New Blackfriars (2026), 1–12
doi:10.1017/nbf.2026.10181

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Newman: Holiness and Humanity

Roderick Strange

Theology, St Mary's University Twickenham School of Management and Social Sciences, Twickenham, London, UK

Email: roderick.strange@stmarys.ac.uk

(Received 18 September 2026 UTC; revised 18 September 2026 UTC; accepted 18 September 2026 UTC)

Abstract

Newman, who has been greatly admired and whose canonization was welcomed by so many, has often been regarded at the same time as a rather remote figure. And while it is true that he appreciated his solitude, he was also aware that he valued his friends deeply. Moreover, this link between solitude and friendship indicates his recognition of the connection between the seen and the unseen worlds, his sharpened awareness, that is to say, of a sacramental dimension to reality. This sense of the sacramental also undergirded his vision of education as he expressed it during his time as Rector of the Dublin University, which he was invited to found and where he applauded saints who could read the world fluently like a book, which interested them naturally. And his love for his friends was influenced further by his patron, St Philip Neri, whom he admired for his generosity, patience, and cheerfulness. His humanity is also made evident by his abiding love of music. He was a gifted violinist.

Keywords: education; holiness; humanity; sacramental; violin

When John Henry Newman was declared to be a saint in October 2019, he was being held up as a model of holiness, a model of Christian living for the universal Church. Holiness can seem rarefied. It helps, therefore, to explore the link between his holiness and his humanity.

When Newman was elected a Fellow of Oriel in April 1822, as he remarked in his *Apologia*, he did not feel instantly at home. Reserved and somewhat in awe of that distinguished Senior Common Room that was reputed to stink of logic, but of which he had now become a member, he tended to take his daily walk on his own. One day he passed Edward Copleston, the Provost, who was out walking with one of the other Fellows. Newman reported that Copleston turned round most courteously, bowed to him, and observed, '*Nunquam minus solus quam cum solus*' – never less alone than when alone (*Apo*. pp. 15–16; [27]).[1] Newman appreciated Copleston's courteous kindness.

[1]The abbreviations used are those of the uniform edition of Newman's works that have become standard in Charles S. Dessain et al., *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman* i-xxxii (London and Oxford, 1961–2008). References in square brackets are to later critical editions, in this instance, Martin Svaglic (ed.), *Newman: Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967). See Cicero, *De Officiis*, III, i, 1.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181 Published online by Cambridge University Press

His initial experience of conversion some years earlier had left him resting, as he was to say, in 'the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings', himself and his Creator (*Apo.* p. 4; [18]). He had a clear sense of the reality of God, and he was at ease in solitude. And yet Cicero's phrase that Copleston used fails to tell the whole story. As Newman told his friend, John Capes, many years later, in 1868, 'I have often been puzzled at myself, that I should be both particularly fond of being alone, and particularly fond of being with friends' (*L.D.* xxiv, p. 53; [429]).[2] He enjoyed solitude but loved his friends as well. Before long, however, in those early days at Oriel, Newman was changing. He was brought out of his shell, not least through the influence of the ebullient Richard Whately, who was to become the Church of Ireland's Archbishop of Dublin, but also through the influence of other Fellows of Oriel, John Keble, Edward Pusey, and Richard Hurrell Froude, who were to become with him key figures in the Tractarian Movement.

Opponents of the Tractarians castigated them as idolaters. In 1836, for example, Thomas Arnold, the great headmaster of Rugby, wrote a letter to A. P. Stanley, the future Dean of Westminster, in which he observed: 'It is clear to me that Newman and his party are idolaters; they put Christ's Church and Christ's sacraments, and Christ's ministers, in the place of Christ Himself.'[3] All the same, there is a touch of irony here, because, writing some time later in a more sympathetic context to the Prussian diplomat and scholar, Chevalier Bunsen, whose theological views were more in tune with those championed by the Tractarians, Arnold acknowledged, 'I believe you have got hold of a truth which is as yet to me dark'.[4] What in the Tractarians he viewed as idolatry, to Bunsen he acknowledged might be in him a blind spot. But that is in passing. The specific point here is that Newman was changing; his way of thinking was developing. He was moving from a point of view that was concentrated more exclusively on God, on the invisible, on the world unseen, and beginning to recognize the relationship between what is unseen and what is seen, between the invisible and the visible world. His vision, in other words, was becoming more sacramental.

A well-known example of this development is the occasion in 1828 when he went out for a ride early one morning. His beloved youngest sister, Mary, had died in January, and he was utterly grief-stricken. Her name recurs regularly in his correspondence for the rest of his life, especially, of course, around the time of the anniversary of her death. But on 10 May he reflected on this ride when writing to another of his sisters, Jemima. Lines from a poem of Keble's had suddenly struck him with particular force. 'I could hardly believe', he told her, 'the lines were not my own and Keble had not taken them from me'. Keble's stanza reads: 'Every leaf in every nook / Every wave in every brook / Chanting with a solemn voice / Minds us of our better choice'. And Newman observed, 'Dear Mary seems embodied in every tree and hid behind every hill'. And he then went on, 'What a veil and curtain this world of sense is! beautiful but still a veil' (*L.D.* ii, p. 69).[5]

[2]See Roderick Strange, *John Henry Newman: A Portrait in Letters* (Oxford: University Press, 2015).

[3]Quoted in Arthur P. Stanley, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold* ii (London, John Murray, 1845), p. 42.

[4]Ibid., p. 146.

[5]See John Keble, *Christian Year*, First Sunday after Epiphany, second stanza. See also A. Macdonald Allchin, 'The Theological Vision of the Oxford Movement', in *The Rediscovery of Newman: An Oxford Symposium*, ed. by John Coulson and A. M. Allchin (London: Sheed & Ward and SPCK, 1967), p. 53.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181 Published online by Cambridge University Press

No one has suggested that the quality of Keble's verse is exceptional, but nevertheless its reference to the beauty of the countryside, the leaves and the waves that Newman could see and admire, was alerting him to an awareness of Mary's presence that was all the same veiled from him.

A further feature underlying this sensitivity to the relationship between the visible world and the invisible becomes clearer when we are attentive to the link between literary criticism and theology in the nineteenth century. As Professor Stephen Prickett has recognized: 'The nature of literary criticism (and the kinds of sensibility it implies) cannot be understood in the nineteenth century without reference to contemporary theology, just as the contemporary theology cannot be understood without reference to the literary criticism of the period'.[6] To understand the Tractarians' way of thinking it is necessary to be aware of the influence on them of the Romantics. The Romantics' poetry was not, so to speak, arbitrary. In other words, what it expressed participated in, was a part of, what it was expressing. For them, for example, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* could not have been expressed in any other way. The words shared in were symbols of the message of the verse.

Then, in his *Apologia*, Newman spoke of the Alexandrian School in a way that virtually echoed his remarks about Keble in that letter to Jemima. He referred to the impact on him of the teaching of Clement and Origen, the passages in their writings that 'were based', as he put it, 'on the mystical or sacramental principle', passages that he understood to mean 'that the exterior world, physical and historical, was but the manifestation to our senses of realities greater than itself'. And he described this teaching as coming 'like music to my inward ear, as if the response to ideas, which, with little external to encourage them, I had cherished so long' (*Apo*. pp. 26, 27 [36]). What had appealed to him in the works of Clement and Origen was not the novelty of their teaching, but rather something that he recognized as registering within him. What he heard he seemed to know already. So the Tractarian sensibility to symbol, certainly in Newman's case, came at him from two directions, the Romantic and the patristic. Both understood, in the words of Alf Härdelin, that 'A symbol conveys to us under sensible signs things which are eternal, and *itself participates in these eternal realities*'.[7]

The most evident example of this approach in Newman's writings comes in his famous, final, 'portentously long' Oxford University Sermon on 'The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine' (U.S. pp. 312–51 [211–35]).[8] As he warned Pusey some days before, 'If any one values his Luncheon on Thursday, he must not go to hear me at St Mary's ... and my only satisfaction is that, if any persons go out of curiosity, they will be punished' (*L.D*. ix, p. 217 [149]). He spoke for about an hour and twenty minutes.

At one stage he considered the relationship between what Christians believe, the Trinity, for example, and the incarnation, and the propositions that express those beliefs. 'Creeds and dogmas', he explained, 'live in the one idea which they are designed

[6]Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (Cambridge: University Press, 1976), p. 7.

[7]Alf Härdelin, *The Tractarian Understanding of the Eucharist* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1965), p. 71 (my italics).

[8]See James David Earnest and Gerard Tracey (eds.), *John Henry Newman: Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford* (Oxford, University Press, 2006).

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to express, and which alone is substantive'. It is the idea that is substantive. Creeds and dogmas 'are necessary only because the human mind cannot reflect upon that idea, except piecemeal, cannot use it in its oneness and entireness, nor without resolving it into a series of aspects and relations'. And he went on to describe Catholic dogmas as being 'but symbols of a Divine fact, which, far from being compassed by those very propositions, would not be exhausted, nor fathomed, by a thousand' (*U.S.* pp. 331–2 [223]). While creeds and dogmas, therefore, are not simply to be identified with the reality they seek to express, they nevertheless live in that reality. They are symbols of it. Symbols participate in eternal realities.

It may be helpful here to pause and take stock.

We have followed Newman from his early experience of conversion, overwhelmed by the reality of God's existence, to his unfolding awareness, as the years went by, of the divine presence made manifest in nature, in the leaves on the trees and the waves of a brook, to his recognition of creeds and dogmas, not as identical with the realities they were striving to express, but as symbols of those realities; and being symbols, not arbitrary, but sharing in, a part of, the idea, the divine fact that they were designed to express. Here is a way of looking at reality that is increasingly incarnational, sacramental. And so we can move on.

Between 1851 and 1858 Newman spent much of his time in Dublin. He remained Superior of the Birmingham Oratory, but he had also accepted the invitation to become the first Rector of the University that the Irish bishops were establishing in Dublin. It proved to be a trying time for him. But while he was in Dublin, once the University had finally been opened, he preached a series of eight sermons. The penultimate he called 'St Paul's Characteristic Gift' (*O.S.* pp. 91–105), and the last, 'St Paul's Gift of Sympathy' (*O.S.* pp. 106–20). They are illuminating.

Newman began that first sermon on Paul by speaking of saints more generally and distinguishing them in particular into two categories. 'There are those, on the one hand', he observed, 'who are so absorbed in the divine life, that they seem, even while they are in the flesh, to have no part in earth or in human nature; but to think, speak, and act under views, affections, and motives simply supernatural'. They love others simply because they are loved by God. They rejoice in what is unseen, feel an interest only in what is unearthly, and 'if they speak, it is almost with the voice of Angels'. And after continuing in this manner, he referred to the beloved disciple and Mary Magdalene, the hermits of the desert and 'the holy Virgins whose lives belong to the science of mystical theology' (*O.S.* pp. 91–2). Here is one kind of holiness.

But then he noted that there are, on the other hand, 'those, and of the highest order of sanctity too, as far as our eyes can see, in whom the supernatural combines with nature, instead of superseding it,—invigorating it, elevating it, ennobling it; and who are not the less men, because they are saints'. These people exemplify another kind of holiness. And he continued:

> They do not put away their natural endowments, but use them to the glory of the Giver; they do not act beside them, but through them; they do not eclipse them by the brightness of divine grace, but only transfigure them. They are versed in human knowledge; they are busy in human society; they understand the human heart; they can throw themselves into the minds of other men; and all this in consequence of natural gifts and secular education. While they themselves stand

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> secure in the blessedness of purity and peace, they can follow in imagination the ten thousand aberrations of pride, passion, and remorse. The world is to them a book, to which they are drawn for its own sake, which they read fluently, which interests them naturally, – though, by reason of the grace which dwells within them, they study it and hold converse with it for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Thus they have the thoughts, feelings, frames of mind, attractions, sympathies of other men, so far as these are not sinful, only they have these properties of human nature purified, sanctified, and exalted; and they are only made more eloquent, more poetical, more profound, more intellectual, by reason of their being more holy.

And in this group Newman named many of the early Fathers of the Church, notably St Athanasius to whom he was so devoted, and, as he said, 'above all, the great Saint of this day, St Paul the Apostle' (*O.S.* pp. 92–3). He was preaching on the feast of the Conversion of St Paul. He was not, he went on to declare, trying to separate Paul from other saints and certainly not from the beloved disciple, but he wanted to identify the mark that distinguished him, and he saw what was characteristic of Paul was the way 'in him the fulness of divine gifts does not tend to destroy what is human in him, but to spiritualize and perfect it' (*O.S.* p. 95). If my memory is correct, these last words in particular anticipate a point made by Ronald Knox, one of my distinguished predecessors as Catholic chaplain at Oxford University, namely, that Paul was not changed by his conversion; he remained as he had ever been, fervent, zealous, and committed; his character was not altered, but it was redirected. What was human in him was not destroyed, but perfected by holiness, by his intimacy with Christ.

Newman then quoted the well-known words of Terence: '*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*', which he translated as, 'I am a man; nothing human is without interest to me' (*O.S.* p. 95),[9] and went on to present a portrait of Paul as an educated man. He described him as 'learned in Greek letters', a learning, Newman noted, that he did not abandon when he had 'learned Christ'. Among several examples that he offered was Paul's address to the Athenians at the Areopagus (Acts xvii. 18–34), and he remarked that Paul 'loved poor human nature with a passionate love, and the literature of the Greeks was only its expression; and he hung over it tenderly and mournfully, wishing for its regeneration and salvation' (*O.S.* pp. 97–8). And so a little later he described Paul's characteristic gift 'as being a special apprehension of human nature as a fact, and an intimate familiarity with it as an object of continual contemplation and affection. He made it his own to the very full, instead of annihilating it; ... thus, while he was a Saint inferior to none, he was emphatically still a man, and to his own apprehension still a sinner' (*O.S.* pp. 102–3). In this university sermon, therefore, reflecting upon what was characteristic about Paul for the benefit of his university congregation, Newman dwelt upon his education, his love of literature, and his humanity.

Newman preached this sermon on 25 January 1857. He had delivered his inaugural lecture on 9 November 1854. That lecture, 'On the place held by the Faculty of Arts in the University Course', was published as 'Christianity and Letters' in *The Idea of*

[9]Publius Terentius Afer (Terence), (195/185–159 BC), *Heauton Timonoumenos*, Act I, scene 1, l.77.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a University (*Idea*, pp. 249–67 [211–25]).[10] It considered in part the history of civilization. Newman referred to a number of civilizations, such as the Chinese, Arabian, and Hindu, but he concentrated unsurprisingly on the civilization that had emerged and developed around the Mediterranean over the course of three thousand years. And he described that civilization as 'the seat of an association of intellect and mind, such as to deserve to be called the Intellect and the Mind of the Human Kind' (*Idea*, p. 253 [213]). As various civilizations combined and intermingled, they spoke of a common thought being generated and a common civilization defined and established. 'As times goes on', he argued, 'and as colonization and conquest work their changes, we see a great association of nations formed, of which the Roman empire is the maturity and the most intelligible expression' (*Idea*, pp. 252–3 [213–14]). He did not identify Christianity with this civilization, but he noted that 'it soon coalesced, and has ever since co-operated, and often seemed identical, with the Civilization which is its companion' (*Idea*, p. 255 [215]). Moreover, as Christianity has 'definite ideas, principles, doctrines, and writings', so too analogously civilization has 'its common principles, and views, and teaching, and', Newman added, 'especially its books, ... the Classics, and the subjects of thought and the studies to which they give rise' (*Idea*, p. 256 [216]). There is much more in this lecture, of course; it is important not to oversimplify, but it is striking that in Newman's portrait of Paul in his sermon, of Paul's humanity and of Paul as an educated man of letters, he was offering those who were listening to him a model to which they should aspire. How much did he aspire to it himself?

It is unlikely that he was offering either deliberately or unconsciously a camouflaged self-portrait. He was not aspiring to it in that sense. But the gift that he identified as characteristic of Paul, his humanity, expressed in education and a care for literature, was of essential importance to him as well. Let us come to humanity later. Consider, first of all, Newman's enthusiasm for education.

As a tutor at Oriel, fulfilling his responsibilities consumed him and caused a clash with the Provost, not Copleston, but by this time, Edward Hawkins, that led to no more pupils being allotted to him. Without pupils, he had more time to devote to the demands of the Tractarian Movement and his great influence was exercised most notably through the sermons that he preached as Vicar of St Mary the Virgin, the University Church, and the lectures that he delivered there, first, on *The Prophetical Office of the Church* and then his series of *Lectures on Justification*.

This concern for education was what made him later accept the invitation from the Irish bishops to go to Dublin and, even before the university was launched, he had delivered the discourses which came to form *The Idea of a University*. In these discourses he championed liberal education and offered his famous description of the gentleman:

> Liberal Education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman. It is well to be gentleman, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life; – these are the connatural qualities of a large knowledge; they are the objects of a University; I am advocating, I shall illustrate and insist upon them; but still, I repeat, they are no guarantee for sanctity of life or even for

[10]See Ian T. Ker (ed.), *John Henry Newman: The Idea of a University* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> conscientiousness, they may attach to the man of the world, to the profligate, to the heartless, – pleasant, alas, as he shows them when decked out in them. Taken by themselves, they do but seem to be what they are not; they look like virtue at a distance, but they are detected by close observers, and on the long run; and hence it is that they are popularly accused of pretence and hypocrisy, not, I repeat, from their own fault, but because their professors and admirers persist in taking them for what they are not, and are officious in arrogating for them a praise to which they have no claim.

And then comes the famous conclusion:

> Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man (*Idea*, pp. 120–1 [110–11]).

The gentleman, the product of a liberal education, as Newman perceived it, was not, therefore, a virtuous person or even necessarily a decent human being, although he ought to be: 'It is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life'.

Then soon after his return from Dublin he founded the Oratory School in order to combine a high standard of education for the young with pastoral care. And some years later, he was lamenting in his Journal that 'Catholics in England, from their very blindness, cannot see that they are blind'. He wanted to review the arguments they used and their position in relation to 'the philosophy and character of the day', in other words, its culture, 'by giving them juster views', that is, better arguments, 'and by enlarging and refining their minds, in one word, by education', and he declared that education, in that large sense of the word, had always been his line (see *A.W.* p. 259). Being educated mattered.

And as a part of education, literature mattered. Many people may be familiar with the incident when a woman wrote to a friend about Newman in 1850 and called him a saint. Her friend knew Newman and sent him the letter. She received the now well-known reply, 'I have nothing of a Saint about me', and he went on to say that 'Saints are not literary men, they do not love the classics, they do not write Tales' (*L.D.* xiii, p. 419 [246]). That, of course, was not what he was saying about St Paul a few years later. It is true that Paul did not write tales, so far as we know, but Newman praised his 'liking for heathen writers, or what we now call the classics' (*O.S.* p. 97). And Newman's own education, of course, was steeped in classical literature.

There were times when he was asked about his style. In April 1869 John Hayes, a vicar in Shropshire, wrote to him and in his reply Newman spoke about the great pains he took when writing, often writing over and over again, not writing for writing's sake or to form an elegant style, but 'to express clearly and exactly' his meaning. If there was one master of style whom he had sought to imitate which, he commented, was 'strange considering the differences of the languages', it was Cicero (*L.D.* xxiv, pp. 241–2 [434]). It is worth recalling that, when a Newman Conference was held in Oxford in 1966, the opening paper was given by Michael Ramsey who was then the Archbishop of Canterbury. And here is his opening sentence: 'I first heard of Newman as a schoolboy,

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181 Published online by Cambridge University Press

when we were told by the sixth-form master that if we were to write Latin we must look to Cicero and if we were to write English we must look to Newman.'[11]

Newman, like Paul, was a learned man, well-educated, steeped in classical literature. But what about that other element, so characteristic of Paul, his humanity? It is time to consider Newman's second Dublin sermon on Paul, 'St Paul's Gift of Sympathy'.

After referring to Paul's apostolic labours, he dwelt on Paul's awareness of his weaknesses and his delight in his friends and companions. He also mentioned again the theme that he had brought out so plainly in the previous sermon: 'There are Saints in whom grace supersedes nature; so was it not with this great Apostle; in him grace did but sanctify and elevate nature. It left him in full possession, in the full exercise, of all that was human, that was not sinful' (*O.S.* pp. 113–14). Grace builds on nature; it does not cancel or abolish it.

But what is noteworthy in this sermon is its concluding section. There Newman noticed links between Paul and his patron, the founder of the Congregation of the Oratory and someone who in due course was acclaimed as the sixteenth-century Apostle of Rome, St Philip Neri. Paul indeed with Peter was one of the original Apostles of Rome and Philip an obscure priest, but Philip lived during the Renaissance when, as Newman remarked, 'literature and art were receiving their fullest development, and commencing their benign reign over the populations of Europe, and his [Philip's] work was not to destroy or supersede these good gifts of God, but, in the spirit, I may say, of a Catholic University, to sanctify poetry, and history, and painting, and music, to the glory of the Giver', while Paul, although so great a teacher, was, in Newman's words, addressing himself 'chiefly to the hearts of his disciples, and [introducing] doctrine, not so much for its own sake as for practical uses ... forming the character and improving the heart' (*O.S.* pp. 118–19). For Newman, heart was always speaking to heart.

Philip was Newman's patron. Saints are given to us as models of Christian living, and those we see as patrons are people whose particular example we seek to follow. So how was Newman inspired by Philip?

Among Newman's Oratory Papers there is a fragment of a life of Philip Neri that he was writing in 1853. At one stage he wrote:

> Spiritual readings are properly limited to spiritual subjects; but a Saint's life may often have in it things not directly or immediately spiritual. To find a Saint sitting down to cards, or reading a heathen author, or listening to music, or taking snuff, is often a relief and an encouragement to the reader, as convincing him that grace does not supersede nature, and that he is reading of a child of Adam and his own brother; and he is drawn up to his pattern and guide while he sees that pattern can descend to him; whereas that shadowy paper-Saint, as I may call it, bloodless, ideality which may be set up in the mind from the exclusive perusal of a roll of unconnected details, may, from the weakness of our hearts, chill us unduly, lead [us] to shrink from the Saints and to respond about ourselves. And

[11] A. Michael Ramsey, 'The Significance of Newman Today', in *The Rediscovery of Newman*, p. 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> then what professes and promises to be the most edifying mode of studying them may in the event prove to be the least.[12]

That sets the scene.

Newman's devotion to St Philip is evident. His name recurs regularly in Newman's Catholic writings. The most striking example comes as he concluded, not so much this second sermon on St Paul in Dublin, but an earlier sermon, preached on 13 July 1852 in the Chapel at St Mary's College, Oscott, at the first Provincial Synod of Westminster after the reconstitution of the Catholic Hierarchy. The sermon, of course, is 'The Second Spring' (*O.S.* pp. 163–82). Newman ended it by speaking of the young students at the English College in Rome that had been established as a seminary in 1579. These men were greeted in the street when he saw them by 'a calm old man' with the words, '*Salvete flores martyrum*', and they used to go to visit him for his blessing before returning to England and the likely prospect of violent death. That old man was St Philip. And through the founding of the Oratory in England, which Newman had just accomplished, Newman spoke of how Philip was now 'wishing to have a name among you, and to be loved by you, and perchance to do you a service, here in your own land' (*O.S.* pp. 181–2). He was hoping that the Oratory would be contributing to this new chapter of mission and ministry.

But how did Philip influence Newman? The answer may perhaps be found by exploring some reflections that he composed in a novena that led up to Philip's feast day on 26 May. There is no need to exaggerate the similarities; Philip 'so rapt in prayer, that, when spoken to, he did not give the right answer, and had to take a turn or two up and down the room before he came to himself' (*M.D.* pp. 140–1 [95]),[13] does not make us think of Newman, who preferred to meditate with a pen in his hand; and yet similarities there are. The first day's reflection on Philip's humility begins: 'If Philip heard of someone having committed a crime, he would say, "Thank God that I have not done worse"' (*M.D.* p. 131 [89]). This instinctive response may remind us of Newman's reaction when that woman called him a saint and, after observing he had nothing of a saint about him, also observed, 'It is enough for me to black the saints' shoes – if St Philip uses blacking in heaven' (*L.D.* xiii p. 419 [246]). There are, however, other passages that bring out a likeness between the two of them more strikingly.

For the fifth day there is a reflection on Philip's tenderness of heart. At one point, Newman wrote: 'Soon after he [Philip] became a Priest there was a severe famine in Rome, and six loaves were sent to him as a present. Knowing that there was in the same house a poor foreigner suffering from want of food, he gave them all to him, and for the first day had nothing but olives to eat' (*M.D.* p. 151 [101–2]). The incident makes me think of two in connection with Newman. A woman whom I know has told me of her aunt who was an enclosed nun, a Poor Clare in the convent that was at Baddesley Clinton, on the outskirts of Birmingham. The extern sisters used to go out questing, as it was called, in other words, begging. And it was Fr Newman who would bring them food. And another friend has written to tell me how, as a little girl, soon after

[12]Placid Murray (ed.), *Newman the Oratorian: His Unpublished Oratory Papers* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1969), pp. 258–9.

[13]William Neville (ed.), *John Henry Newman: Meditations and Devotions* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1916; Baronius Press, 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Second World War, she would go with her father to visit people who were in need; her family lived between Birmingham and Wolverhampton. She wrote: 'I wish I could remember the details—tho' I was of course very young and completely ignorant – of elderly Birmingham people who had known "Mr Newman" and loved him dearly, especially for his fearless visits to the slums of the cholera epidemic. Some, I know, were bargees, an extraordinary community with whom my dad spent a lot of time helping with any writing they needed – they were fine with ciphering and measuring and accounts, but not words! But when I think of that great, fastidious, academic man from so different a background, and all that he did in Birmingham and Littlemore, etc., I am awed'.[14] Birmingham in fact was spared a severe cholera epidemic in the 1850s, but it would seem that Newman's readiness to minister among those who might fall prey to it, his tenderness of heart, was remembered with affection in the local community.

Another reflection referred to Philip's patience. Newman began: 'Philip was for years and years the butt and laughing-stock of all the hangers-on of the great palaces of the nobility at Rome, who said all the bad about him that came into their heads, because they did not like to see a virtuous and conscientious man. This sarcastic talk against him lasted for years and years; so that Rome was full of it, and through all the shops and counting-houses the idlers and evil livers did nothing but ridicule Philip' (*M.D.* p. 159 [107]). And he gave other examples of people, even some quite close to Philip, who treated him negligently and without respect. It brings to mind another entry in Newman's Journal at the beginning of 1860. He had left Dublin in November 1858, but since then had become embroiled in trying – in fact rather unsuccessfully – to rescue the prestigious, but controversial periodical, *The Rambler*, from the crisis that was brewing up around it, and at the same time he was founding the Oratory School. Some of the most demanding years of his life were lying in wait for him. In his Journal he observed that, besides wishing to do God's will, he had hoped to please the people whom he had sought to serve, but, he went on, 'I have been treated, in various ways, only with slight and unkindness'. Then he continued:

> Because I have not pushed myself forward, because I have not dreamed of saying, 'See what I am doing and have done' – because I have not retailed gossip, flattered great people, and sided with this or that party, I am nobody. I have no friend at Rome, I have laboured in England, to be misrepresented, backbitten, and scorned. I have laboured in Ireland, with a door ever shut in my face. I seem to have had many failures, and what I did well was not understood.

And he concluded: 'I do not think I am saying this with any bitterness' (*A.W.* p. 251). And what is striking is the way, in all the difficulties he had to face, especially at that time, in his public dealings there was no trace of self-pity. What he confided to his Journal was never on public display. In the midst of pressure, he was patient.

Newman's own tenderness of heart and patience in the face of crisis and when he was despondent mirror qualities that can be discerned in Philip. They are evidence of humanity; both men had their feet on the ground. And there is another quality that

[14]Letter to RS from Anne Pope, 27 September 2019.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is readily associated with being human, what Newman described in Philip as cheerfulness. Philip welcomed even strangers with affection and would leave his prayers sometimes 'to sport and banter with young men'. On one occasion, Newman recalled, 'he restored cheerfulness to Father Francesco Bernardi, of the Congregation, by asking him to run with him, saying, "Come now, let us have a run together"' (*M.D.* pp. 155–6 [104–5]).

Cheerfulness is not a quality that people often associate with Newman, but that may be because they are not in tune with his kind of humour, which tended to be dry and donnish.[15] In 1877 he corresponded with his friend, William Copeland, who had been one of his curates when he was an Anglican. Copeland was putting together a selection of Newman's sermons that were appropriate for the liturgical year and they were discussing what to include and what to omit. On 4 December Newman observed that he had doubts about including one in which he had remarked, 'the Church has erred', which, he told Copeland, 'grates so upon me'. Then he observed drily, ironically, in brackets, given the controversy surrounding the recent Vatican Council, 'I should not mind "the Pope has erred"' (*L.D.* xxviii, p. 274). And Newman could also be self-deprecating. As an Anglican, bishops had been wary of his Catholic leanings; as a Catholic, bishops had been critical of his approach to education. Forever under suspicion, he had come to take it for granted. And so he observed in his Journal in 1868: 'I should be so out of my element if I were without that cold shade on the side of ecclesiastical authority, in which I have dwelt nearly all my life, my eyes would be so dazed, and my limbs so relaxed, were I brought out to bask in the full sun of ecclesiastical favour, that I should not know how to act and should make a fool of myself' (*A.W.* p. 264).

We have followed Newman from his early overwhelming sense of the divine presence to his evolving awareness of that presence made manifest in nature and in symbol and on to his embracing that presence as well through his sense of grace building on nature and being expressed in literature and through education and in human behaviour. Let me end with a final story about Newman that again may capture something of his humanity.

When Newman was preaching in Dublin about St Paul and speaking of grace sanctifying natural gifts, he referred, you may recall, to music as one of those gifts. Now, as a boy of 10, Newman had begun to play the violin. He loved to play. But in the late 1840s he had stopped. However, he began to play again around 1865 and soon afterwards two of his dearest friends, both former fellows of Oriel, Sir Frederic Rogers, later Lord Blachford, and Richard Church, who was to become the Dean of St Paul's, combined to give him a new fiddle, as Newman called it. Three were sent from the warehouse for him to choose one. It was not immediately easy because, as Newman explained to Church, 'my fingers have been in such a state, as being cut by the strings, that up to Saturday last I had sticking plaster upon their ends ... But on Saturday I had a good bout at Beethoven's Quartetts ... and thought them more exquisite than ever—so that I was obliged to lay down the instrument and literally cry out with delight. However, what is more to the point, I was able to ascertain that I had got a very beautiful fiddle—such as I never had before. Think of my not having a good one till I was between sixty and

[15] See Joyce Sugg, 'Did Newman have a Sense of Humour?' in *The Clergy Review* lxviii (Oxford, University Press, 1983), pp. 100–4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seventy—and beginning to learn it when I was ten' (*L.D.* xxii, p. 9 [390]). But the story does not end there. What happened to the fiddle?

Richard Church was the father of twin daughters, Helen and Mary. In 1883 Helen got married. Until then Newman had played his new fiddle constantly and it had given him much pleasure, but now, he told Church, 'I have no command of it; nay, strange to say, I cannot count or keep time'. So he decided with Church's permission to send it to Mary. 'I don't suppose', he remarked, 'she will find a fiddle make up for Helen'. But he knew she was proficient and, although she had her own violin, he hoped she would receive this one, because it 'would come with associations in its history' (*L.D.* xxx, pp. 197–8 [540]).

This small episode, I would suggest, reveals something of Newman's personality and his humanity, and also allows us to glimpse his holiness.

Cite this article: Roderick Strange, 'Newman: Holiness and Humanity', *New Blackfriars* (2026), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10181 Published online by Cambridge University Press