

# University Education

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Eamonn Conway

As someone who works in a Catholic college academically linked to a State university I consider it a great honour to have been invited to give this homily.\* Many of the issues with which Newman struggled, especially during his time at the Catholic University bear an uncanny similarity to the issues which those of us committed to Catholic third-level education are confronting today.

When we reflect on Newman in a Church context today we usually focus on his more obviously theological or spiritual writings. We tolerate a certain hiatus between his ideas concerning the Catholic faith and those concerning education, a hiatus that Newman would never have allowed. For Newman, all true knowledge is the work of the Creator and participates in divine revelation by helping us to understand the Creator's handiwork. What he had to say about university education is utterly grounded in and flows from his understanding of a specifically Catholic understanding of Christian faith. I want to mention briefly three points regarding third-level education which were of considerable importance to Newman, and, in my view, remain important today. The first relates to the purpose of education.

In 1863, Newman wrote: 'Now, from first to last, education, in the large sense of the word, has been my line.' Newman stood for education in the fullest sense, espousing a broadly liberal as opposed to a narrowly professional education. Put plainly, he wanted education to equip people for life, and not just for a career or a job. He wanted education to form and cultivate, not just to inform or up-skill. Newman espoused life-long education long before it became a cliché: in education 'a habit of life is formed',

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he wrote, 'of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom'.

In our universities and third-level colleges, education which is habit-forming in any positive sense is becoming increasingly difficult. Where it happens, it is effectively a fortunate by-product of a system increasingly at the service of economic imperatives. Newman said that a University may be considered with reference either to its students or to its studies: he never envisaged it being considered primarily or even exclusively with reference to the market.

Secondly, Newman considered the hallmark of a university to be its presentation of the unity and majesty of knowledge. For Newman, all knowledge formed a united whole. It is only when knowledge is understood and presented as such that it can pass from consideration of the questions of immediate to those of ultimate concern. Along similar lines, Benedict XVI, in his address at the University of Regensburg last year, recalled how, in his day at the university, there was an annual *dies academicus*, when professors from every faculty appeared before the students of the entire university, making possible a genuine experience of *universitas*. There was a sense, he said, of the *universitas scientiarum*, of 'coherence within the universe of reason', and that

despite our specializations which at times make it difficult to communicate with each other, we made up a whole, working in everything on the basis of a single rationality with its various aspects and sharing responsibility for the right use of reason – this reality became a lived experience.

Today, students learn more and more about less and less. The buzz word for staff and student alike is 'specialization'. Only very rarely, perhaps even accidentally, is it possible to open up and discuss the 'bigger questions'. In my own experience, even when I do raise questions of ultimate concern, so schooled are students in the process of absorbing and reproducing material, that I am likely to be interrupted to be asked: will this be on the exam?

Recently, Alasdair MacIntyre, writing on what he calls the fragmentation of the American university, remarked that 'From a Catholic point of view the contemporary secular university is not at fault because it is not Catholic. It is at fault insofar as it is not a university.' I have no doubt that this would also be Newman's judgement upon many Irish universities today, and he would look with disappointment at those who so easily cloak themselves in his mantle and purport to have realized his vision.

The third and final point relates specifically to theology. Newman argued that theology can integrate and unify education like no other discipline. Theology which remains faithful to its

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sources can ensure that the ultimate questions are not avoided or obscured. Furthermore, Christian revelation offers unique insight into the human condition and it is the task of theologians to put this at the service of education as a whole. Newman wanted 'the intellectual layman to be religious, and the devout ecclesiastic to be intellectual'. He could not have envisaged a well-established university without an equally well-resourced and respected theology faculty.

There are signs of movement, for example, the recognition by the NUI of the Milltown Institute. Yet theology remains marginalized and impoverished within the Irish educational system. It has barely squeezed in the back door of a few third-level institutes and is still absent from most university campuses. Some time ago Professor Dermot Keogh (UCC) commented that 'it is frustrating to speculate what would have happened in the 1960s if the best and the brightest had been recruited to teach Theology in the NUI system.'

Where theology is surviving in Ireland – I won't say flourishing – it is always in danger of having to sell itself short by misrepresenting itself as 'an art or a business making use of theology', a danger against which Newman expressly warned. It was therefore heartening to hear An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, TD, say last October that 'philosophy and theology should continue at the heart of the mission of the University, no less than the physical or social sciences'. But these welcome words need to have some flesh put on them both in Higher Education policy and university praxis.

In short, Newman's idea of the Catholic University remains largely that: an idea, and this despite widespread acknowledgement, if not of the intrinsic worth of education, at least of its central role in enabling Ireland's recent economic success, along with growing recognition that a civic leadership deficit is the inevitable consequence of downgrading the humanities in Higher Education.

So much for Newman's context, and ours. What light can today's Gospel (Lk 4:1-13), throw on all of this?

Despite its apocalyptic undertones, Luke's account of the temptations in the desert underscores the ordinariness of Jesus. Jesus was tempted, as we are: tempted to sell himself short, tempted to abandon his mission, tempted to settle for the immediately satisfying and the tangible.

The devil says to Jesus, 'I will give you all this power ...'. What is recorded in this Gospel passage is a battle between two very different understandings of what it is to be really 'powerful'. For the devil, power is control. It is the ability to manipulate and subsume; to lure everything and everyone into being an extension of

the self-absorbed self; the power to destroy and fragment what cannot be so absorbed.

As John Howard Yoder points out, the opposite of this kind of power is not weakness, but a different kind of power. For Jesus, power is letting-go, self-emptying, surrendering to and living in trustful obedience to the Father's will. For Jesus, power is not power to divide and to fragment but rather to heal, to restore, to unite and to raise up. Luke deliberately presents as the third temptation the devil leading Jesus to Jerusalem. Jesus will go there all right, but in his own time and on his own terms, or better, the terms of the Father.

The devil's kind of power, essentially the power of evil, did not win on Calvary, though it appeared to do so. Instead, the cross becomes the only form of power acceptable to the Christian. To cite Yoder once more: 'the cross and not the sword, suffering and not brute power, determines the meaning of history'.

And so, to return to Newman. Like Jesus, Newman, in his efforts to establish a Catholic University, was up against 'principalities and powers', occasionally at work even through his fellow Churchmen. His time in Ireland was a crucifixion, and I am sure he had to struggle not to 'ask to see the distant scene', and to pray 'one step enough for me'. Newman bore his suffering with resilience, and both his vision and action for a Catholic University in Ireland sowed seeds that have yet to bear fruit, and will do so, in their due season.

'Worship me, then,' says the Devil, 'and it shall all be yours.' But the harvest of a genuine Catholic University is Christ's, not ours. Our only responsibility, an important one nonetheless, is to ensure that we do not succumb to the temptation to turn stones into bread in order to win for ourselves the kind of power that is passing and peripheral in reign of God terms.