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Newman still commands our attention

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Cardinal John Henry Newman (CNS/Crosiers)

Cardinal John Henry Newman will be beatified at a Mass Sept. 19 presided over by Pope Benedict XVI. It will be the first time Benedict has presided over a beatification ceremony, indicating the great reverence in which Newman is held.

Newman, however, commands more than reverence. More than 100 years after his death, he still commands attention. Why? In part, Newman still fascinates because he was the outstanding English prose stylist of his day. In part, we are still in awe at the powerful spirituality of his sermons. In part, Newman?s conversion, which he recounted in *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, is still a compelling account of an intellectual?s wrestling with a faith that transcended his intellect.

The main reason, however, that Newman still commands attention is that he has rightly been called the ?father of Vatican II.? This designation stems from three contributions he made to Catholic thought, contributions that continue to chart the way forward for our 21st-century church.

First, Newman?s method would characterize the *ressourcement* theology that shaped every document of the council. In the *Apologia*, in order to cope with his own challenge, Newman returned to the writings of those early Christian writers who had theologized not about the use of condoms but about the divinity of Christ. He discovered that his status as an Anglican was too close to that of the Novationist heretics for comfort, and he swam the Tiber. His followers in the 20th century discovered something else: that the writings of the early church fathers contained a richness of theological metaphor and a wonder at the stupendous claims contained in the Nicene Creed that had been lost in the years, and the minutiae, that characterized certain aspects of scholasticism before the Second Vatican Council.

Second, Newman?s ?Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine? provided the theological justification for the council?s work. As Pope John XXIII said in his opening remarks, ?The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.? John XXIII understood that the church had been weighed down in her effort to proclaim the Gospel by manners of speech and patterns of thought that had ossified and were unrecognizable to the women and men of his time. Newman pointed a way forward.

Third, Newman, like John XXIII, was devoid of nostalgia. Newman?s writings never speak of a golden age that never was, but faced the challenges of his day head-on, with confidence and vigor, and with the glowing conviction that in the central dogmas of the faith, the enigmas of human existence found their resolution. This was no shallow optimism. It was a profound commitment to the central Christian claim that, whatever the achievements of science discovered about the physical nature of the universe, at the heart of reality was a loving

God who had revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

John Allen will be filing reports throughout the Papal visit to the U.K. Sept. 16-19. Stay tuned toNCR Today[1] for updates.

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.
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- 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
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- 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]

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