



The Holy See

**LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 2nd CENTENARY
OF THE BIRTH OF CARDINAL JOHN HENRY NEWMAN**

*To The Most Reverend Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Birmingham*

On the occasion of the second centenary of the birth of the Venerable Servant of God John Henry Newman, I gladly join you, your Brother Bishops of England and Wales, the priests of the Birmingham Oratory and a host of voices throughout the world in praising God for the gift of the great English Cardinal and for his enduring witness.

As Newman pondered the mysterious divine plan unfolding in his own life, he came to a deep and abiding sense that "God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission" (*Meditations and Devotions*). How true that thought now appears as we consider his long life and the influence which he has had beyond death. He was born at a particular time – 21 February 1801; in a particular place – London; and to a particular family – the firstborn of John Newman and Jemima Fourdrinier. But the particular mission entrusted to him by God ensures that *John Henry Newman belongs to every time and place and people*.

Newman was born in troubled times which knew not only political and military upheaval but also turbulence of soul. Old certitudes were shaken, and believers were faced with the threat of rationalism on the one hand and fideism on the other. Rationalism brought with it a rejection of both authority and transcendence, while fideism turned from the challenges of history and the tasks of this world to a distorted dependence upon authority and the supernatural. In such a world, Newman came eventually to a *remarkable synthesis of faith and reason* which were for him "like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth" (*Fides et Ratio*, Introduction; cf. *ibid.*, 74). It was the passionate contemplation of truth which also led him to a liberating acceptance of the authority which has its roots in Christ, and to the sense of the supernatural which opens the human mind and heart to the full range of possibilities revealed in Christ. "Lead kindly light amid the encircling gloom, lead Thou me on", Newman wrote in *The Pillar of the Cloud*; and for him

Christ was the light at the heart of every kind of darkness. For his tomb he chose the inscription: *Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*; and it was clear at the end of his life's journey that Christ was the truth he had found.

But Newman's search was shot through with pain. Once he had come to that unshakeable sense of the mission entrusted to him by God, he declared: "Therefore, I will trust Him... If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him... He does nothing in vain... He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide the future from me. Still, He knows what He is about" (*Meditations and Devotions*). All these trials he knew in his life; but rather than diminish or destroy him they paradoxically strengthened his faith in the God who had called him, and confirmed him in the conviction that God "does nothing in vain". In the end, therefore, what shines forth in Newman is *the mystery of the Lord's Cross*: this was the heart of his mission, the absolute truth which he contemplated, the "kindly light" which led him on.

As we thank God for the gift of the Venerable John Henry Newman on the two hundredth anniversary of his birth, we pray that this sure and eloquent guide in our perplexity will also become for us in all our needs a powerful intercessor before the throne of grace. Let us pray that the time will soon come when the Church can officially and publicly proclaim the exemplary holiness of Cardinal John Henry Newman, one of the most distinguished and versatile champions of English spirituality. With my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 22 January 2001.

IOANNES PAULUS II