NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# Q & A: Professor Ian Ker

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 15, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

With all eyes on the upcoming beatification of John Henry Newman, Q & A asked a group of Newman scholars what the cardinal might have to say to the 21st century Church.

Today, we hear from Professor Ian Ker of Oxford University. Ker has written the best biography of Newman [1] to date. (Biographies of great men and women are never "definitive" because subsequent scholars pose different questions and unearth different aspects of the subject.) Professor Ker chose the provocative, and bold, option of replying in the first person, in Newman's own voice.

**The question**: What would Newman have to say to the 21st Century Church?

**Professor Ian Ker** (speaking in the voice of Newman): As one who has often been called ?The Father of the Second Vatican Council,? I think the Church of this post-conciliar period would find the many private letters I wrote before, during, and after the First Vatican Council of interest and relevance. There I made several points.

First, Councils arouse great controversy and disunity. There are likely to be those who grossly exaggerate the Council's teachings (as happened in my country after Vatican I when Cardinal Manning exaggerated the scope of the definition of papal infallibility) and those on the other side who resist those teaching (as with Dollinger and the Old Catholics). Is there a parallel after Vatican II?

Second, Councils have unintended consequences, as was practically inevitable when papal infallibilty was defined in isolation and without the wider context of a more general teaching about the Church. Did the post-Vatican II Church become overly preoccupied with ecumenism, justice and peace, etc. at the expense of the larger Gospel?

Third, my study of the early history of the Church showed me how the Church 'moved on to the perfect truth by various successive declarations, alternately in contrary directions, and thus perfecting, completing, supplying each other'. Conciliar texts need completing - not by augmenting or strengthening what has been taught but by supplying other aspects of the truth. History suggests that the Vatican III some have dreamed of is unlikely.

Fourth, conciliar teachings need interpreting: they no more speak for themselves than the Bible does. I was amused from heaven to notice how bishops after your Vatican Council returned home naively declaring they would 'implement' the Council. The interpreting comes not only from theologians and the magisterium but also what I have called 'the passive infallibility of the whole body of the Catholic people' is involved.

Finally, I suggest you look at the beginning of my Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, where I argue that, while it is sometimes said that 'the stream is clearest near the spring', on the contrary 'a philosophy or belief ... is more equable, and purer, and stronger, when its bed has become deep, and broad, and full. It necessarily rises out of an existing state of things, and for a time savours of the soil. Its vital element needs disengaging from what is foreign and temporary.' I wonder if your Vatican II did not rather savour of the soil of the sixties and if its 'vital element' does not need disengaging from that somewhat volcanic soil?

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

- Hijacking or setting him free, Benedict loves Newman [2], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Benedict finds unlikely ally in British PM [3], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Polarized opinion on pope fills London streets [4], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Trying to solve the church's communications problem [5], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope meets with sex abuse victims [6], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Analysis: Benedict's in a box in talking about the crisis [7], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope apologizes for 'unspeakable crimes' of sex abuse [8], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Joint statement on meeting between Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury [9]
- Benedict in Britain: We get it, we've got it, let's share it [10], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope calls on religions to defend environment, human life [11], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Full text of pope's comments on the crisis [12], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Of all people, Cardinal Kasper? [13], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Benedict battles the 'dictatorship of relativism' [14], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope on crisis: 'We weren't fast enough' [15], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Benedict to step into buzz saw of dissent during upcoming UK visit [16], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Newman still commands our attention [17], an NCR editorial
- He even prayed 'with a pen in his hand' [18], a book review by Peter L?Estrange
- Hijacking Newman [19], by Dennis Coday
- Newman: the 'sense' and 'consent' of the faithful [20], a viewpoint by Robert McClory

**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 [21]
- Christopher Pramuk, Assistant professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati [22]
- Ian Ker, Professor at Oxford University and author of a Newman biography [23]
- The Very Reverend Richard Duffield, the Provost of the Birmingham Oratory [24]
- Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster and Primate of England [25]

**Related items in Distinctly Catholic:**

- When Benedict Meets With Victims [26]
- Letters between Newman and the Rev. Charles Kingsley [27]
- James Roberts, assistant editor of the British Catholic weekly The Tablet [28]
- Christopher Lamb, news editor of the British Catholic weekly The Tablet [29]
- Elena Curti, the deputy editor of the British Catholic weekly The Tablet [30]
- Catherine Pepinster, editor of the British Catholic weekly The Tablet [31]

**Source URL (retrieved on *10/20/2014 - 05:53*):** http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/q-professor-ian-ker

**Links:**
[1] http://www.amazon.com/John-Henry-Newman-Ian-Ker/dp/019956910X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1284570016&sr=1-1
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/20317
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/20316
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/20315
[5] http://ncronline.org/node/20314
[6] http://ncronline.org/node/20313
[7] http://ncronline.org/node/20309
[8] http://ncronline.org/node/20308
[9] http://ncronline.org/node/20303
[10] http://ncronline.org/node/20306
[11] http://ncronline.org/node/20293
[12] http://ncronline.org/node/20281
[13] http://ncronline.org/node/20276
[14] http://ncronline.org/node/20274
[15] http://ncronline.org/node/20268
[16] http://ncronline.org/node/20207
[17] http://ncronline.org/node/20254
[18] http://ncronline.org/node/20211
[19] http://ncronline.org/node/20240
[20] http://ncronline.org/node/20265
[21] http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/q-father-komonchak
[22] http://ncronline.org/node/20277
[23] http://ncronline.org/node/20241
[24] http://ncronline.org/node/20220
[25] http://ncronline.org/node/20181
[26] http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/when-benedict-meets-victims
[27] http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/blast-past-newman
[28] http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/q-james-roberts
[29] http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/q-christopher-lamb
[30] http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/q-elena-curti
[31] http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/q-catherine-pepinster