the century since his death.

6. It is my fervent hope that the present Centenary year will occasion in the minds of many people who thirst for truth and genuine freedom *a renewed awareness of the lessons to be gained from the life and writings of this outstanding Englishman, priest and cardinal.* A man of such consistent loyalty and sincerity could not fail to inspire and draw many others towards the ideal he faithfully served.

Not all agreed with the momentous decisions he took or with the religious principles he advocated, but all unfailingly testified to the spiritual influence his example wielded over others. Some called him their guide in the paths of holiness; others were swayed by the silent force of his humble and withdrawn ways; still others found comfort and peace in his simple exposition of truth; while all were struck by his life of constant prayer and study, and by his familiarity in faith with the "things that are above" (*Col.* 3, 1).

Down to the present day, Newman remains for many a point of reference in a troubled world. They look to him as a man of great natural talent who put every ounce of it at the service of God and the Church. His remarkable life, void of sham and ambition, but steeped in a prayerful communion with the Unseen, while it remained alive to the problems of his age in Church and society, continues to inspire, to uplift and to enlighten.

May the Centenary celebrations issue in abundant grace and spiritual vigour for the Church in England, for your own Archdiocese and for the members of the English Congregation of the Oratory of St Philip Neri, founded by John Henry Newman.

Finally, I take the occasion to send my greetings and my Apostolic Blessing to all the Friends of Cardinal Newman throughout the world.

*From the Vatican, 18 June 1990.*

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