

On saints and sinners

A few days ago, I read in a “The Tablet”, a weekly Catholic periodical that Cardinal John Henry Newman will shortly be beatified – this is the last step before canonisation, being declared a saint. Newman lived about 150 years ago and was one of the brightest stars in the Anglican Church at that time. He began life as an Evangelical, but his work among the poor, and his own theological studies, led him to question, among other things, the way predestination was commonly understood. This moved him towards the Catholic wing of the Anglican Church and then eventually into the Catholic Church.

He brought with him many of the riches and insights of Anglican theology and became one of the most influential theologians of modern times – an influence, which can be seen in the theology of the Second Vatican Council. However, he was also a man who suffered much and made great sacrifices for what he believed. His conversion, for example, brought him the great pain of being separated from close friends and the hymn “Lead kindly light”, which he wrote, reflects much of that sadness. Nor was his life made easy when he entered the Catholic Church and he was often attacked by those held a more black and white vision of the Christian life – it was to help protect him from this that towards the end of his life Pope Leo XIII made him a Cardinal. So, there is much in Newman to be admired and held up as an example and this is why he is being beatified – but he also had his faults. He was, for example, a grumpy man and I am told there was a Brother, who was ignored by Newman, even though they lived in the same religious house for many years – and the Brother said, “And I never knew why!” There is a temptation to say that this fault – and others that he had – should bar him from being declared a saint, but should it? If you think about people only in terms of black and white, then there is no way Newman should be declared a saint – nor most others, for that matter – but such a way of looking at things is false, for nothing and no-one exist in terms of black and white.

When the Church declares that someone is a saint, it is not saying that this person is completely holy and that there is no shadow at all in him or her. It is saying that something in the life of this person shows the greatness and power of grace and stands as an example, an icon, for us all.

This understanding of what a saint is, is important for us, because we all have a tendency to think in terms of black and white about others, and also about ourselves. We tend to get fixated on a fault or weakness that we or others have and so overlook the wonders of grace that are happening in our lives. Worse still, if we do see some goodness, we reject as hypocrisy, because it comes to us mixed up with baser stuff. Those who pan for gold know otherwise, a little of their wisdom would help us.

When I was studying philosophy, one of the things we had to study were fallacies in logical argument. One of these was known as the “*argumentum ad hominem*”, which means that you reject what a person is saying, because of a personal fault he or she has. For example, a teacher may say, “Two and two equal four” and you answer, “Don’t listen to her – she is always gossiping about others”. Silly, isn’t it? But that is what we so often do to others and, sadly, also to ourselves.

We all carry weaknesses and failings, every one of us, thank God! Think how lonely we would be if we never needed help from others! We need to be like gold-panners – rejoicing and full of wonder when we see small grains of gold and patiently give the dross into the hands of the one who made the gold. He has a wonderful way of using this to build beautiful things.

One of my favourite spiritual authors is Saint Francis de Sales. He wrote: “As long as you are alive, you will have to bear the burden of your humanity. Perfection will have to wait for another life and another world, because it won’t happen in this one”

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Another Church Father, St Gregory of Nyssa, wrote: “The longer I live, the more I come to see that to be perfect is not to attain perfection, but to grow in it.”

That is why the thief who died on the cross next to Jesus is known as St. Dismas, why grumpy John Henry Newman will most probably be declared a Saint and also why you – if you can get past looking at the dross and overlooking the gold – will realise that you also are becoming a saint, made so by the grace of God as an icon to others of some goodness.

Diary

I came across a lad on the beach, who I know, and I stopped and we chatted for a while. I knew this lad had a brother of about 18, who was crippled with polio. He told me that he was trying to raise the money to buy his brother's wheelchair so that he could go to a vocational school – and he was selling himself to raise the money. I mentioned this to a friend of mine in Reading and he sent me some money for the wheelchair. So, last Monday we went shopping and we had enough to buy the wheelchair and some rupiah, the equivalent of about 30 pounds, which I told the lad was for his brother. You could have warmed your hands on the smile on the lad's face.

Three of the Bali bombers have received a date for their execution – March. I am still not allowed to go in to say Mass for them yet, but a letter has been written to the authorities, so I am hoping. Their one last chance is an appeal for clemency to the President of Indonesia. Please remember them and their families in your prayers.

I am coming home to UK for a short break – 19th Feb to 5th March. So, maybe I will see some of you then.

God bless,

Terry