



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE
WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Feast of Blessed John Henry Newman

Mass for the College Founders and Benefactors

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Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/frank-brennan-6/homily-91022>

Today is the 177th anniversary of John Henry Newman's admission into the Catholic Church. When our Church canonised him three years ago, the Vatican officials decided to choose the date of his conversion, rather than the more customary date of his death, as his feast day. It was not the most ecumenical of moves. Our now King Charles, Supreme Governor of the Church of England, was very gracious in the remarks he made on the occasion of the canonisation - remarks which are worth recalling in light of the kerfuffle this week over the sacking of a conservative Anglican banker as CEO of a Victorian football club. Charles said:

'In the age when he lived, Newman stood for the life of the spirit against the forces that would debase human dignity and human destiny. In the age in which he attains sainthood, his example is needed more than ever - for the manner in which, at his best, he could advocate without accusation, could disagree without disrespect and, perhaps most of all, could see differences as places of encounter rather than exclusion.'¹

The events in the Essendon football club and the response by civic leaders, including the Victorian Premier, would have you wondering about our capacity any longer to see differences as places of encounter rather than exclusion. I happily voted 'yes' in the same sex marriage plebiscite and I approved the change to the law. I did so on the understanding that the 38% who voted 'no' would suffer no adverse discrimination for their religious views and would be free to participate

¹ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2019-10/newman-canonization-prince-charles-editorial-britain.html>



respectfully in all aspects of public life, even in the administration of Victorian football clubs.

During the week, our shores have been visited by two very refined and educated Englishmen who reflect something of the ethos which John Henry Newman inhabited and exhibited. Lord Jonathan Sumption, one time judge of the Supreme Court of the UK, spoke of the mounting tide of intolerance in democratic societies like the UK and Australia. He said, 'The campaigns of suppression conducted by pressure groups against unfashionable or "incorrect" opinions on controversial issues such as race, gender reassignment, same-sex relationships or climate change are a symptom of the narrowing of our intellectual world.'²

Archbishop Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, is presently touring many of the Anglican dioceses in Australia. He has been speaking about secularised western societies losing the ability to disagree well: 'We have not found a way of disagreeing without exclusion, without cancelling people. We are just in a place where since there is no one authority, we seem to be going to no authority at all – even the authority of a common concern for each other's dignity and for freedom of religion and belief.'³

The Essendon fracas will be yesterday's news soon enough. But it is necessary for serious educated Christians to be clear about what is at stake. Those of us who are members of churches with a strong tradition of teaching authority on moral and social issues need to acknowledge four things. First, our authoritative teachings are grounded in the tradition of scriptures and the believing community's reflection on those scriptures over the centuries. The articulation of those teachings can be dated and jarring to a modern listener unfamiliar with the tradition, especially in relation to issues in which there have been profound new discoveries in the social and physical sciences. Those teachings can be so jarring as to be wrong or at least in need of restatement. We don't need to look at the one-off sermon of a pastor from the little known 'City on a Hill' Church. For example the Catechism of the Catholic Church still states: 'Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered." They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not

² <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/death-of-democracy-is-now-a-live-threat/news-story/8c6bf1f6315051c11a6f60adb7910bde>

³ <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/archbishop-of-canterbury-warns-cancel-culture-hurting-human-dignity/news-story/328c33fb265e8da3b084be1df2162181>



proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.⁴

Second, our authoritative teachings are not the end of the matter. In all instances, we are called to practise pastoral solicitude, respecting the dignity, experience, and reflection on experience of the other. Even the now outdated Catechism states that those with 'deep-seated homosexual tendencies' 'must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.'⁵

Third, we are to respect the formed and informed conscience of the other. As Pope Francis has famously said, 'Who am I to judge?'

Fourth, we need to be willing to give an account of ourselves and our religious beliefs and practices in the public square, conceding that some aspects of our religious life will be hurtful to non-believers who do not share our faith in the value of sacred texts and authoritative development of traditional teachings.

In the whole area of sexuality, we are in a new era. The committed Christian needs to admit that the traditional teaching is not only jarring; it is also hurtful to many people, especially to those who profess no religious beliefs but who espouse inclusion, toleration and respect for all. Even for many Catholics, the teaching is now just plain wrong.

Having been rector of the Catholic University in Dublin, and then having set up the Oratory School back in England, St John Henry Newman wrote in his journal on 21 January 1863:

'Catholics in England from their very blindness, cannot see that they are blind. To aim then at improving the condition, the status, of the Catholic body, by a careful survey of their argumentative basis, of their position relatively to the philosophy and the character of the day, by giving them juster views, by enlarging and refining their minds, in one word, by education, is (in their view) more than a superfluity or a hobby, it is an insult. It implies that they are deficient in material points. Now from first to last, education in this large sense of the word, has been my line.'⁶

⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, para 2357, at https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P85.HTM

⁵ Ibid, para 2358.

⁶ John Henry Newman Autobiographical Writings, Henry Tristram (ed.), Sheed and Ward, London, 1956, p. 259.



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We need to be attentive to our blindness. We are always being called to enlarge and refine our minds. Through education, we can renew the tradition, enhance the scope of our pastoral solicitude, and respect the formed and informed consciences of those with whom we disagree. In a society increasingly antipathetic to organised religion, we can rightly request and demand the same deference.

Newman was always wary about his attempts to provide the faithful with juster views by enlarging and refining their minds. He always felt a need to be looking over his shoulder. As he wrote in his journal: 'I should wish to attempt to meet the great infidel etc questions of the day, but both Propaganda and the Episcopate, doing nothing themselves, look with extreme jealousy on anyone who attempts it, and, giving him no credit for what he does well, come down with severity on any point in which he may have slipped.'

Inspired by the witness of John Henry Newman, we hear afresh the words spoken to Timothy in today's second reading, heeding the warning and taking up the challenge of educated evangelisation:

'For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry.'

Inspired by John Henry Newman, let's advocate without accusation, disagree without disrespect and, see differences as places of encounter rather than exclusion.