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Q & A: Father Duffield

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 14, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

This week at Q & A we emailed a variety of Newman scholars, asking them what Cardinal Newman would have to say to the Church of the 21st century. Today, we hear from the Very Reverend Richard Duffield, the Provost of the Birmingham Oratory, that is, Newman's successor.

The question: What would Cardinal Newman say to the 21st century Church?

Fr. Duffield: The Church of the 20th Century had to proclaim the message of the Gospel in a time of unprecedented change, political, technological and moral. Almost all the proponents of these changes saw orthodox Christian faith as an impediment to human progress, at best an anachronism, at worst kind of tyranny. But the 20th Century was not unlike Newman?s own 19th Century and the 21st Century looks set to be the same. Newman?s experience was like our own. The one unchanging fact is the fact of unending change!

As a very young man, Newman took for one of his mottoes, the phrase: ?To live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often?. This is not the statement of a facile philosophy of neophilia, love of the new for its own sake. Rather it expresses Newman?s insight that to preserve the inner spirit of the message sometimes the outward form of its expression has to change.

This demands an acute awareness of the problems of the present day: what, in our own age, are the points of conflict with the inheritance of Christian doctrine? It demands a profound understanding of the past: what exactly is that inheritance?

This philosophy underpins the great work that led Newman into the Catholic Church, the Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine. Over and over again throughout history, new situations have called forth a renewed interest in the Church?s tradition and new ideas in response to the challenges that are thrown up by an ever changing world. We look to our past to see what we can learn from similar experience. We test new ideas against the perennial tradition handed down to us. We find answers from the past and ensure that new ideas do not conflict with what has gone before. Newman in his age, was like the scribe of the kingdom in St Matthew?s Gospel who ?brings out from his storehouse things both new and old?. I think this would undoubtedly be one of the things Blessed John Henry Newman would want to say to the 21st Century. As far as lies within your power, understand the challenges of the present and understand the inheritance from the past.

Some of Newman?s practical propositions, at the heart of his significance for our own day, result from this insight:

- The importance, in an age of democracy (i.e. popular power) of having an educated laity. We find this expressed in The Idea of a University, the Letter to the Duke of Norfolk, the establishment of the Catholic University of Ireland and the Oratory School
- The importance of a clear philosophy of Christian belief. We find this in The University Sermons and the Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent.

- The importance of an appeal to the whole person. Newman?s motto as a cardinal, Heart speaks to heart, demands that the Church appeals not only to the reason, but to the moral and the aesthetic sense as well. Man is not converted by syllogisms, but by the true, the good and the beautiful all together. This amounts to a call to Catholics not only to preach and teach well, but to live good and moral lives and to worship in beauty and holiness. We find this in the foundation of the Birmingham and London Oratories which show us Newman?s love of the 16th Century reformer and founder of the Oratory, St Philip Neri.

What would Blessed John Henry Newman have to say to us in the 21st Century? Do not be afraid; have clear heads and holy hearts; keep a critical awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the times; ?test everything, hold fast to that which is good?.

Stories in this series on the papal visit to Scotland and England:

- Hijacking or setting him free, Benedict loves Newman [1], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Benedict finds unlikely ally in British PM [2], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Polarized opinion on pope fills London streets [3], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Trying to solve the church's communications problem [4], by John L. Allen, Jr.
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All this week in his Distinctly Catholic blog, Michael Sean Winters is interviewing a variety of Newman scholars:

- Fr. Joseph Komonchak, taught ecclesiology at Catholic University, wrote his dissertation on Newman [20]
- Christopher Pramuk, Assistant professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati [21]
- Ian Ker, Professor at Oxford University and author of a Newman biography [22]
- The Very Reverend Richard Duffield, the Provost of the Birmingham Oratory [23]
- Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster and Primate of England [24]

Related items in Distinctly Catholic:

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