

Cardinal Newman's letters to young nun made public

Simon Caldwell | Catholic News Service | Jul. 21, 2010

LONDON -- An English order of nuns has made public the letters between a dying nun and English Cardinal John Henry Newman, who founded the Oxford Movement to bring the Anglican Church back to its Catholic roots.

The letters show how the 19th-century theologian, who will be beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in Birmingham, England, Sept. 19, tried to console Visitation Sister Dominica Bowden after she discovered she was suffering from tuberculosis.

The letters, copies of which have been shown to Catholic News Service, illustrate their friendship and reveal how the nun's death left Cardinal Newman distraught.

Cardinal Newman knew Sister Dominica because her father, John William Bowden, was his best friend during his years at Oxford University.

As an Anglican priest, in 1831 he had baptized the future nun as a baby, "Marianne."

She became a Catholic in 1847, two years after Newman was received into the church and three years after her father had died; she entered the convent at the age of 21.

Cardinal Newman preached at the Westbury convent Mass at which Sister Dominica took her final vows.

The correspondence between the pair began soon afterward, and although only Cardinal Newman's letters remain, they display deep affection. At the time, Sister Dominica was in her 30s and Cardinal Newman was in his 60s.

In some of the letters, which have never been published, the cardinal reflects on day trips to the seaside or grumbles about growing old, struggling to pay the bills, or his frustration at being unable to open an oratory at Oxford.

The tone of the letters suddenly changes, however, when Sister Dominica tells him that she is gravely ill. He tries to console her by saying he is praying for her and offering Masses for her recovery.

"I wish you spoke of yourself as stronger -- but you are in the hands of that dear Lord to whom you have dedicated yourself, and he will never forsake you," he wrote in one letter.

"I remember how your dear father, when you were quite a little thing, always said that you would be a nun," he wrote.

In another, he said, "Till you tell me that you are really better, I propose, please God, to say a Mass for you once a week -- and have begun this morning."

When, in the summer of 1867, she tells him that she thinks she is dying, Cardinal Newman admits to almost weeping. That Oct. 9, Sister Dominica died.

Cardinal Newman's last letter to the Westbury convent is to the mother superior, expressing his shock at Sister Dominica's death.

"I was not prepared for your letter," he wrote. Sister Dominica "has been so much better or, at least, seemed to have still so much strength that I thought she would have longer to wait till she entered into her rest.

"She was young and I am old and she is taken before me," he added. "May I follow her and my soul be with hers!"

In a July 20 telephone interview with CNS, Mother Jane Margaret Clifton, the superior of Visitation Sisters in England, confirmed that the letters were authentic.

"Sister Dominica was a very outgoing person, she was very contemplative, a very cultured lady and a very educated lady for that age," she said. "Newman was extremely close to her."

The Order of the Visitation was founded in France in the 17th century by St. Jane Frances de Chantal and St. Francis de Sales, from whom Newman borrowed his motto, "Cor Ad Cor Loquitur" (Heart Speaks to Heart), after he was made a cardinal by Pope Leo XIII.

Father Ian Ker, Cardinal Newman's biographer, told CNS in a July 20 telephone interview that he had not previously known of the existence of the letters but did not doubt their authenticity.

"Newman had a great capacity for friendship, which has largely disappeared today," he said. "These letters bring out his affection and his great care. No one went unnoticed. He had an exquisite courtesy and a lot of women friends."

Cardinal Newman's beatification was announced in July 2009 after the Vatican declared that the inexplicable healing of Deacon Jack Sullivan of Marshfield, Mass., from a crippling spinal condition was the result of the cardinal's intercession.

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