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

Hijacking or setting him free, Benedict loves Newman

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 19, 2010 NCR Today

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London

tIn the final act of his four-day trip to the United Kingdom, Benedict XVI travelled today to Birmingham to formally beatify the great English theologian and apologist Cardinal John Henry Newman, praising him as an apostle of ?the vital place of revealed religion in civilized society.?

tWhile Benedict's enthuasiam for Newman was obvious, with whom the pope shares a passion for the life of the mind, critics charged that the pontiff has tamed Newman, obscuring his critique of papal authority and his openness to change.

A crowd estimated at 65,000 braved cold and rainy weather to greet Benedict XVI in Birmingham?s Cofton Park, some arriving as early as 3:00 am when the gates to the park opened.

tNewman?s life covered virtually the entire 19th century, born in 1801 and died in 1890. An Anglican convert to Catholicism in 1845, Newman remains a widely influential figure because of his vast writings, including two landmarks books: *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* and *The Grammar of Assent*.

tTheologically, Newman is often seen as a hero to more liberal Catholics because of his emphasis on the development of doctrine, suggesting that church teaching can change, and on conscience, suggesting that individual Catholics may occasionally be compelled to challenge official formula.

tThat liberals remain an important constituency within the Catholic fold was driven home today by a poll published in Britain?s *Sunday Independent*, which showed that solid majorities of Catholics in the U.K. disagree with the pope on a wide range of issues, including abortion after rape and contraception.

tThe bold headline was, ?You?re Wrong, Catholics tell Pope.?

tBritish Catholic writer John Cornwall, whose earlier claim to fame is as the author of *Hitler?s Pope*, suggested in a Sept. 10 piece in the *Financial Times* that Newman has been ?pontifically hijacked,? meaning co-opted by Benedict to suppress dissent rather than to encourage it.

Oxford church history professor Diarmaid MacCulloch, an Anglican, called this a "political beatification" by Benedict intended to advance a revisionist reading of Newman's life and legacy, playing down Newman's opposition to "papal monarchy" and his role as a pioneer of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

tYet Ratzinger is no Johnny-come-lately to his fondness for Newman. He studied the *Grammar of Assent* in the seminary, and a fellow student at the time, Alfred Laepple, has said that for him and the young Ratzinger, ?Newman was our hero.?

tDuring a workshop for American bishops in Dallas in 1991, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger reflected at length on Newman?s legacy, arguing that Newman?s emphasis on conscience rests on a prior commitment to truth.

?Conscience is central for [Newman] because truth stands in the middle,? Ratzinger said then. ?Conscience signifies the perceptible and demanding presence of the voice of truth in the subject himself.?

In that sense, Ratzinger argued, it?s a mistake to style Newman as a patron saint of dissent.

For Newman, Ratzinger argued, ?A man of conscience is one who never acquires tolerance, well- being, success, public standing, and approval on the part of prevailing opinion, at the expense of truth.?

That led Ratzinger to identify two standards for a genuine sense of the role of conscience.

?First, conscience is not identical to personal wishes and taste,? he said. ?Secondly, conscience cannot be reduced to social advantage, to group consensus or to the demands of political and social power.?

That, in effect, is the version of John Henry Newman whom Benedict beatified this morning. In some ways this was a classically "Ratzingerian" moment, a theologian-pope embracing and extolling another towering Catholic intellectual, rather than a devotional figure who embodies popular religiosity.

Benedict acknowledged that while Newman was one of the great personalities of Victorian-era England, ?he continues today to inspire and enlighten many all over the world.?

?Firmly opposed to any reductive or utilitarian approach, he sought to achieve an educational environment in which intellectual training, moral discipline and religious commitment would come together,? Benedict said.

Benedict put special emphasis on Newman?s commitment to education, especially the need for an informed Catholic laity.

The pope quoted Newman: ?I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold and what they do not, who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it.?

Finally, Benedict also said that was beatifying not just a towering intellectual, but also a ?priest and pastor of souls? who exercised a ministry of ?warmth and humanity.?

Benedict lauded Newman?s ?devoted care for the people of Birmingham during the years that he spent at the Oratory he founded, visiting the sick and the poor, comforting the bereaved, caring for those in prison.?

If additional proof of Benedict?s fondness for Newman were needed, consider this: When the pontiff was elected in April 2005, he made it clear that the pope would no longer celebrate beatification Masses in Rome. Instead, they were to be performed in the diocese by the local bishop, to underscore that a ?blessed? belongs to a local church.

Over these past five years, Benedict XVI has stuck to that policy, declining to celebrate a single beatification Mass ? until today. Benedict chose to make Newman his first, and potentially his only, beatification Mass, confirmation indeed that Newman is close to this theologian-pope?s heart.

Whether Benedict this morning is ?hijacking? Newman, or setting free the real man beneath ideologically charged interpretations, will continue to be a matter of debate. That Benedict XVI takes Newman?s life and

legacy seriously, however, is beyond any doubt.

One American footnote to this morning?s events: The miracle report which qualified Newman to become ?blessed? involves Jack Sullivan, a Catholic deacon in Boston, who reported being miraculously cured of a spinal disorder after praying for Newman?s intercession. Sullivan was one of the deacons who assisted with this morning?s beatification Mass.

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

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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 [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:

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