

HOMILY FOR THE OPENING OF NEWMAN HALL, CARDIFF

30 JANUARY 2016

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The Chancellor of the University of Cardiff would no doubt empathise with the late Sir Herman Black, Chancellor of the University of Sydney from 1970 until 1990. Addressing a freshman class one year, Sir Herman shared a childhood memory with them. As a little boy, he was walking with his father past the buildings of which he was now Chancellor. *“What do they do in there, Dad?”* the precocious boy asked. His father was puzzled by the question and took a few minutes to reply. Eventually he said, *“They think”*. It would be hard to find a better description for the nature and purpose of a University than to say *“They think”*.

But what does it mean to think? The poet D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) gives an excellent description in his poem entitled simply *“Thought”*.

Thought. I love thought.

But not the jiggling and twisting of already existing ideas.

I despise that self-important game.

Thought is the welling up of unknown life into consciousness;

Thought is the testing of statements on the touchstone of conscience;

Thought is gazing onto the face of life itself, and reading what can be read;

Thought is pondering over experience, and coming to a conclusion.

Thought is not a trick, or an exercise, or a set of dodges;

Thought is a man, in his wholeness, wholly attending.

For Lawrence, thought is not jiggling or twisting, not a trick, or exercise, or set of dodges. It is much more than the acquisition of facts, or the passing of exams, or the pressure to conform. For Lawrence, thought is the *“testing of statements on the touchstone of orthodoxy”*. Our thoughts have a moral dimension; they have consequences as well. Thinking is not a self-indulgent hobby, but in its fullness benefits not just ourselves but others too. That is what the Jewish and Christian tradition calls *“Wisdom”* – as we heard in the Old Testament reading.

“Thought is the testing of statements on the touchstone of orthodoxy.” Doesn’t that sentence describe perfectly the genius and the faith of John Henry Newman? He came to the Catholic faith by the rigour and logic of his studies of the Ancient Fathers of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church was not his natural emotional environment, not being enamoured of the wilder excesses of Italian devotions!

His intellectual and theological explorations were paralleled by his spiritual journey. No wonder he wrote:

Lead kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom.

Lead though me on.

I do not ask to see

The distant scene.

One step enough for me.

Newman’s magisterial book *“The Idea of a University”* was based on logic, faith and human relationships. It was also based on his own experience as a young tutor at Oxford. He got into trouble with the Provost of Oriel College for championing the tutorial system, matching students and their needs with personalised program of study for themselves and sharing with others. It caused controversy because many professors preferred to lecture from on high in an impersonalised way to a depersonalised student body. Many years later as a Catholic priest, Newman was having difficulty with the Irish bishops about the founding of the University of Ireland .. (It’s not unusual for priests to have difficulties with bishops – and vice versa!). He wrote:

“If I had to choose between a so called University which dispensed with residence and tutorial superintendence, and gave its degrees to any person who passed an examination... and a University which had no professors or examinations at all, but merely brought a number of young people together for three or four years, and then sent them away If I were asked which of these two methods was the better discipline of the intellect, the more successful in training, moulding, enlarging the mind, I have no hesitation in giving preference to that University which did nothing, over that which exacted of its members an acquaintance with every science under the sun”. (Idea of a

University p.145). In other words, teach our students to think. Teach them to test their ideas on the touchstone of orthodoxy. Give them the keys of relating to each other, so that philosophical and religious ideas, social science, scientific theory and experimentation are tested through conviviality, living together, sharing ideas, based on firm academic, social and we would say religious foundations. *“The Glory of God is humanity fully alive”*. (St. Irenaeus. 2nd century).

This is the vision behind the establishment of this Hall of Residence under the patronage of Blessed John Henry Newman. It is more than a place where students reside in comfortable surroundings, basically living separate, individual lives. It is a place of community, of sharing ideas, of being responsible for the common good, of praying together and reaching out in faith and solidarity to their fellow students. In that way, they will be able to reflect the truths of the reading from Ecclesiasticus:

*“At dawn and with all his heart
He resorts to the Lord who made him.
He will be filled with the spirit of understanding”*.

In all of this, they will also be inspired also by the example of the Sisters of Nazareth and their foundress Victoire Larmenier. Her charisms love, compassion, patience, respect, justice and hospitality. These are lessons for life not just in caring for the old, but for the young as well. Here I would add the word “prophetic” to that list because of the courage of the Sisters of Nazareth in allowing this extraordinary initiative. That, together with the vision, leadership of our university chaplain, Fr. Gareth Jones, himself inspired by the ideals of Cardinal Newman, have together created in this place as Malcolm Muggeridge once said:

“Something Beautiful for God” – and something beautiful for our residents both young and old”.