

England's Most Modern Saint

It isn't often that I have the chance of writing on something topical, but I can do so this month because we already know, even as I write this in late August, that on 13 October Cardinal Newman will be canonised by Pope Francis in Rome. Not only will he be England's most recent saint, but he will also be the first English person who has lived since the seventeenth century to be recognised as a saint by the Roman Catholic Church.

You may wonder why I am choosing to write about him, apart perhaps from an obvious touch of general national interest. The reason is simple: he began his ecclesiastical career in the Church of England and was hugely influential before going over to Rome. With reference to his impact on Anglicanism, the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, has recently said of him, 'he was one of the key leaders of the Oxford Movement that heralded a revival in the life of the Victorian Church of England that spread around the Anglican Communion'. The Oxford Movement, in which Newman played such an important part, introduced into Anglicanism what we might now characterise as high church practices. Not everyone agrees with these practices nowadays, and not everyone did then either. But it has to be said that the Oxford Movement (or the Tractarian Movement as it is also known, because of the Tracts for the Times that set out its ideas) had a huge impact on the Church, reaching way beyond those individuals, groups and communities who accepted all of its arguments and practices. It is so significant in the development of the Church of England that it deserves an article of its own, which I will write for next month.

John Henry Newman was born in 1801 and was brought up in quite an evangelical context. In 1817 he went to Trinity College Oxford and became a Fellow of Oriel College in 1822. He was ordained deacon in 1824, priest in 1825, and became vice-principal of Alban Hall that same year, following which he became vicar of St Mary's Oxford. The sermons he delivered at St Mary's between 1834 and 1842, advocating and developing Tractarian theology and practice, were hugely influential throughout the country. They circulated widely in print as Parochial and Plain Sermons. By degrees, however, Newman began to doubt the claims of the Anglican Church to be the true church (a claim of restoration and continuity made by it since the Reformation) and he gradually resigned from his positions in Oxford. For a few years he lived not far away in a semi-monastic community which he had set up with a few friends, but he then took the final step of being received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1845.

He founded the Oratory of St Philip Neri in Birmingham in 1848 and was made a Cardinal in 1879. Newman was noted scholar, steeped in the reading of the great Church Fathers, preeminent amongst whom was Augustine of Hippo, and his many theological writings have had a profound influence on both the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. He was the author of the *Dream of Gerontius*, which Elgar set to music as an oratorio, and he also wrote two well-known hymns, 'Firmly I believe and truly' and 'Praise to the Holiest in the height'.

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