

Why is Cardinal Newman still relevant today?

Ryan Marr and his colleagues were thrilled to hear that a second miracle attributed to the intercession of Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman had been confirmed by the Vatican on Feb. 13. There may even have been some dancing in the offices of the National Institute for Newman Studies, Marr wrote in a blog post that day.

The institute, affiliated with Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, provides resources for and publishes scholarly works about Cardinal Newman, a prominent Anglican priest who converted to Catholicism in 1845. He was made a cardinal by Pope Leo XIII in 1879 without ever having been ordained a bishop, and he was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010.

Days after the second miracle was confirmed, Marr, the institute's director, spoke with *Our Sunday Visitor* about why Cardinal Newman continues to be such a significant figure.

Our Sunday Visitor: Why is Cardinal Newman such an important figure, and why does he remain relevant today?

Ryan Marr: Newman was arguably the most well-known convert in the 19th century. He had his hand in a lot of different things: He was priest, a poet, teacher. He helped found the University of Ireland in Dublin. He was really prolific as a writer. But I think the reason that many people are drawn to Newman on a devotional level is that he combined the life of the mind with a real profound personal sanctity.

His largest body of writings are sermons and a huge collection of letters. He was a pastor, a counselor, and he was really committed to the souls that were committed to his care. ...

The motto that he took when he was named a cardinal was "*Cor*

ad cor loquitur,” which means “heart speaks to heart.”

Newman’s voice continues to resonate in a lot of people’s hearts today, whether that’s the nerdier types who are drawing on his theology or those who continue to draw a great deal from his prayers and his sermons. Especially as English becomes more and more the *lingua franca*, I think Cardinal Newman’s only going to grow in influence, because of the depth of his theology and the fact that he wrote in English makes what he said very accessible to a lot of people.

OSV: Knowing that Newman sought the truth with enough passion to follow wherever it led him, what do you think he has to say to spiritual seekers today?

Marr: When Pope Benedict beatified Newman, he really highlighted his passion for the truth and the fact that Newman was willing to sacrifice a great deal – career prospects and friendships – when he was called by his search for the truth into the Catholic Church.

Those who say they are spiritual but not religious are in a different place, but still on a journey. I think Newman, because of his confidence that the God who redeems us is the God who created us, would feel strongly that those who follow their consciences and who seek the truth, that God will reward that search.

The one thing which maybe cuts against the grain of our current cultural understanding of these things is that Newman did think faith always had to be lived out in community, so he would see religious commitment – being drawn into a community of faith – as the proper end or the goal of the search.

OSV: How was Newman viewed during his life?

Marr: His life was long – from 1801 to 1890 – and it had its ups and downs. When he came into the Catholic Church in 1845, it was a different kind of time. It was in the papers, so

people knew that John Henry Newman, that prominent minister, had become Catholic. That was controversial, and he kind of stood out. When he first became Catholic, he was seen as maybe in some ways a traitor to his own people.

Later in his life, after a personal attack, he wrote a book called the "*Apologia Pro Vita Sua*," which means "A Defense of My Life." I think that book really redeemed him in the eyes of the English people, because they were able to see Newman not simply as Roman Catholic but as a brilliant person who followed his conscience in a search for the right home for his faith. He was in some ways reclaimed by the English people.

Now, here at the institute, when I interact with scholars, it's a mix of Catholic and Anglican theologians who still are drawn to Newman, especially since he wrote so much in the first half of his life.

OSV: What was it about Newman that attracted you to this field?

Marr: I was raised in an evangelical Protestant context, and I was actually at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina studying to be a Protestant minister, and I stumbled on Newman's writings. There was a line in his "Essay on Development" where he says, "To be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant," which is kind of a blunt way of saying this, but he really thought that the deeper you moved into history, the more you saw the connections between the apostolic faith and the Catholic Church. It isn't like a mirror, but the living Roman Catholic Church is the continuation of the community Jesus founded.

When I first read that statement, it really challenged me to look more closely at Church history, and it was through that study and some other factors that I became Roman Catholic myself in 2007. So when I went on to do graduate studies in theology, there was a really personal angle

OSV: For someone who hasn't read his work, where should they start?

Marr: I would say one of two places. There's a collection of his prayers called "Meditations and Devotions," and if someone's just looking to go deeper in their faith, Newman provides some profound meditations that can be used for prayer. In terms of his other writings, I would start with his homilies and sermons. The sermons that he wrote as an Anglican are called "Parochial and Plain Sermons." Even for Catholics, there's a lot there. A sermon could be read each day as a kind of devotional entry into Newman's thought.

OSV: How does the institute spread the word about Cardinal Newman?

Marr: It's really a three-pronged mission. One is that we have physical collection, so a material library. But we've also dedicated resources to scanning all of Newman's papers contained at the Birmingham Oratory in England, so we're developing a digital library where users will be able to access Newman's handwritten manuscripts online. And then finally we also have scholarships where professors and scholars from around the world can stay here and use our library; then what they write goes into the Newman Studies Journal, which we publish twice a year. ...

OSV: It's been said that his thinking was influential at the Second Vatican Council. Do you see that?

Marr: The book that Newman wrote when he was moving from the Church of England to the Roman Catholic Church was called "An Essay on the Development of Doctrine." In that work, he looked at how doctrine had developed over time, and that it was not a mark against Catholicism but in its favor. ... There were theologians who were there who said that issue was behind all the issues that were discussed at Vatican II.

There are other ideas as well. He wrote an essay called

“Consulting the Faithful,” in which he said that as the Church discerns how to speak about what it teaches, it’s important for Church leaders to look to the lay faithful and to gauge their own devotion and understanding of the Faith. At the council, the universal call to holiness was emphasized, so Newman’s idea that the faithful have an active role to play in the life of the Church was really prominent.

Michelle Martin writes from Illinois.