

SERVANT OF GOD JOHN HENRY CARDINAL NEWMAN

SERMON PREACHED AT ABBOTSFORD, MELROSE

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INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a privilege being here with you in this little Oratory in Abbotsford, the former home of the late Sir Walter Scott and used by the late Cardinal Newman on his several visits to Abbotsford for rest, relaxation and prayer, especially in the celebration of Mass. I am privileged to be using one of the chasubles of Cardinal Newman for this particular celebration.

Here in this beautiful Borders countryside we see the rolling hills and the lush green fields surrounding us and the neighbourhood stretching into the distance. If any place is conducive to prayer and meditation, planning and rest, it is surely here. If any place is suitable for the confirmation of one's vocation in ministry, in priesthood, as a Cardinal – one could hardly find anywhere better.

SCOTUS – A SON OF THIS LAND:

I continue my reflection this morning by asking you to cast your minds back some 750 years – to approximately the year 1265. That is the year when it is believed that Blessed John Duns Scotus was born. He was born not so very far from here in the beautiful Borders town of Duns – hence his full name John Duns Scotus. As a young man he grew up in this Borders countryside conducive, as I have indicated, to prayer and meditation. He must have considered the wonders of God's creation, the power of God, and that call of God to him to enter the Franciscan Order and then to go forward for Priesthood.

Having completed the necessary studies he was ordained to the Priesthood in Lincoln Cathedral and then exercised his intellect in a very wonderful way as a priest and as a teacher. He began frequent journeys at the request of his superiors between England and the Continent which were to end only with his death. He continued his studies at Oxford after Ordination before being sent to Paris and then returning to England before again lecturing in Paris. After various other lecturing positions he was then sent to Cologne where he lectured for some time before his untimely death in 1308 at just under 43 years of age.

His holiness and his loyalty to the Church and its Teaching were outstanding – particularly with regard to his teaching on the uniqueness of each and every individual. His dedication to and the depth of his studies on Mary under the title of the "Immaculate Conception" are known throughout the Catholic world. Words engraved on the stained glass windows in the church in Duns sum up his teaching on the Immaculate Conception: "Potuit decuit fecit" – these words meaning: "It could be done, it was fitting, it was done". He has rightly been

described as a “Saint for Europe”. After his death his reputation for holiness spread throughout Europe and his tomb in Cologne reminds us of his travels. The English translation of the inscription on his tomb is: “Scotland brought me forth; England received me; France taught me; Cologne holds my remains”. Regarded as one of the most important philosophers – theologians of his time, his complex and nuanced thoughts earned him the title of ‘The Subtle Doctor’.

NEWMAN - A VISITOR TO THIS LAND:

As we well know Newman was born south of the Border with England but he was a frequent visitor to the beautiful Scottish Borders. It is well known that he made several visits to Abbotsford House, the home of Sir Walter Scott, situated here by the River Tweed at Melrose within sight of the magnificent ruined Border Abbey of Melrose. Here he met with and talked to his friend James Hope Scott and was influential among various Borders families and in their conversions to the Catholic Church. The fact that so many beautiful churches in these Borders towns were built is an indication of that influence of Cardinal Newman.

One could rightly say that like Scotus before him he must have been influenced by the beauty of the Borders countryside itself. Here I am sure was a place where he could indeed recharge his spiritual batteries. In this area he could grow closer to God while preparing for his more active ministry as a priest, as an intellectual, as a spiritual guide to his beloved brethren in the Oratory.

From here his journeys continued: South of the Border to England; and across the Irish Sea to Ireland itself at the request of Cardinal Cullen to try to establish a Catholic University in Ireland. Wherever he went he was revered not only as a great intellectual but as a good and holy priest.

I see many similarities in the life and apostolate of John Duns Scotus and the life and Apostolate of John Henry Cardinal Newman. And those similarities which I have mentioned above are continued after the deaths of those two great men.

BEATIFICATIONS:

I myself was privileged to be in Rome with the late Cardinal Winning on the **Declaration of the beatification of Blessed John Duns Scotus in 1992.**

At that time the late Pope John Paul II declared on: “The fame of holiness, the virtues, and the cult from time immemorial given to the servant of God, John Duns Scotus”. Scotus was being beatified, not because of his travels, nor because of the depth of his learning – but rather because he had been a good holy priest.

And of course something similar happened in the case of the servant of God John Henry Cardinal Newman. **The decree of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints concerning the cause for canonisation of the servant of God John Henry Newman**, Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, and founder of the Oratory of St Philip Neri in England was promulgated on the 22nd January 1991.

The decree speaks of the honour and esteem in which he was held in his own country; on the fact that his “theological thought is of such stature and profundity that he is judged by many

learned men to rank along side the greatest Fathers of the Church; but also the decree states that “beside his intellectual achievement, his lifelong and fruitful ministry was marked by all the characteristics of a true pastor, one whose priestly charity moved him to direct his attention to the poor, whom he would help in whatever way he could”.

We are reminded that his way of life commands our admiration in its straightforwardness and frugality, totally founded on the Lord who is present in the Holy Eucharist and in the hearts of believers; and it is stated that “on account of these qualities the servant of God and his message are of great significance for our time and enormous bearing on the world”.

The cause was introduced quite simply **because his reputation for holiness** which was strong enough while he lived and grew ever greater after his death.

It was because of the above and to much more that Pope John Paul 11 solemnly declared that: “It is certain that the servant of God, John Henry Newman, Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, founder of the Oratory of St Philip Neri in England, had practiced the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity towards God and his neighbour, also the Cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude and those connected with them, to a heroic degree, in accordance with the requirements of the investigation of this case”.

CONCLUSION:

Consequently as we think of the journey of Blessed John Duns Scotus through this land toward sanctity and beatification so too we think of that same journey some 500 years later accomplished by the servant of God, John Henry Cardinal Newman.

Called to be a Cardinal by Pope Leo XIII on 15th March 1879 – it is also interesting to note that one of the first acts of Pope Leo XIII on being elected Pope was the apostolic letter “Ex Supremo of 4th March 1878 in which the Restoration of the Scottish Hierarchy was restored. One of the major acts following that Apostolic Letter was the appointment of John Henry Newman as a Cardinal.

Two great men who were travellers for Christ. And if Scotus is called a ‘Saint for Europe’ so surely it would be our ardent desire and prayer that Newman be declared a ‘Saint for Britain’. Thinking of the epitaph on the tomb of Scotus, the epitaph for Newman might be: ‘England brought be forth; Ireland stretched me intellectually; Scotland gave me a place of rest’.

Holiness of Life based firmly in our faith and on academic learning were at the roots of the declared sanctity of John Duns Scotus and John Henry Newman. May that sanctity lead them both to being declared as Saints and worthy of us following in their example here on earth so that one day we may be united with them in the joys of Heaven.

