Newman's Sanctity (Bilston Oct 6 2019)

Many people may well be wondering about the grounds for making JHN a saint. Was it mainly because he wrote lots of amazing theological books? And wasn't he a great defender of the faith? And wasn't he involved in so many important educational projects in this country and in Ireland, too? Surely that's it!

Yes. All of those. And of course, everyone here tonight knows something terribly important about our new Saint JH Newman about which they can be very proud, and which few outside this area know about at all, yet although it seems like a small event in such a great and long life, Newman's stay in this parish is of the greatest importance in explaining just what is so saint-like about him.

You all know he came to Bilston just over 170 years ago. Of course! That's why Fr Craig has asked that St JHN be the patron of your new cluster of parishes. Yet Fr Newman, as he was then, didn't stay long. He didn't have to! The wonderful thing is that he came at all, and why. I remember when I was asked in December 2016 if I would help out Fr Geoff at Bilston, who was then seriously ill, it seemed to me to be a wonderful privilege for me, a member of Cardinal Newman's own Oratory, to be asked to come and serve the people of Bilston just as Fr Newman had done so many years before! I stayed a little longer than Fr Newman did, yes, but in such very different circumstances!

After all, in the early 19th century, Bilston was a poor place with terrible sanitary conditions. There was a devastating outbreak of cholera there in 1832, for which the priests of Wolverhampton bravely came out to administer the sacraments and provide whatever comfort they could to the people dying in great numbers. This was such a traumatic experience that afterwards the people worked to get their own church and to have their own priests to serve them. The church was built, severely plain, and then enlarged in 1845 according to plans by the famous architect Pugin. And this is the same church that still stands on Oxford road to this day.

Then in August 1849 there was yet another disastrous outbreak of cholera, actually one of many around the country. When the parish priest of Bilston, Father Michael Crewe, found the sheer task too great for himself and fell ill as a result, he managed to get the help of Fr John Sherlock, who took temporary charge. Fr Sherlock also distinguished himself by his selfless devotion, which included carrying the sick to hospital on his back. But the sheer scale of the task was too great, and sickness affected him as well, which is hardly surprising since the priests were in constant physical contact with severely sick people. Indeed, Fr Crewe was so affected by the cholera that he later had to go to convalesce in Torquay, but he died there the following April, aged only 30 yrs.

Back to the time of the epidemic itself, on September 14th, Feast of the Holy Cross, Fr Crewe called on Fr Newman at the Oratory in Birmingham, which was then situated in a pretty poor part of that town, Deritend. He appealed for yet more help, since neither he nor Fr Sherlock could carry on unaided. Fr Newman wrote the same day to a friend that 'We have to serve Bilston in the cholera for charity. Two of us are going tomorrow.'

And that is how it came about that Fr Newman went off at a day's notice, together with another Oratorian priest, Fr Ambrose St John, and Br Aloysius, a young Oratorian laybrother who would himself die very young just two years later. These three arrived on Saturday September 15th to take over the enormous task of caring for the people of Bilston in their terrible state of sickness. I think it is really important to note that not only was Bilston a very dangerous place to be, and it required great courage on any one's art to go there, but Newman was not really well himself. Throughout his life he suffered from really terrible colds, so bad that on this occasion, just a few days before Fr Crewe appealed to him for help, Newman had been unable even to say Mass for nearly a whole

week, so poorly was he! Not only that, but as a result of his cold, Fr Newman had gone quite deaf. He must have been feeling rotten!

This fact didn't go unremarked at home in Birmingham. After he had reached Bilston he wrote to the Oratory community to tell them how he was and received a reply from one of the Fathers, saying that 'your letter came too late to save the hearts and tears of your most affectionate and devout people. All the tears that you and Fr Ambrose left them to spare have been spent.' Then he mentions by name a certain Mrs Allen, who was clearly an ordinary parishioner whom Newman must have known well, and who was 'dissolved in tears by [Newman's] confessional all Saturday Evening and refused consolation.' A few days later, Newman himself wrote to a friend in London, 'No one can express the sorrow our poor journey to Bilston caused – every one was crying as if we were going to be killed.' Remember that Newman had only been in this part of Birmingham for a little over 6 months, so you can gauge how much he had already won the affections of the people there. His readiness to go to help the Bilston priests and folk says much about his readiness to get his sleeves rolled up! Just think how many excuses he could have made to the Bilston priest, about how poorly he still was, and how much every one at Birmingham feared for his health. Wasn't it more important that he, on account of all the important work he had to do, should stay behind and let others go instead? Don't let anyone tell you that Newman was an ivory-tower academic! People and their souls mattered to Newman the priest more than anything else. On account of the reaction to his departure for Bilston, Newman reflected to the same friend that 'a parish is an onus, but it creates a local mass of affection.'

Anyway, to return to Bilston; the day after Newman and Ambrose and Aloysius arrived at Holy Trinity was a Sunday. Newman wrote in his diary that he 'preached etc.', where the 'etc' probably means he administered the sacraments to all who came, for, as he noted that the cholera seemed to be declining rapidly in intensity, there was nothing for him to do. Fr Newman was clearly a conscientious and much sought-after confessor. That is probably what the 'etc' means when he otes in his diary what he did in Bilston. Moreover, while he was away from Birmingham he wrote to Fr Frederick Bowles, one of the Oratorians back at home that he thought 'it would be as well to stick up a notice at his confessional saying, 'Fr Newman in returning on Tuesday next'. Why so, you may wonder? Well, he went on to say to Fr Frederick that 'I have a bad conscience about my penitents…', meaning that he knew well enough that there were many who were attached to him and came to him for spiritual advice as well as absolution. Nobody was too small or unimportant for Fr Newman. Nobody went away without spiritual wisdom and consolation.

His hearing did return, while he was still at Bilston as it happened, and just before he left only three days after he had arrived. Why did he leave so soon, then? Well, in the first place, as he had said, there was much less to do than was first thought, since the epidemic was fast dying down, but secondly, his community was concerned about *his* health. Another Oratorian, with the rather alarming name of Fr Coffin, wrote to him only the day after he had left Birmingham, when everyone there was in turmoil at Newman's departure in his poor state of health, for what seemed like a sentence of death. Fr Coffin wrote, offering to go to Bilston himself in Fr. Newman's place, if only for as long as it took for Newman to recover from his bad cold. 'Let me take your place', he wrote, 'at any rate until you have gained your strength after your late severe cold. It would, I am sure, give all the Community [of the Oratory Fathers and parishioners] great satisfaction. God I know will be with you, but think what you mean to us,' he wrote, heavily underlined.

You would probably have assumed that Fr Newman was only too glad to have an excuse to get away from Bilston, but no; he had to be persuaded, and only on condition that Fr Coffin took his place. So it was that when Fr Newman left Bilston on Tuesday after he had arrived the previous Saturday, he went out to Cotton Hall in the North Staffs countryside, which was lived in at that time by the Oratorians, and stayed there for a week or so while his health picked up. Even then, when he

wrote to Birmingham to say he was wondering if he should come back again within a day or so, he said that he 'had not to apologize to [the Fathers for staying away] so much as to his penitents'!

When he returned to Birmingham soon after, he did not forget Bilston. It was his habit throughout life to write some of his most personal letters to his sister Jemima, who was the only one of his staunchly Anglican family who kept in touch with him after his conversion to Catholicism. Just after the following new year Newman wrote a letter to her reviewing the past year, in which he spent some time talking about the cholera epidemic that had raged in many places throughout the country. He said, 'I have seen very little of severe illness – but certainly the cholera is very shocking to see. We went over for a time to Bilston, where it raged so, that the priests were unequal to it. Multitudes crowded for reception into the Church, and, alas, could not be received for want of instructors and confessors. They did not send for us till one priest was ill abed, and by that time the disease was abating – but the sight of the sick in the hospitals was terrible – and brought before one most awful thoughts. The *night* calls, which were frequent, involving walks from nightfall to morning of four to (I think) seven miles were the most trying part of the toil, but I had none of that, though my dear companion had. Before we came, the priest had had in succession (the same priest) three or four journeys through the night – just getting into bed to be called out again.' This was Fr Newman's retrospective on that fateful time in Bilston. Although he did not in the end stay as long as he had anticipated, this description of the terrible demands made on the priests in these conditions surely recounts what Fr Crewe had told him that day in September when he had called to ask for help, and therefore this is what Fr Newman fully expected would await him and Fr Ambrose too.

For Fr Ambrose St John was the dear companion Newman mentioned in that letter to his sister Jemima. Ambrose was younger than Fr Newman by many years, yet he would die long before Newman. In fact he died prematurely on account of hard work like this, all undertaken to lighten the burden that was always likely to fall on Fr Newman's shoulders. This is the reason why Newman was so grateful and devoted to him. Fr Ambrose was at his side from his Anglican days at Littlemore near Oxford, travelled with him to Oscott to be confirmed, went out to Rome with him to study for ordination, and then came back with him to England to found the Oratory at Maryvale. Fr Ambrose was always ready to do anything to help Fr Newman, as on this occasion at Bilston. Years later, when there was a major crisis in the Oratory School, and the headmaster and teachers all resigned one Christmas eve, it was Fr Ambrose who stepped into the breach and took over the headship at a day's notice, even though he found the task uncongenial. Ambrose literally gave his life for Fr Newman. Newman was always deeply sensitive to any kindnesses done to him, which is the other side of the coin of his sensitiveness to the pain and hurt he felt at others' rejection and ingratitude. Newman so wanted to show his own gratitude for Ambrose's uncomplaining willingness to do anything to help him that he solemnly ordered that when he in his turn came to die, he was to be buried in Ambrose's grave at Rednall. And that, I am sure, is why his remains are still predominantly there in the Rednall soil, and not in a magnificent coffin or reliquary in the Oratory Church.

All this is not only to explain the detail of what I know you have all been aware of in outline, but also to show just why Newman is a saint. When he was a young Anglican clergyman in Oxford, he not only had the care of teaching rich young men in Oriel College, nor was he only the vicar of the big, beautiful university church of St Mary's, but even earlier than that he looked after St Clement's, one of the poorest parts of Oxford, where nobody 'important' lived. In fact, it had been largely neglected because the clergymen simply gave up on these poor ignorant people who hardly ever came to church. Mr Newman made waves in Oxford because he actually visited these people in their hovels. He realised they needed spiritual and material care, so he not only gave them alms, but he set up a Sunday School for the children, and, ever practical, he had a gallery built for the School

to meet in, and got a friend to buy a stove to keep it warm in winter. By the following Christmas, attendance at Holy Communion had increased vastly.

Then, some years later, when he was by now the famous vicar and preacher of St Mary's, he did not only preach, but again he looked out for the parishioners. Littlemore, neglected, miles away from the parish church. JHN again visited and made plans to build a church in their village so that they would have somewhere near to come to Sunday service, and also he took over the care of the school, teaching the children both their religion, and music! Many years later, when he was a Catholic priest, he was still remembered in Littlemore by the children of those who had known him as an Anglican vicar in their village, so great was the impression he left.

Also in Birmingham he set up a school for the children in the poor district of Deritend where he was given the charge of the mission. Although there was already a little mission school in the area run by a nun, Newman personally taught catechism to a hundred children who turned up in the evenings because they were out at work all day, and so could not get a normal schooling. He also ran a Sunday school and gave twice-weekly lectures to the adults in the evening again, since that was the only free time these people had.

It is important to remember that the Pope had personally signed the charter setting up the Oratory under Fr Newman's direction, specifying that they were to care for the 'higher classes' and more educated people. The fact that there were none of these in Deritend did not cause Newman fret or feel aggrieved, but he recognised God's call to serve these poor people. As he would say a few years later to a Roman Monsignor who invited Newman, the famous preacher, to come and preach a course of sermons in Rome, where he would be assured of finding an audience of a far higher class of people than he was getting in Birmingham, Newman wrote back, declining the invitation politely but firmly, saying that he had no taste for what the Monsignor had in mind for him, and in any case, Birmingham people have souls'. Even when he was dealing with well educated and upper class people, Newman never considered them better, or poorer people beneath his dignity as a pastoral priest, but always recognised that every person needs saving, everyone needs instructing and guiding in the faith.

This is the man who is about to be our first canonised English saint of recent times, and the first who wasn't a martyr since the 15th century! I am sure you can see from what I have said, that even though there are so many wonderful and high-flown reasons for his canonisation, Newman is a saint because he heroically lived his priesthood for all he was sent to. How proud you can be here in this parish to have our new saint as your new patron. How pleased he will be in heaven I don't doubt, to know that he is still remembered with pride and gratitude by you, the descendants of those he came so unselfishly to serve in the moment of their greatest peril.

Blessed, soon to be Saint, John Henry, pray for this parish and for all England. May we all learn from you to love and to know our faith and to practise it and share it with zeal and love. May your example and holiness inspire us all to follow you to heaven.