



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
ON THE OCCASION OF THE SYMPOSIUM
ORGANIZED BY THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
ON NEWMAN FRIENDS**

*To Reverend Father Hermann Geissler, FSO
Director of the International Centre for Newman Friends*

While the joy of having been able to beatify Cardinal John Henry Newman during my recent visit to the United Kingdom is still alive within me, I address a cordial greeting to you, to the distinguished Relators and to all the participants in the Symposium organized in Rome by the International Centre of Newman Friends. I express my appreciation of the chosen theme: “The Primacy of God in the Life and Writings of Bl. John Henry Newman”. This theme rightly emphasizes theocentrism as a fundamental perspective which characterizes the personality and opus of the great English theologian.

It is well known that the young Newman, although he had come to know the “religion of the Bible” thanks to his mother, endured a period in his life full of difficulties and doubts. At the age of 14 he was influenced by philosophers such as Hume and Voltaire and, in identifying with their objections to religion, turned towards a kind of deism, in accordance with the humanist and liberal trends of that time.

Nevertheless, in the following year, Newman received the grace of conversion, finding repose “in the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator” (J.H. Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua*, Chapter 1. “History of My Religious Opinions to the Year 1833”). He therefore discovered the objective truth of a personal and living God, who speaks to the conscience and reveals to man his condition as a creature. He understood his dependence on the existence of the One, who is the beginning of all things, finding in him the origin and sense of identity and personal uniqueness. It is this particular experience that constitutes the base for the primacy of God in Newman's life.

After his conversion, he was guided by two fundamental criteria — drawn from the book *The Force of Truth* by the Calvinist Thomas Scott — which fully manifest the primacy of God in his life. The first: “Holiness rather than peace” (*ibid.*), which documents his determination to adhere to the interior Master with his own conscience, confidently abandoning himself to the Father and living in faithfulness to the recognized truth. These ideals were later to entail “a great price to pay”. In fact, Newman both as an Anglican and as a Catholic, was subjected to many trials, disappointments and misunderstandings. Yet, he never descended to false compromises or easy agreements. He always remained honest in his search for the truth, faithful to the promptings of his conscience and focused on the ideal of sanctity.

The second motto Newman chose was “Growth the only evidence of life” (*ibid.*), which completely expresses his willingness for continuous conversion, transformation and interior growth, always faithfully relying on God. Thus he discovered his vocation in service to the Word of God and, turning to the Fathers of the Church to find greater light, proposed a true reform of Anglicanism, adhering in the end to the Catholic Church. He summed up his own experience of growth in faithfulness to himself and to the Lord’s will in these well known words: “Here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often” (J.H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Chapter 1, “On the Development of Ideas”). Newman, during his long life, was one who converted, who was transformed and in this way remained the same, becoming ever more himself.

The horizon of God’s primacy also deeply marks Newman’s numerous publications. The cited essay on the *Development of Christian Doctrine* states: “That there is a truth then; that there is one truth;... the search for truth is not the gratification of curiosity; that its attainment has nothing of the excitement of a discovery; that the mind is below truth, not above it, and is bound, not to descant upon it, but to venerate it” (*ibid.*, Chapter 8, “Application of the Third Note of a True Development—Assimilative Power”). The primacy of God is therefore expressed as the primacy of truth, a truth that must be sought first of all by orienting one’s interiority to acceptance, in an open and sincere exchange with all, and that finds its culmination in the encounter with Christ “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (Jn 14:6). Newman thus bore witness to the Truth also with his very rich literary production, ranging from theology to poetry, from philosophy to pedagogy, from exegesis to the history of Christianity, from novels to meditations and to prayers.

In presenting and defending the Truth, Newman was always careful to find the appropriate language, the correct form and a suitable tone. He tried never to offend others and to witness to the gentle inner light, the “kindly light”, forcing himself to convince others with humility, happiness and patience. In a prayer to St Philip Neri he wrote: “that my countenance may always be open and cheerful, and my words kind and pleasant, as becomes those who, in whatever state of life they are, have the greatest of all goods, the favour of God and the prospect of eternal bliss” (J.H. Newman, *Meditations and Devotions*, Novena of St Philip May 22, Philip’s Cheerfulness).

I entrust to Bl. John Henry Newman, a master in teaching us, that the primacy of God is the primacy of the truth and of love, the reflections and work of this Symposium as, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, I am pleased to impart to you and to all the participants the implored Apostolic Blessing, a pledge of abundant heavenly favours.

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