

(Sermon delivered by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the dedication of Saint John Church and Catholic Student Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, Sunday morning, January 12, 1958)

At hundreds of state and secular universities throughout this land there are Catholic chapels and student associations called Newman Clubs. We have the privilege and joy of seeing another dedicated here today at Michigan State University. It seems quite proper in the sermon this morning to take a look at the man whose name graces most of these works - John Henry Newman.

Someone has said that every great work is but the lengthening shadow of a great man. Newman was great in many ways, but his memory will always be primarily that of the Oxford scholar, a man whose life in many ways seemed fated to be a failure, yet whose dedication to the mind and its values brought forth in him a special kind of gentility, intelligence and holiness that lives on today in student groups dedicated to his memory.

Oxford University was the first and lasting passion of his life. He went to Trinity College, Oxford, at the age of sixteen. Five years later, he was elected a fellow of Oriel, the center of Oxford's intellectual life. After two more years, he was ordained an Anglican priest there, and then was appointed

Vicar of the University Church, St. Mary's, as a very young man - one of the most promising scholars of the day.

His days might have continued in this quiet, serene, and Oxfordian fashion for the rest of his life, but there arose a crisis in which he had to declare himself. The Government began to move into the spiritual domain, and Newman could only side with what he conceived to be the path of truth and defend the untouchable primacy of the spiritual. With his obvious gifts of intelligence, his own deep spiritual nature, and his firm honesty of purpose, he soon became the leader of what was called the Oxford Movement. Students flocked to St. Mary's to hear him preach.

An observer of the day tells of the simple eloquence by which he was stirring Oxford to new religious life and fervor. "Through the silence of that high Gothic building, Newman's words fell on the ear like the measured drippings of water in some vast, dim cave. After hearing these sermons, you might come away still not believing the tenets peculiar to the High Church system; but you would be harder than most men if you did not feel more than ever ashamed of coarseness, selfishness, worldliness, if you did not feel the things of faith brought closer to your soul."

In attempting to champion the divine character of the Anglican Church, Newman forged the theological theory of the Via Media - that the Anglican Church was midway between the Roman Catholic Church and other forms of Protestantism. He tried to ^{establish} ~~prove~~ the link between the doctrines of the Anglican Creed and the ancient Christianity of the Fathers of the Church. In pursuing this course, he and his fellow Oxford scholars revived the study of the ancient Christian texts. An unforeseen result followed. The further back he went, the more his middle way veered towards the ancient Church and his sermons eventually were censured by the Anglican Bishop of Oxford and the other bishops.

Here the really great crisis of his life began. At the height of his scholarly career, at the age of forty, he resigned from St. Mary's and went into retirement to think through his problem, to do penance, and to pray for light. But he remained the scholar, and renewed his dedication to truth, wherever it might lead him.

For three long years, his studies led him in a direction in which personally he did not want to go. His family chided him for giving up his ministerial duties, his fellow scholars at Oxford pleaded with him not to abdicate

his leadership. He only prayed to know the will of God, however difficult it might be to accept and follow it.

His final words to his faithful Oxford friends and disciples were touching, and typically modest, speaking of himself in the third person - "if he has made you feel there was a higher life than this daily one, and a brighter world than that you see; or encouraged you, or sobered you, or opened a way to the inquiry^{ing}, or soothed the perplexed; if what he has said or done has ever made you take an interest in him, and feel well inclined toward him; remember such a one in time to come, though you hear him not, and pray for him, that in all things he may know God's will, and at all times he may be ready to fulfill it."

This was his definitive break from his beloved Oxford, and from all the hopes and dreams it held for him. While at this time he had lost faith in the apostolic character of the Anglican Church, he was not yet convinced that the Church of Rome was indeed the true Church that Christ had founded. It took him two more years of patient, and often heartbreaking study to pass from probability to certainty.

The closer he came to Rome, the more his courage was tried.

"I have a good name with many;" he wrote his sister, "I am deliberately sacrificing it. I have a bad name with more. I am fulfilling all their worse wishes, and giving them their most coveted triumph. I am distressing all I love, unsettling all I have instructed or aided. I am going to those whom I do not know, and of whom I expect very little."

But he was ^{finally} convinced of the truth and, to him, that was God's will. Just midway in his life, at forty-four years of age, he chose truth over everything he humanly cherished or had ever desired, for the truth was to him, above all, the divine voice of God. Like Abraham, he was willing to sacrifice his most precious human possession for it. He became a Catholic. More than three hundred Oxford graduates followed him, and the procession has not yet stopped.

The following year, Newman was ordained a priest in Rome. For the next half of his life, almost everything he turned his hand to seemed to fail. But out of his failures came a magnificent succession of books. He was publicly accused of hypocrisy - his book "Apologia pro vita sua" is a classic story of a great soul struggling with itself in the search for truth. The same story comes to us in his autobiographical novel, "Loss and Gain." His "Grammar of Assent"

gives us a rare psychological view of a mind and heart groping for a proper decision.

Newman tried to found a Catholic university in Ireland, and while human factors again balked his efforts, we have his incomparable "Idea of a University" as one of the permanent classics of educational literature. He attempted the editorship of a learned review, but again was thwarted. Once more, his talents turned to writing books, all of which would fill a wide shelf, but nothing in numbers, to compare to those written about him and his writings in almost every decade since his death. Newman was asked to do a new translation of the Bible, and those who have been thrilled by his English style will need real charity to forgive those who blocked this project.

Perhaps the unsuccessful project that hurt him the most was his plan to return to his beloved Oxford, to found there a Catholic Chapel and student house. It seemed within his grasp when again suspicion and enmity, both within the Church and outside it, blocked his dream. We gain a sense of this pain of loss from a description in his novel, "Loss and Gain."

"The spires and towers of the university came to his view, hallowed by how many tender associations, lost to him for years, suddenly recovered --

recovered to be lost forever. Each college, each church, he counted them by their pinnacles and turrets. The silver Isis, the grey willows, the far-stretching plains, the dark groves -- wood, water, stone, all so calm, so bright, they might have been his, but his they were not. Whatever he was to gain by becoming a Catholic, this he had lost; whatever he was to gain higher and better, at least this and such as this he never could have again. He could not have another Oxford, he could not have the friends of his boyhood and youth, in the choice of his manhood."

Yet the ways of God are sometime strange. Thirty-two years after he had left Oxford, after years of frustration and suspicion, this saintly scholar was elected an honorary Fellow of Trinity College, and returned at the age of seventy-six to be welcomed by the President, faculty, and students.

Two years later, as if to balance the frustrations he had likewise suffered within the Church, the newly-elected Pope, Leo XIII, himself a great classical scholar, announced that he had selected John Henry Newman to be a Cardinal of the Church, a most unusual act which raised him from a simple priest to this high dignity.

Sometimes a man's life may seem to be a failure by worldly

standards, but if he has followed truth and dedicated himself unselfishly, with all his mind and heart, to what he perceives to be the will of God, failure cannot possibly be the ultimate measure of his life, no matter what happens to him.

The great passion of Newman's life was scholarship and excellence. It permeated all he did. It led him into the Church when all else was tugging him away from it. The quest of truth, integrity of life, excellence in thought and expression, gentility at all times, wholehearted devotedness to the will of God: this is the true story of his life.

There is one endeavor in his life that we might well and pertinently meditate upon today. It seems to me an apt illustration of the Providence of God that can turn apparent failure into ultimate success, if a man's mind and heart be right, and if his moral courage be great and daring.

There is one pervading thought that characterizes all of Newman's writings on education: that a university that teaches all else and neglects theology, the science of God, is undermining the adequacy of knowledge to which a university is by nature committed. Hear only a few of his strong statements on this matter:

"If, then, in an institution which professes all knowledge, nothing is professed, nothing is taught about the Supreme Being, it is fair to infer that every individual in the number of those who advocate that institution, supposing him consistent, distinctly holds that nothing is known for certain about the Supreme Being; nothing such, as to have any claim to be regarded as a material addition to the stock of general knowledge existing in the world. If, on the other hand, it turns out that something considerable is known about the Supreme Being, whether from Reason or Revelation, then the institution in question professes every science, and yet leaves out the foremost of them. In a word...such an institution cannot be what it professes if there be a God."

"If there be Religious Truth at all, we cannot shut our eyes to it without prejudice to truth of every kind, physical, metaphysical, historical and moral."

"If the various branches of knowledge which are the matter of teaching in a university, so hang together, that none can be neglected without prejudice to the perfection of the rest, and if Theology be a branch of knowledge, of wide reception, of philosophical structure, of unutterable

importance, and of supreme influence, to what conclusion are we brought from these two premises but this? that to withdraw Theology from the public schools is to impair the completeness and to invalidate the trustworthiness of all that is actually taught in them...Religious Truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge. To blot it out is nothing short of unravelling the web of university teaching. It is, according to the Greek proverb, to take the Spring from out of the year."

"Lastly...supposing Theology be not taught, its province will not simply be neglected, but will be actually usurped by other sciences, which will teach, without warrent, conclusions of their own in a subject matter which needs its own (Theology's) proper principles for its due formation and disposition."

The real success story of Cardinal Newman's life is that today, sixty-eight years after his death, we are dedicating one of hundreds of Chapels and buildings that are constituted to carry out this preoccupation of his life, to do what he so clearly desired, but could not do himself in his own lifetime. The Newman Apostolate exists today so that theology may indeed be a part of the University Life, even though a State University in

a pluralistic society cannot of itself teach this or that religion.

Saint John's Church and the Newman Club are here at Michigan State University to do what Newman himself wished to return to Oxford University to do. It is ^{No small} ~~also a~~ compliment to American religious maturity that Saint John's Church and its teaching chaplains are welcome at Michigan State University, as Newman Clubs, ^{and religious foundations} are welcomed at many other State universities throughout our beloved land.

We pray today that all who come to this Chapel and this hall may feel within themselves the stirrings of greatness that characterized the man who gave his name to this movement. We pray that the Holy Spirit of God may inspire in our Catholic students that same dedication to scholarship and truth, that same striving for intellectual and moral excellence, that same wholehearted integrity of life, that same courage to fulfill the will of God in all things, that made John Henry Cardinal Newman a great man in success and ~~in~~ apparent failure.

And may all of us ponder, ^{in his} the beautiful words that Newman wrote in his hour of trial and crisis; *his poetic prayer to God, The source and reward of truth:*

"Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom,
 Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home
 Lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene - one step enough for me.

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
 Will lead me on
O'er moor and fen, O'er crag and torrent, till
 The night is gone;
And with the morn those angel faces smile
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile."