

# The Ireland of Newman – the Ireland of today

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The forthcoming beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman is an opportunity for me as Archbishop of Dublin and for the Catholic community in Dublin, to reflect not only on the period and the work of Newman in Dublin, but also on the lessons which we can learn for Irish Catholicism today from Newman's thought and activity.

Newman was invited to be rector of the Catholic university of Ireland by my predecessor, Cardinal Paul Cullen. Cullen was — from the time when he was rector of the Irish College in Rome — an enthusiastic supporter of the idea of a Catholic university of Ireland, modelled on the University of Louvain. Subsequently, he became Archbishop of Armagh and then Archbishop of Dublin, and was the real leader of the project to establish a Catholic university in Ireland. Not all his brother bishops were as committed as he. Some of those who called themselves supporters were less active when it came down to getting the financial resources urgently needed for the project to be carried out..

Maybe Ireland was not ready for Newman's university. The predecessor of Cardinal Cullen, Archbishop Daniel Murray was one of the few bishops strongly opposed to the Catholic university project because he considered it unfeasible. Murray regarded — with less difficulty than his brother bishops and Rome itself — the British Government's project, that Catholics could attend the Queen's colleges, state universities which Cullen considered "*godless colleges*".

Newman's university was not exactly a success. The number of university students was very small. His degrees were not recognised. The British authorities were not prepared to approve licenses granted by private establishments. There was a shortage of Irish Catholics with a university education capable of becoming lecturers. Only a few Irish students, and some English, attended the university until its degrees in medicine were finally approved, but for a short period.

After the establishment of the university and Newman's installation there, the Irish bishops were even more divided. Archbishop MacHale continually put obstacles in Newman's path. It is interesting to note that the Irish bishops have a long history of a lack of unity, despite Rome's attempts to impose it. On the question of the Catholic university, Archbishop Murray of Dublin, recognised by all as a saintly person, had no difficulty in publicly disagreeing with the decisions of Rome or, at least, in interpreting the decisions of Rome in a very personalised manner.

Although Cullen was a strong supporter both of the university and of Newman, he was a complex figure and frequently left Newman waiting for answers to urgent questions which had been asked of him. The personal rapport between Newman and Cullen was difficult. For his part, Newman was not a good administrator and was continually absent from Dublin — often on Oratory business in Birmingham — even at crucial moments for the university. In November 1858, Newman resigned his position as rector.

It should be noted that the university project was launched in a dramatic moment in the history of Ireland. Ireland had suffered a traumatic period because of the Famine which had lasted three full years, and effectively had continued in the fifties of the nineteenth century, the period when the creation of the university was proposed. The Great Famine was one of the major world catastrophes of the nineteenth century and became a veritable watershed in the history of Ireland. Its effects changed forever the demographic landscape of Ireland, with consequences for its social and political structure. For most nineteenth century, Irish Catholics food and survival had priority over the issue of education.

It is hard for us today to imagine the immense trauma which almost all families in Ireland endured for generations after the Great Famine. In the middle of the nineteenth century, famine was not something out of the history books, but an experience lived by the greater part of the population. The country's population decreased drastically. The number of emigrants rose to 250,000 in a single year. Millions of

young people full of hope died or were forced to emigrate. Inevitably, the sense of loss in families lasted for generations. The fear that this could happen again must have persecuted those who had passed through this devastating experience for the rest of their lives.

This was the climate in which Newman was appointed rector in November 1851. Three more years of indecision were to pass before the doors of the university were opened. However, in 1852, he wrote his publication "*Idea of a University*". It was not only a work on the concept of university or the value of a liberal education, but also on the relationship between reason and faith.

In presenting the nature of his university, Newman tried to sensitise the authorities of Church and State in Ireland, as well as the general public on the importance which the development of intellectual life had for the welfare of both individuals and of the Catholic Church.

This had to be stated in a cultural climate in which, on the one hand certain versions of free thinking challenged the very foundations of revelation, and on the other hand, there was a religious climate which was suspicious of free thought. In the Catholic university Gazette of 9 February 1855, Newman quotes from an earlier speech: "*One of the greatest disasters of modern times is the separation between religion and science, and the perfection of knowledge is a combination of both ... which makes men not only educated but good Christians.*"

The question of relationship between faith and reason was particularly delicate at that time — maybe less in Ireland than the rest of the United Kingdom and continental Europe — with the increase of the sceptical attitude toward religion. Newman wanted to show his contemporaries that faith and reason do not conflict, but also that "*reason could not be the sole arbiter of all truth*".

Many parallels can be found between Newman's reflections then and those of Pope Benedict XVI today, just as one can find parallels between the cultural context in which Newman found himself and the cultural context in which Ireland lives today.

Ireland is undergoing a veritable revolution of its religious culture. Many outside of Ireland still believe that Ireland is a bastion of traditional Catholicism. They are surprised to discover that there are many parishes in Dublin where the presence of persons at Sunday Mass is some 5 per cent and, in some cases, even below 2 per cent. The problem is that many in Ireland and in the Church in Ireland have not yet understood the full extent of the cultural change taking place and continue to act as if we were still simply living in a culture with a Catholic majority.

Most certainly, there are still many vestiges of popular mass Catholic culture. The Marian Shrine at Knock is the second most visited tourist site in Ireland — second only to the Guinness Factory! This year on the last Sunday in July around 20,000 people climbed Croagh Patrick, a difficult mountain, in a penitential pilgrimage in honour of St Patrick. The majority of Irish people want their children to be baptised and they also want to have a Christian burial. However, the number of non-religious marriages is visibly increasing.

The commitment of priests, such as those in Dublin, must not be overlooked. They are generous, close to the people, respected, supported, and loved by the faithful. They exercise their ministry in a climate in which the debate on the role of faith in Irish society too often tends to be polemical or ideological. The more sensational mass media concentrate on the scandalous and on the bizarre. The media in general — with some notable exceptions — focus insistently on the sins of the Church and the scandal of sexual abuse of children by priests.

However, it is to be unequivocally highlighted that the scandal of sexual abuse of children by priests and religious in Ireland is a true scandal and not a media invention. There are faithful of all ages who are offended by the fact of abuse but above all by the manner in which the horrific abuse of children and adolescents was handled by Church authorities. The victims were robbed of the God they seek, as President McAleese said in her presentation the other day, but the faithful also often feel robbed of their Church and feel betrayed by their Church.

Ireland, therefore, becomes or has already become a laicised society. In some ways, some expressions of Irish secularism have features which are still adolescent. It is a conflicting and reactionary secularism.

This can be seen, for example, in the public debate on the theme of education. Catholic schools have played an important role in social integration on a vast scale. They played a vital role in the integration of social classes, as well as integrating a vast number of immigrants. And yet, there are people who state that because of the very fact of being religious, these schools are a factor of separation in society and should be abolished or deprived of public funds. There is the impression that a pluralist Ireland must necessarily be a secularist Ireland.

However, within the Church, there are those who want to keep the Church's control over education to a level which does not reflect reality. Ireland needs pluralism in its school system. In the middle, we frequently find many parents whose interest in education rests more on exam results and job opportunities than on one type of ethos over another.

As Ireland becomes secularised, a culture still steeped in formal religious values inevitably degenerates into a form of civil religion, where there will always be a difficulty in developing a true debate on the relationship between faith and reason. People develop a love/hate relationship with civil religion. The Church provides a unique space in which people, even though secularised, can share the events of their lives and find a ritual to express the more profound human experiences of joy, sorrow or fear. However, if the Church becomes just a place where lay persons gather to celebrate human experiences without a deep reference to God, then this civil religion ends up by being empty and does not respond to the search for God who is missing in the lives of many.

When people turn to a Church from which they are in reality alienated, they tend to desire that the Church becomes "their" Church, rather than the place where Christ addresses them and invites them to meet Him and be challenged by His love.

I have the impression that when many people say "We are the Church" they actually want to say "I am the Church", meaning "I am creating a Church according to my needs and my lifestyle." There is a danger that when some say that the Church is the "People of God", they really want to say that it is up to the people to determine who God is and how God is useful. But, whoever encounters only their own God does not encounter the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Newman saw faith as based on rational grounds but not as something solely based on reason. Faith is more than an intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions or submission to moral rules. Faith always contains an element of risk and the certainty of faith does not remove that element of risk.

For Newman, the act of faith is something which affects the whole person, heart and mind. It is an impetus to make faith a life-changing event and is constitutive of one's own actions. The truly Christian act is something very different to a vaguely religious attitude which is just full of civic virtue. Newman does not deny that such an attitude can result in many good things, but still acting just like this does not fully deserve the title of Christian.

After the failure of the Catholic university project in Ireland, Catholicism in Ireland has not found its proper place in the cultural life of Ireland. This is due to a non-intellectual streak in the religious culture of Ireland, often located within a narrow clericalist frame. In particular, in the years following independence of Ireland in the mid-twentieth century, there developed a flourishing and fruitful collaboration between Church and State in social and education fields, which due to clericalism has often led to the creation of confusion as to boundaries of the roles of Church and State. Today, there is a need for the transformation of that culture for the sake of pluralism, but also to highlight the true meaning of Christian charity which has no desire to dominate but to serve. Where Church-State, Church-Society and faith-politics relationships are not correctly understood, it will be increasingly harder to grasp in a fair manner the relationship between faith and reason, and vice-versa. In this context, the pages of *Deus caritas est*[1] should be re-read.

Ireland needs both mature secularists and atheists and mature Christians with a solid intellectual formation. Strangely, the secular culture often calls aloud for a new Church, but a Church of its own design, and hopes that somehow the official Church will come into its own frame. Exponents of Catholic

culture have difficulty in recognising that Catholic culture in Ireland does not have the prominence which it had in the past and must live as salt of the earth in a new way.

Recently, a leader of one of the Protestant Churches in Dublin said to me that all our Churches were now wearing clothes which had been tailored for us when we were fatter. The answer to today's real religious challenges is not to seek more fashionable clothes to make us look better, or to follow the trends of the moment. We need functional clothes of the right fit for the current realities which we have to face. While a traditionally Catholic country, Ireland does not have a proportionate level of theological research. School catechesis, despite the goodwill of teachers, does not produce young Catholics prepared to join in the Christian community. Sometimes, after 15 years of catechesis, young people remain theologically illiterate. There are no forums for reflection on the relationship between faith and life, like for example the Catholic academies in many German dioceses. There is not a serious Catholic press, at the level of Catholic newspapers in France and Italy. There are few writers who would present themselves as Catholic. We do have many people ready to comment on Church events, not infrequently in a sensationalist manner with little knowledge of the nature of the Church. I do not deny the right to criticise the conduct of the Church and of the clergy, and I am not speaking here only of people critical of the Church.

There is a tendency on the part of Catholic commentators to sensationalism, to underestimating the depth of the crisis of faith, and to thinking that everything can be solved by simple media strategies. If the crisis in the Irish Church were only a crisis of media strategies, then it would be enough to turn to some guru or other. If the solution to the crisis in the Church in Ireland were only of structural reform, then it would be enough to turn a group of management consultants. If however the crisis of the Church in Ireland is a crisis of faith, it is necessary to turn to the word of God and to persons of true and mature faith.

Newman's idea was to form, in a Catholic university, Catholics capable of living and witnessing their faith in life, even in a world not always favourable to the concept of faith.

Newman's attempt having failed, the Church in Ireland resorted to a project which lacked the sense of urgency of a rigorous encounter between faith and reason, and which placed its hope above all on the strength of an inherited Catholic culture. Seen nowadays, the fundamental presuppositions of such a project are fragile. It is necessary to revert to Newman's ideas and to create in young people a new sense of Catholic faith.

I see here a role for Catholic movements, especially those which form the young in the true dimensions of personal and ecclesial faith, through the integration of prayer, of a personal knowledge of Jesus through the Sacred Scriptures, and of critical reflection on personal and professional life as a service to society.

The challenge is great, but also urgent. This year alone, I have circulated 250,000 copies of the Gospel of St. Luke to families. It is an attempt to renew Biblical pastoral life in the diocese. The initiative was well received, but has not yet had the desired success, because the ability to make a meditative reading of the Gospels has been lost between clergy and laity, and indeed teachers of this type of spirituality are lacking.

I do not wish be too negative in my assessment of the situation in Ireland. I have already referred to good priests. There are religious men and women who give notable witness of faith and charity. Among the laity, there is a thirst for faith formation. However, very often the vision of Church reform is seen through a secularised lens.

Newman hoped that the university would generate Catholics not only with a passion for science, but also with a passion for truth — those "*educated people, but also good Christians*". He dreamed of a generation of Irish Catholics who could take their place in public without being ashamed of their belief in the value of the contribution of their own faith to society. Ireland today — and not just Ireland — needs people so inspired by Newman's vision on the relationship between faith and reason.