

PulledQuote: “Newman reminds us that we as Christians can know the truth, and that it has been revealed definitively in the person of Jesus Christ.” –Bishop John Folda

Headline: St. John Henry Newman and conscience

In the summer of 2018, I had the opportunity to visit England and made an excursion to the university city of Oxford. Just on the outskirts of that town is a small residence called Littlemore, a stone house where John Henry Newman lived with a group of his associates. Newman had been the Anglican chaplain at Oxford and was a well-known scholar in England. But through his study of the Christian faith, and especially through studying Scripture and the ancient fathers of the Church, Newman came to understand that the fullness of Christian faith was to be found not in his own Church of England, but in the Catholic Church. He resigned his prestigious post at Oxford, and retired to Littlemore, where he stayed and was eventually received into the Catholic Church.

Newman’s decision had consequences. He lost his high standing in academic and social circles, and most of his friends abandoned him. Even his family, including his closest sister, turned their backs on him, and Newman was left with only a few new Catholic friends. Many tried to steer him away from his Catholic course but to no avail. Newman knew what the truth was, and he had to act on that truth.

Newman’s conversion was a response to grace, and it was also a decision of conscience. He is now acknowledged as one of the greatest Catholic thinkers of the last two centuries, and his spiritual and intellectual influence is widely felt throughout the Church even today. Perhaps we know him best for the many campus Newman Centers that bear his name, where university students can still deepen their relationship with Christ and form bonds of Christian friendship with their fellow students. Certainly one of his greatest contributions is his reflection on the nature of conscience. Through his own conversion experience, he came to understand that one must seek the truth in light of the Gospel and Christian tradition and then act accordingly.

This sounds simple, doesn’t it? But it becomes more difficult when the surrounding culture tells us there is no such thing as truth, or that the truth cannot be known, or that truth can contradict itself, or that truth is only a matter of personal opinion that varies from one person to the next. All of those theories were in play during Newman’s time, and they are even more prevalent today. Newman reminds us that we as Christians can know the truth, and that it has been revealed definitively in the person of Jesus Christ. Moreover, Jesus chose to pass along that truth through the Church that he had founded, and through the very human instruments that he chose to lead it.

In our time, conscience has been reduced to a personal choice that is often disconnected from objective truth. You might sometimes hear people claim that they acted in a way that was contrary to the moral truths of the Gospel, but that they had followed their conscience, so their action was rendered just and moral. Newman himself is often used to justify this way of thinking, since he persuasively taught on the primacy of conscience throughout his life. But Newman would never propose conscience as a justification for an act contrary to the moral teaching of the Church. In fact, he vigorously affirmed the necessity of forming one’s conscience in accord with the truth that is passed along to us through the Gospel and the Church’s tradition. A so-called decision of conscience can never render an evil act good or change a sinful decision into one that is righteous.

Newman affirmed that we must act according to our conscience, which is the primordial voice of God in our souls. But he also insisted that conscience must be adequately formed and informed by truths of faith and reason. If we do not, we will be operating with a deformed conscience that will lead us away from truth and goodness. The individual conscience is not infallible; it depends on sound formation in the truths that God himself has made known to us. When we are tempted to do evil, a well-formed conscience will tell us to stop, but an overly subjective conscience will not. In a recent address, Cardinal Thomas Collins said, “The voice it hears will only be the echo of our own desires; it is the counterfeit of conscience, the right of self-will.”

Cardinal Collins continued: “When conscience is seen as a free pass to go along with our own desires and the Spirit of the Age, then the flame of faith flickers and dies, and the Church shrivels away;

when conscience is seen, as it is seen by Newman and Thomas Aquinas and all the great teachers of Catholic faith, as a stern monitor that challenges us to repentance and to holiness...then the Church flourishes and, filled with the Holy Spirit we set out with joyful boldness on our mission to bring Christ to the world.”

I was privileged to celebrate Mass in the tiny chapel at Littlemore where John Henry Newman was received into the Church in 1845. It was a humbling experience to pray where this great man of faith had joined in the communion of all the Catholic faithful, and now Pope Francis has announced that he will canonize John Henry Newman as a saint on Oct. 13. At that time, his holiness of life and the integrity of his teaching will gain even greater prominence, and I hope many of the faithful in our diocese will come to know and appreciate the important place he still holds in the life of the Church. Above all, Newman was a teacher of the faith, and we can all learn from his clear teaching on the correct role of conscience in the Christian life. He was a man of humility and integrity, who understood the true meaning of conscience and had the courage to follow it.