Adventure of belief

John Henry Newman's beatification

by Carol Zaleski in the June 29, 2010 issue

I'll always remember the day last July when John Henry Newman's beatification was announced. My family and I were en route to Heathrow Airport, barreling along in a van driven by my fearless godmother, who had promised we would not miss our plane. Her mobile phone signaled a text message, and from where I was sitting, clutching my seat, I had the chance to read it aloud. Sent by a priest of the Oratory (the congregation Newman brought to England), all it said was: "Pope announces Newman's beatification." Spirits were high for the rest of the trip—and we did catch the plane.

Not all observers have felt inclined to celebrate, however. The *Times* of London recently ran a piece by a prominent Catholic writer on "Why Cardinal Newman is no saint" in which the author debunks the miraculous healing attributed to Newman's intercession, seeing it as part of an effort to turn the progressive Newman into a conservative "plaster saint." This intramural wrangling looks pretty shabby when compared to the tremendous outpouring of affection occasioned by Cardinal Newman's death in August 1890. "A great man has passed away; a great link with the past has been broken," said the London *Times*, ". . . whether Rome canonizes him or not he will be canonized in the thoughts of pious people of many creeds in England." The interdenominational *Evangelical Magazine*, recognizing New man's personal holiness and fidelity in the face of setbacks, considered that "of the multitude of saints in the Roman calendar there are very few that can be considered better entitled to that designation than Cardinal Newman." The shock of his defection to Rome having passed, both his former and present coreligionists were eager to honor him for having been, at each stage of his journey from evangelical to Anglo-Catholic to Roman Catholic, a steadfast witness to the gospel, to the development of doctrine by which the gospel has been safeguarded and unfolded over the centuries, to the harmony of the gospel with reason and conscience, and to the beauty of the gospel as source and guarantor of the highest achievements of human culture.

Ecumenically speaking, Newman offers as much opportunity as challenge. It should be remembered that most of what he believed as a Roman Catholic he first discovered as a Protestant possession. Newman learned his patristics as an evangelical and his Catholicism as an Anglican, maintaining a wonderful consistency of thought while asking himself at each stage, am I now in the church Christ founded?—a question all Christians ought to confront, however differently they may answer it.

Newman was essentially a modern thinker, whose experience of the effects of unbelief enabled him to speak not only to all Christians but to all truth seekers. *Pace* Dawkins, it was not Charles Darwin who made it intellectually respectable to be an atheist, it was Newman:

> I look out of myself into the world of men, and there I see a sight which fills me with unspeakable distress. The world seems simply to give the lie to that great truth, of which my whole being is so full. . . . If I looked into a mirror, and did not see my face, I should have the sort of feeling which actually comes upon me, when I look into this living busy world, and see no reflexion of its Creator.

Because Newman understood that it is difficult to believe what Christianity proclaims, because he admitted that arguments for the existence of God often fail to reach the heart, his defense of the implicit rationality of Christian faith inspires confidence. He lit up the path between a rationalism that abuses reason and a fideism that despairs of reason, articulating truths that ordinary Christians already half-know and trustingly believe. He reaffirmed the objectivity of revelation without diminishing its mystery. He reinstated theology as the queen of the sciences without cramping the style of secular learning. No English writer has more eloquently conveyed the sense of individual vocation (“God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another”) and the assurance of divine providence (“Therefore I will trust Him. Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away”).

Reading Newman’s famous remark to the Duke of Norfolk (“I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please,—still to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards”) in the context of his devotion to the church visible, hierarchical and sacramental, one gets a sense of Christian moral and intellectual life as a great adventure, next to which libertarian understandings of the rights of conscience seem shallow and dull. The

adventure was hardly dull for Newman. His turbulent career makes it plain that ecclesial thinking has nothing to do with untroubled conformity. What the London *Times* expressed with warmth and prescience in its obituary of August 1890 is now more clear than ever: John Henry Newman is a pastor and doctor to the universal church.