

In September of 2010, Pope Benedict XVI traveled to England for the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman, a man who died 120 years ago and spent much of his life behind the walls of Oxford colleges and giving lectures. But when one looks at his life, one sees that this is no ordinary academic; but rather a man who was passionate about his faith which filled his soul, and a man who was clearly focused on deepening it and helping others to learn the truth about it, no matter what the cost.

Newman was born into a well-off family in London, the son of a banker. As a teenager, he fell in love with academics, studying the great writers and philosophers.

It was when he was 15 that he converted to Christianity, becoming an evangelical Calvinist. While he subscribed to this for a time, as he studied it more deeply he came to believe that this particular form of Christianity put too little emphasis on the Church and too much emphasis on faith alone and the individual. And so he embraced Anglicanism.

In June of 1824, he was ordained a deacon in Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford, and the following spring was ordained a priest, where for 2 years he would be active in church work and writing. But already noted for his brilliant mind, Newman continued to embrace academics.

His first real exposure to the Catholic Church came when he visited Rome, which, upon a visit in 1832, he called "the most wonderful place on earth," but referred to the Roman Catholic Church as "polytheistic, degrading and idolatrous." Not too long after this he visited Sicily, where he fell seriously ill and attributed his cure to the belief that God had more work for him to do.

Back at Oxford, Newman became active in what was known as the "Oxford Movement," which argued for the reinstatement of lost Christian Traditions into Anglicanism; seeing it as one of 3 branches Christianity. During this time in the early 1830s, he would do writing and speaking, which essentially was to argue for the position of a "middle road" of sorts between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. However in the years that followed, he came to realize that Catholicism was the road to travel.

His writings during this times, arguing for less Protestantization of the Anglican Church, became widely popular, called the "Tracts for the Times." They argued for the Real Presence of the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, and there was also a lot of Catholic teaching in them that Newman argued were part of the authentic Christian faith. Gradually many Anglican authorities, seeing these, reacted with fear and anger.

Newman though was undeterred, despite the fact that some were saying his writings were too reflective of Catholic belief. But also as he wrote more and studied more, he was convinced that the Roman Catholic Church had held onto much of the original Christian doctrine that Protestantism had abandoned; though he still felt Rome had added doctrines and practices that one could not reconcile with the Gospel, such as the saints and the primacy of the pope.

As he continued to write these tracts into the 1840s, he was spending a lot of time trying to keep Anglicans from becoming Catholics; but it was his own teaching bringing them that way, and his heart was going that way too. He was convinced that this middle way was the best way. But then in 1841, he talked about how the 39 Articles, which are a document of Anglican theology, should be interpreted in a Catholic sense. This outraged many and was condemned by many Anglican bishops. And at this point, Newman realized that if the Anglican Church he belonged to was not, in fact, a branch of the Catholic Church, that he could not remain in it.

He soon retired from an active role in ministry, and took up a residence with a few like-minded people in a village near Oxford. He took to studying Catholicism more, setting about to demonstrate how the doctrines of the Catholic Church were the inevitable result of development over time, not knowing though if he would convince himself. He studied Catholic teaching and found how the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church were the growth and flower of the ancient teachings of the Apostles and Church Fathers. He completed the book-length "Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine," which is an exhaustive tour of history and theology. He praised himself that if he reached a point where he convinced himself of the truth of the Catholic Church, he would then cease writing the book and become a Catholic. And so after months of long hours of study and work - often 14-plus days working into the night - he knew he had to cross the threshold into the Catholic Church.

In October of 1845 he resigned his position at Oriel College where he was a teacher, as he could not hold it as a Catholic. He told people who were close to him that he would be becoming Catholic. A priest, Fr. Dominic Barberi, had received into the Church some of Newman's colleagues, and the day he arrived he found Newman before him, on his knees, asking to be received into the Church. Newman, on the day he became Catholic, wrote 30-plus letters to relatives, friends and colleagues to announce his decision. And on October 9, 1845, after a journey of a dozen-plus years, he became a Catholic, being confirmed on All Saints Day. Present were 10 or so former Anglican ministers who had also converted. Many more Anglicans would follow. He would spend a few years in Rome to study for ordination to the Catholic priesthood, being ordained in May of 1847. Here he became fascinated with Saint Philip Neri, the Italian Catholic priest who founded the society of Oratorians. Philip made personal ministry and working with youth and young adults and the family a big part of his ministry, giving both academic and spiritual counseling to those in his care. After his ordination, the Pope, Pius IX, charged Newman with heading the Oratory in England; he established a house in Birmingham, an industrial city, where Newman would spend the rest of his life. The rest of his years were spent preaching and writing, and he was said to have had many converts.

While he had found where he needed to go in life, the road there and ahead would not be easy. Family turned on him; Anglican leaders condemned him, including one who argued that Newman was a proponent of dishonesty among the clergy. But Newman remained undeterred in his mission of being a Catholic apologist.

At the age of 79 in 1879, the pope made him a cardinal. It was seen as a turning point for English Catholics, as no more would they be called intellectually inferior or morally depraved just because they were Catholics. Attitudes were changing a bit by that point, and it was widely viewed as an honor. For the rest of his life, he continued to write, and died 10 years later in 1890.

When you look at his life, what makes him so remarkable is that he was able to see clearly who God is through carefully growing in his faith, and learning about God and His Church as the years went by. He could have remained where he was at and been comfortable, respected, and not rocked the boat. John Newman wanted to know the truth, and for that to happen, he knew it would require work and sacrifice.

Speaking of our faith, we sometimes might think it's all about belief in God. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. For the Catholic, we are given the same question as Peter - "who do you say that I am?" The answer is if we believe that Jesus is Lord, our Redeemer, we have to know what those words mean. And this means that you and I are, like Saint John, called to grow in faith as a matter of word and action.

The starting point is the question, who do we serve. A big theme in Isaiah is renouncing personal plans in favor of the ways of God. In the first reading, we meet Shebna, an official who has the title "master of the palace." It seems that he is inclined to take advantage of his position to serve his own interests, as an earlier verse in Isaiah refers to the elaborate tomb he has prepared for himself. Isaiah isn't impressed, and warns him that he is going to pull him down. Eliakim on the other hand is a faithful servant, who is focused on others rather than himself. John Newman did the same. Anti-Catholicism was rampant in England at the time; it was said that to be a Victorian one also had to be anti-Catholic. Newman knew that where he was going might be "legal," but he also knew some would hate him. But he also wanted to help others who were Catholic be able to articulate and defend the faith too. He knew there was something far more important than temporal recognition, and that was getting to heaven. For us, that means serving God has to be front and center, in a particular way as Catholic Christians.

So once we say "I want to serve God," we have to get to a point where we can say, like Peter, who God is. And that means we try to understand God, and then live in a way that reflects that.

Knowing God means growing in our understanding of Him over our lives. It means we pray, we think about our faith, we listen to what the Church says in guiding us. There's so much there, and it's all for our benefit. We can't just say "I believe in God" if we then don't put the time into understanding who He is, and what He teaches us. As the successors of the apostles, the bishops are there to help us understand Divine Revelation. Saint John Newman first became Christian, then Catholic, but he devoted years of study to make that leap that led him to the door of the priest to request confirmation and then holy orders. We don't have to spend 7 years of intense study, but we do need to pray daily. We do need to talk about the faith with our kids to help them

see its importance. We do need to think about what the Church teaches with respect to faith and morals in the catechism. If you love someone, you fall in love with them more and more every day and know them inside out. Anyone can say they believe in God, but once we realize that God is love and loves us, we should be driven to learn how to respond to Him through our way of life, and learn how we can teach others to do the same.

That teaching part is the second part. John Newman wrote so much and gave numerous lectures because he wanted to empower people.

Note what Jesus promises Peter with respect to the Church: the gates of the netherworld will not prevail against it. It might seem like this implies it's the Church hiding behind the walls against all the bad things in the world, but that's not the case at all. The army on the move when attacking would try to go through the gate, the weakest part of the wall. The Church is an army, and we are on the move. Some in the world might not like our message, which can be very counter-cultural. Remember, the world is good - Genesis tells us that God looked at what He created and saw that it was good. But original sin's effects have caused all kinds of problems. Relativism. Selfishness. Sensualism. Racism. The list goes on and on. And so this means we are also called to be different as Christians. We do not fight with weapons, but with a way of life. John Newman is the perfect example of this. In his time, Catholicism had been legalized again in England but certainly wasn't tolerated. In our time, the message is the same - privatize your religion. We can't do that. Whether we are showing others through how we live through our love, our service and showing kindness to others, or avoiding certain kinds of self-destructive behavior, or whether we are speaking out on our beliefs, we have to be active. We can't be just leave our religion within the Church, but have to announce the Gospel to all nations, and call everyone out to bring them into the community of the Church.

For John Newman, he grew in his understanding of the faith over the course of his life, and showed his faith by living it out. The greatest gift we are given in life is that relationship with the God who is love. Let's make sure we don't know him for 50 minutes a week, but 24/7/365, and proclaim him through our words and actions throughout our lives. The gates will not prevail against us, so let's truly go forth from Mass each week and bring Jesus into the world through our words and actions setting the world on fire and helping others to see how much they are loved by God by helping one another to truly know Him and what it means to say "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."