

INTERVIEW

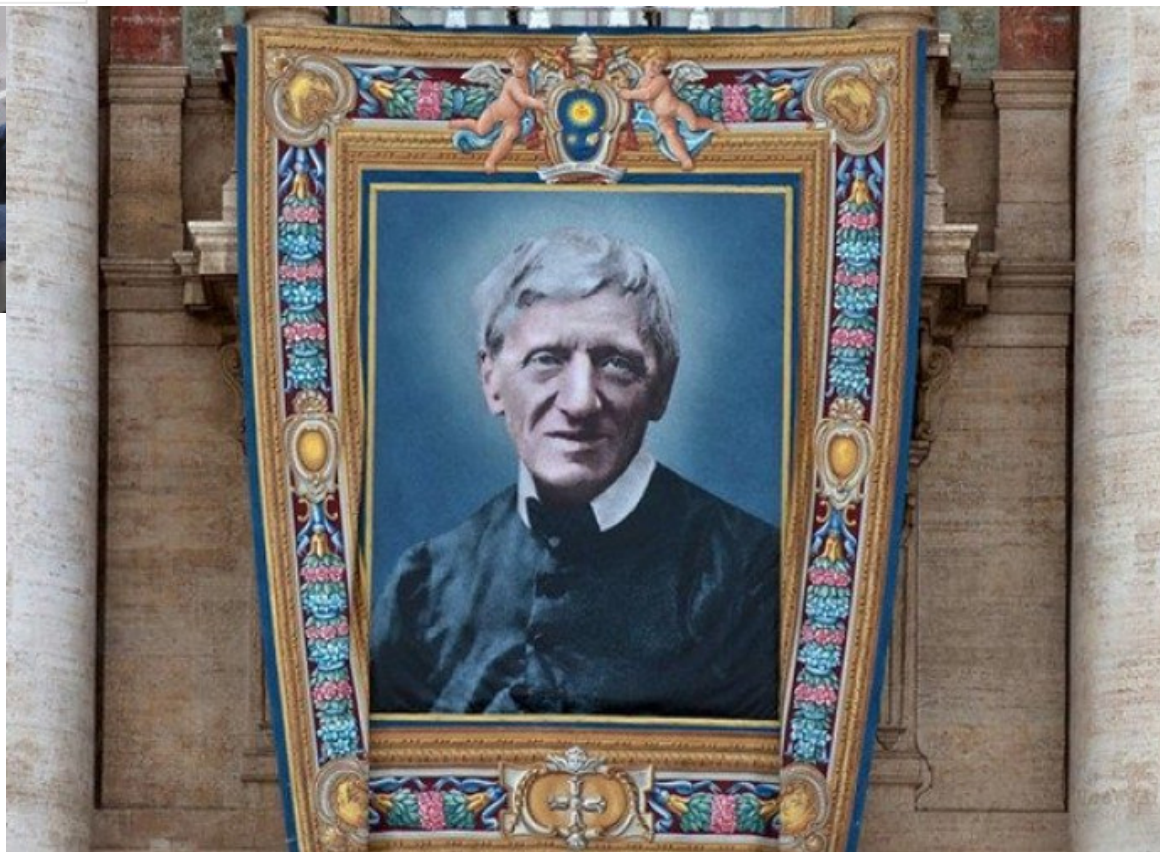
## Newman Doctor of the Church: "His condemnation of religious liberalism speaks to us today."

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On Thursday July 31st the Congregation for the Causes of Saints announced that St John

Henry Newman is to be proclaimed Doctor of the Church, a decision that took many by surprise but not Monsignor Edoardo Cerrato. "It was in the air," explains the Bishop Emeritus of Ivrea and former Procurator General of the Confederation of the Oratory of St Philip Neri — the same order embraced by the English saint after his conversion — in this interview with the *Daily Compass*. "Nevertheless, the news of the decision of His Holiness Leo XIV fills us with joy and gratitude."

**Cerrato has a deep connection to Newman**, not only because they were both Oratorians, but also because the bishop emeritus is one of the foremost scholars of Newman's life and thought. It is with him that the *Daily Compass* seeks to understand the significance of Pope Leo's decision with him.

### **Your Excellency, what does it mean to be a Doctor of the Church?**

It is not an academic or honorary degree. With this title, the Church recognises the authority of a man or woman who is distinguished by holiness and eminent doctrine, as evidenced in their writings. The first Doctors of the Church were proclaimed by Pope Boniface VIII at the end of the thirteenth century, and others have been given this title since then, including four women: Teresa of Ávila, Catherine of Siena, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Hildegard of Bingen. With Newman, the number of Doctors of the Church counts 38.

### **What aspects, in your opinion, make Newman a Doctor of the Church?**

Pius XII had already confided to Jean Guitton that 'there is no doubt that Newman will one day be a Doctor of the Church'. The reasons will be authoritatively explained in the Apostolic See document that is to be published. I will answer your question by quoting the title of an article by Monsignor Fortunato Morrone, a distinguished Newman scholar and dear friend, which was published in L'Osservatore Romano yesterday: 'A refined intellectual and theologian who bore witness to the Gospel by incarnating it'. When travelling personally to Birmingham to beatify Newman, Benedict XVI broke a rule he himself had established, saying: 'He left us an exceptional example of fidelity to revealed truth, following that kindly light wherever it led him, even at considerable personal cost. Great writers and communicators of his stature and integrity are needed in the Church today, and I hope that devotion to him will inspire many to follow in his footsteps.' Much attention has rightly been given to Newman's academic work and his many writings, but it is important to remember that he considered himself, above all, a priest.'

Of the many aspects you ask me to mention, I have chosen this one, which seems to underlie all the others and speaks to us even more today. It is what Newman himself placed at the centre of his 'Cardinal's Speech' upon his appointment as cardinal, reported in full on the front page of L'Osservatore Romano two days later: 'Liberalism in

religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, that all beliefs are equal, and this belief gains more and more credit and strength every day. It is against any recognition of a religion as true. It teaches that all must be tolerated because, for everyone, it is a matter of opinion. Revealed religion is not a truth, but a feeling and a personal preference; not an objective or miraculous fact; and it is the right of every individual to interpret it as they wish.'

### **Can you describe Newman in a few words?**

I think I can answer quickly by referring to his experience of faith examined in the light of reason: '*fides et ratio*'. This is the title of the great encyclical of St. John Paul II, which cites Newman as an example. Newman speaks to us through his lifelong conversion journey, as well as through the vastness and richness of his writings. This is perfectly captured by two mottos: '*Cor ad cor loquitur*' and '*Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*'. The first was chosen for his cardinal's coat of arms and felt by Newman to be so familiar that he believed it to be from the Bible or *The Imitation of Christ*, although it appears in a letter by St. Francis de Sales, and quoted by Newman himself in a 1855 lecture on university pastoral care, expresses the fundamental principle of the Christian vocation that shaped his life, theological thought, and pastoral efforts. The second, chosen for his tombstone, is the hallmark of his worldview. Indeed, it is the model through which Newman conceived the ultimate purpose of human intelligence: to seek and attain truth. Newman considered the conditions for this certainty and focused on its essence.

### **Newman wrote a great deal. Which aspect of his thought do you consider to be the most decisive or worthy of rediscovery?**

Numerous publications have presented the life of the English convert before and after his beatification and canonisation. These publications emphasise the aspect on which Roderick Strange dwells, for example: 'Even in his apparently most theoretical writings, Newman is a personality who allows himself to be guided by internal and external events [...]'. He was always more interested in reality than in theory. He was concerned with what was really happening'. In his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), Newman himself argued that a doctrine or theory shows its true vitality when it becomes an 'active principle'; active not only in generating a new contemplation or reflection in man, but above all in translating into actions and initiatives of application. Newman's experience is one of faith examined in the light of reason. Christians are called to be free, but not independent. As Cardinal Bagnasco said at the presentation of Newman's 'Oratorian Writings', 'in a historical and cultural moment such as the one we are experiencing, in which we are witnessing a reversal of categories', personal independence seems to be more important than truth. For culture, having a link with

truth, with goodness and moral criteria seems to be a negative thing.

**Newman was a convert. How important is it for a convert to be recognised as a Doctor of the Church? When he converted, both Anglicans and Catholics opposed him and viewed him with suspicion. Yet Leo XIII made him a cardinal, and today, another Pope Leo is proclaiming him a Doctor of the Church?**

Leo XIII conferred the cardinal's hat upon him and confided in Lord Selborne, "It was not easy; it was not easy." They said he was too liberal, but I had decided to honour the Church by honouring Newman. I have always had a great admiration for him.' Through this courageous and deliberate act, Leo XIII recognised the merits of the man he called 'my cardinal'; expressed his strong conviction that the intellectual life of Catholics should be encouraged; and favoured the future reception of Newman's works and thought, in accordance with an orientation that would be a constant feature of his pontificate. Father Velocci emphasised the strong similarity between Leo XIII and Newman, who both expressed a preference for openness and fidelity to tradition. The fundamental theme of Newman's essay 'The Development of Christian Doctrine' is continuity in development. The Pope revealed this spirit at various moments of his pontificate and in different fields of study: historical and biblical disciplines; questions of sociology, philosophy, and theology. Thus, he marked a new era in the Church.

**How has the Congregation of the Oratory welcomed the proclamation of Newman as a Doctor of the Church?**

This solemn act of the Church brings us joy and encourages us to follow in the footsteps of the holy Doctor. Newman's varied thought, expressed through philosophy, theology, apologetics and history, as well as in novels and poetry, was born and developed through an authentic Christian journey. This journey was not only significant due to its duration of forty-three years out of Newman's eighty-nine, but also because it followed the "way of the Oratory" as traced by St. Philip Neri.

The spirituality of the Oratory of St Philip resonates deeply within Newman's own spirituality, characterised by a personal encounter with God in Christ and a commitment to charity as the bond of perfection. 'Twelve priests working together: that is what I desire,' wrote Newman. 'An Oratory is a family and a home'. Newman was fascinated by the element of 'kindness' that expressed Neri's inner world: a singular freedom of spirit; a love of authentic communal life, governed by the laws of discretion; respect for the gifts of each person; and a wise simplicity that made Philip's joy 'thoughtful', as Goethe wrote in his diary during his Italian journey. Newman's writings on the Oratory demonstrate the depth of his commitment to his Oratorian vocation, as evidenced by his daily choices, such as requesting permission from Leo XIII to remain with his

Birmingham community even after his appointment as cardinal and expressing his desire to be buried in the Rednal cemetery, in a grave like all the others.

**Newman is the patron saint of Anglicans who converted to Catholicism and settled in Rome. What significance does Pope Leo's decision have for this part of the Church?**

I believe that Newman's proclamation as a Doctor of the Church will touch not only Anglicans who have entered the Catholic Church, but also receive the fraternal support of members of the Anglican Church. It was a long, serious and painful journey that led Newman to the Catholic Church. "As I progressed," he wrote, "my difficulties disappeared, so that [...] I resolved to ask to be admitted among them". His was not a conversion from one church to another, but a conversion to the church itself.

Newman's entire journey — from his conversion at the age of fifteen to his study of the Church Fathers, his involvement in the Oxford Movement and his entry into the Catholic Church — demonstrates that the path of conscience is not self-isolation, but openness, conversion and obedience to the One who is love and truth. There is an intrinsic link between conscience and truth, and the dignity of conscience does not allow for any arbitrariness or relativism. As Fortunato Morrone says, reason, cultivated in the concrete experience of individuals made up of relationships, imagination, feelings and specific historical contingencies, inevitably tends towards truth.