

# Newman's faith

Two postcard portraits of the recently-beatified John Henry Newman have graced my office for years. One is a miniature painted by Sir William Charles Ross in 1845, the year of Newman's reception into the Catholic Church. The second, by Emmeline Dean, gives us the aged cardinal, a year before his death in 1890. Between those two portraits lies a spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage within Catholicism that, combined with Newman's pre-Catholic journey from evangelicalism to high-church Anglicanism and the Oxford Movement, remains one of the most compelling such tales of modern times - a path the church has now officially recognized, one marked by heroic virtue, miraculously attested.

The times being what they are, it was inevitable that gay activists and their allies among progressive Catholics would try to claim Newman as a patron-saint of gayness, citing letters he exchanged with his longtime friend Ambrose St. John, with whom he asked to be buried.

As the pre-eminent Newman biographer, Father Ian Ker, pointed out, however, suggestions that Newman and St. John were homosexually involved (even if in a non-carnal way) testify to the ignorance that our culture exhibits about deep friendships, especially deep male friendships.

He might have added that letters between such friends written in a 19th century literary style ought not be scrutinized through the foggy lens of 21st century homoeroticism, which saturates everything from Abercrombie & Fitch ads to prime-time banter these days.

These crude efforts to recruit a holy man to a dubious cause are a distraction from measuring Newman's greatness as a thinker, writer, and preacher - a man who anticipated the Second Vatican Council in his own navigations through the whitewater of Catholicism's encounter with intellectual modernity. He left the Church of England for Rome when he could no longer accept Anglicanism's claims to be apostolically grounded. And as the recent travails of the Anglican Communion have demonstrated, Newman was right, if ahead of his time, in recognizing that Christian communities untethered from apostolic tradition inevitably end up

inventing do-it-yourself Christianity, taking their cues from the ambient culture of the day.

I once had the honor of spending time in Newman's rooms at the Birmingham Oratory, which are much as the aged cardinal left them at his death in 1890. Perhaps most touching are Newman's Latin breviaries, which he began to use as an Anglican, causing much controversy about such popish practices.

It is as a man of faith that the church beatified John Henry Newman, however: the kind of man of faith who could write the following (which I take from another prayer card I've had for years, given me by Catholic Worker artist Ade Bethune):

"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. I may never know it in this life but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught ... Therefore I will trust Him, whatever I am ... He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me - still, He knows what He is about."

Blessed John Henry Newman, pray for us and for the unity in truth of Christ's Church.

*Weigel is Distinguished Senior Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.*