

Province of Westminster

HEADTEACHERS MASS: BLESSED CARDINAL NEWMAN.

6 OCTOBER 2010.

I am sure that many of you have learned a great deal about Blessed John Henry Newman in the last few months. Certainly there is so much more for us all to learn. And that is true not least about his vision of education.

But the place to start this morning is to recognise how well his character is summed up in the readings we have heard.

Writing to Timothy, St Paul speaks of us having to ‘keep as your pattern the sound teaching you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.’ This is an apt description of John Henry Newman’s intense search for the meaning and continuity of the apostolic truth of the faith he lived. Yet, of course, in the words of Pope Benedict, his was never ‘a faith of formulas of past ages; it is a very personal faith, a faith lived, suffered and found in a long path of renewal and conversion.’ Indeed, in speaking like this of Blessed John Henry Newman, Pope Benedict describes him as a ‘modern man, who lived the whole problem of modernity, who faced the problem of agnosticism, the impossibility of knowing God, of believing.’

This long and continuing search for the fullness of faith, which makes Newman such a model for us all, is why the first reading of our Mass is so appropriate: ‘He will be filled with the spirit of understanding, he will shower forth words of wisdom. He will grow upright in purpose and learning, he will ponder the Lord’s hidden mysteries.’ This spirit of constant reflection and enquiry is surely one that is befitting every teacher.

And then the Gospel reading adds to our appreciation of this new ‘Blessed’. John Henry Newman came to realise that we keep the salt of our faith tasty and the light of our faith burning when we are in communion with the successor of St Peter, within the visible communion of the Catholic Church. He knew that this is not an easy place to be, especially in an age, which he felt and saw coming, which gives first place to personal opinion and to the importance of self. Yet he did not propose or agree with any dismissal of the importance of such perspectives. He was always most attentive to his own experience and inner life. But he came to recognise that such experience can only truly be evaluated, only truly come to its fulfilment, through the gifts of God among which is the authority given by Christ to Peter, and now found in the ministry of the Bishop of Rome.

But this morning we are pondering Blessed John Henry Newman’s vision of education. I think it may be summed up, rather simplistically, in one word: wholeness. Newman was convinced that education must keep in focus the wholeness of its task, the wholeness of whatever is being learned, and the wholeness of the person doing the learning.

So, for him, no subject ever stands alone. There is a wholeness of truth which alone gives coherence to education. Of course, there must be specialisation. But no subject

can hold sway over all others and all are held together by the single truth which comes to us from the mystery of God. Hence at the heart of education is the quest for God.

And similarly, the student must always be seen in his or her wholeness. It is the entire well-being of the child or student that is the concern of the Catholic educator, not just their mastery of a subject. The true teacher is concerned about the spiritual and moral formation of pupils as well as their academic progress.

That is a challenge indeed.

The vision and inspiration of John Henry Newman's understanding of education is sprinkled throughout the addresses of Pope Benedict during his marvellous visit here. They sparkle.

I hope all of you will explore closely the Holy Father's address at the 'Big Assembly' event with Catholic schools at Twickenham. (Incidentally, that event was web-streamed to over 3000 schools. It was also watched on line by as many of 640,000 other people making a total on-line audience of 800,000 – and that does not include a general TV audience. – A Big Assembly indeed!) But we really must study that text and I am glad to learn that Nottingham Diocese, with Bishop Malcolm McMahon, is already preparing study material based on it. I am sure that is something we can all share.

There is so much to draw out of this remarkable Visit. Please note that the filming of each event is available on the Bishops' Conference papal visit website. The complete record of the papal texts is shortly to be published. There is so much here for us to treasure and from which we can certainly draw great riches.

But let me highlight some of the Holy Father's points about education which come from other parts of his Visit. When he was speaking at the Interfaith event, to the leaders in society from the different faith communities, he said these words which readily apply to your vocation: 'God has entrusted us with the task of exploring and harnessing the mysteries of nature in order to serve a higher good. What is that higher good? In the Christian faith, it is expressed as love for God and love for our neighbour. And so we engage with the world wholeheartedly and enthusiastically, but always with a view to serving that higher good, lest we disfigure the beauty of creation by exploiting it for selfish purposes. So it is that religious belief points us beyond present utility towards the transcendent!'

In other words, as Pope Benedict insisted, education only makes full sense when it is clear about the 'higher good' which it serves and the link between that higher good and the mystery of God.

Our way of speaking about that higher good is most frequently centred on the Christian understanding of the human person: who we are, where we have come from, the purpose for which we are made, our true destiny and the consequent patterns by which we are to live. Continually during this Visit, Pope Benedict has refreshed our understanding of the human person by emphasising that it is the true meaning of the person is all and always to be found, experienced and lived, in relationship to the person of Jesus, the Lord.

He told our young people that real and lasting happiness will be found in their relationship with Christ. He told them, and us, that our sense of purpose in life, our vocation, will be discovered through our relationship with the Lord – and that he wants us all to be saints. He told us all that we find the true foundation for our relationships with each other in our relationship with Christ, a truth that was so remarkably experienced and lived in that profound silence of 80,000 in Hyde Park. There, in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, we discovered a sense of unity that went beyond all words and was rooted solely in Christ.

So at the heart of education we must always be looking to Christ and opening our hearts to him.

We are all rightly proud of what is readily called the Catholic ethos of our schools. That ethos, as we know, is made up of the values we aspire to maintain and the broad pattern of behaviour which follows. We can honestly say that in our schools we try to follow the example and teaching of Christ. But today we have to remind ourselves that this ethos, our way of life, is not just based on following the example of Christ but on living consciously in relationship to Christ. At the centre of our schools is not the example of Christ but the person of Christ. And we turn to him regularly throughout the life of the school in our times of prayer and liturgy, in assembly and, of course, in the celebration of Mass. In our schools it is vital that we all meet the person of Christ. Only then can we consistently try to follow his example and, along that one true path, find our fulfilment.

In Cofton Park, at the Beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman, Pope Benedict spoke of the need for an educated laity. In Scotland he spoke of the need for Catholics to step forward and join in public service, striving for a society ‘which works for the true welfare of its citizens and offer them guidance and protection in the face of weakness of fragility’. Then he added: ‘Do not be afraid to take up this service to your brothers and sisters, and to the future of your beloved nation.’ These, too, are among the aims of Catholic education, and part of the vision which we seek to renew among each other today.

Let us commend ourselves to the Lord, and, during this Mass, deepen our relationship with Him who alone can guide, strengthen and sustain us in this great task.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols