

Undertakers find English cardinal's body had disintegrated

LONDON – English officials exhuming the body of Cardinal John Henry Newman in preparation for his likely beatification discovered that his body had disintegrated completely.

Church officials planned to transfer the cardinal's remains from a secluded cemetery in the suburbs of Birmingham to a marble sarcophagus in the Birmingham Oratory, where he could more easily be venerated by pilgrims. But when undertakers opened his grave Oct. 2, they found there was nothing in it.

"The absence of physical remains in the grave does not affect the progress of Cardinal Newman's cause in Rome," said Peter Jennings, press secretary for Cardinal Newman's cause. "The Birmingham Oratory has always been in possession of some actual physical remains of Cardinal Newman. These consist of some locks of hair."

In an Oct. 4 statement, Mr. Jennings said both the cardinal's body and his wooden coffin had rotted away; not even any bones or teeth remained. All that was left were the brass handles of the coffin, attached to a few pieces of wood, and a few tassels from the cardinal's red hat.

Also recovered was a brass plate with a Latin inscription, which reads in English: "The Most Eminent and Most Reverend John Henry Newman Cardinal Deacon of St. George in Velabro Died 11 August 1890 RIP."

"An expectation that Cardinal Newman had been buried in a lead-lined coffin proved to be unfounded," Mr. Jennings said. "In the view of the medical and health professionals in attendance, burial in a wooden coffin in a very damp site makes this kind of total decomposition of the body unsurprising."

Mr. Jennings said the Birmingham Oratory still planned to celebrate a Mass Nov. 2 when the casket – containing the locks of hair and the items found during the exhumation – would be placed in the Oratory church.

The cardinal had shared a grave with a close friend, Father Ambrose St. John, who had died several years earlier than the cardinal and whose remains were undisturbed during the exhumation.

Cardinal Newman's sainthood cause was opened in 1958.

In April, Vatican medical consultants ruled that an inexplicable healing in August 2001 was a result of his intercession. Deacon Jack Sullivan of Marshfield, Mass., had been suffering from a serious spinal disorder but was cured after praying to the cardinal.

The case is now being studied by a committee of theological consultants.

If they decide that the healing was a miracle and their finding is confirmed by the sainthood congregation and the pope, it will mean that Cardinal Newman can be beatified and declared "blessed." A second miracle is needed for his cause to progress to canonization.