

In Celebration of the Canonisation of St John Henry, Cardinal Newman
The Anniversary of the Foundation of the Oratory at Maryvale
by St John Henry Newman in 1848
Mary Vale February 19th 2020

It was on the evening of the 1st of February, 1848, that Fr Newman, recently returned here from Rome, read out the papal Bull of canonical erection of the English Oratory. First Vespers of the Feast of the Purification of our Lady, which we now know as that of the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple, had just been sung by him and his companions. After Vespers and the reading of the Bull, Fr Newman admitted those companions to membership of the newly erected Oratory. They were six priests: Fathers Ambrose St John, Fr John Dalgairns, Fr William Penny, Fr Robert Coffin, Fr Richard Stanton and Fr Thomas Knox. Then three laybrothers also were admitted: John Sheppard, Bernard Hennin and Aloysius Boland.

But that night was by no means the first Newman had spent at Mary Vale. Shortly after his reception into the One Fold of the Redeemer on October 9th 1845 at Littlemore near Oxford, Newman had come to Oscott College to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation from Bishop Wiseman, rector of Oscott, who had known Newman since had they met in Rome in 1833. Wiseman suggested that now he was a Catholic, Newman would need a base from which to build up a new life and a new apostolate, especially one which would allow him to gather friends around him and to study theology and teach the faith.

Friendship was of great importance to Newman, and he had a great gift for it which he had been able to exercise over many years in Oxford and at Littlemore, where he had already lived a kind of forerunner of the Oratorian life, a life of prayer and study, and of ministry to his flock in the little village church which he had built there for them, and where he taught the children in the school.

That little community who lived a quasi-monastic life at Littlemore was dear to him both as a support in his work and as companions in his search for the truth. Small wonder then that he sought the same kind of support and companionship once he had become a Catholic. Even before he went to Rome to prepare for ordination, he came here to what was then called Old Oscott with some of his companions at Bishop Wiseman's invitation, and was to make this his first home as a Catholic, some time before it would become the first home of the Oratory. It is interesting to note that as early as Epiphany Day 1846, over two years before the Oratory would be founded here, Newman had already decided that his new home was to be called Mary Vale, partly in order to distinguish it from New Oscott, and partly out of devotion to our Lady, but in any case before he had chosen the Oratory as his vocation, and therefore before any association could have been made with the 'Chiesa nuova' of Santa Maria in Valle (or Vallicella), the Roman Oratory Church.

In the event, it was Frederick Faber who was to point out to Newman that the name he had chosen for his new home here was providentially similar to that of St Philip Neri's church, which led Newman somewhat prophetically to say to him, 'I have long felt special reverence and admiration for the character of St Philip Neri, as far as I knew it, and was struck by your saying that his Church at Rome was 'in Vallicella' (that is, 'in the vale') – I wish we could all become good Oratorians, but that, I suppose, is impossible.' That seems to suggest that the very name of Mary Vale was to play its own part in bringing Newman closer to St Philip, and not the other way about as we might perhaps have assumed. As we can judge from the end of that quotation, John Henry Newman was sure about the name of Mary Vale some considerable time before he was sure about becoming an Oratorian.

But his discovery of St Philip Neri was crucial to his own personal development as to the choice of the Oratory as an institution in which to serve God and the Catholic Church in this land. St Philip

would provide him with a community life which would support him in friendship and prayer for the rest of his life. St Philip transformed the austerities of Littlemore into the homely yet simple comfort of Mary Vale. That journey of Newman's life as a son of St Philip which had begun for him in Rome itself, was now given new stability in this house, in this chapel even on that night in February, 1848.

This time of the year is not only the anniversary of the foundation of the Oratory here in this place, but of Newman's first taking up residence here on February 23rd, 1846. Just three days later he wrote the now famous letter from the room just near the back gallery here, stating that 'I am writing [from the] next room to the Chapel – It is such an incomprehensible privilege to have Christ in bodily presence in one's house, within one's walls, as swallows up all other privileges and destroys, or should destroy, every pain. To know that He is close by – to be able again and again through the day to go in to Him; and be sure, My dearest Wilberforce, when I am thus in His Presence you are not forgotten. It is *the* place for intercession, surely, where the Blessed Sacrament is.'

So it was in this place, and in this month of the year, which is incidentally the month of his birthday, and so throughout his life associated with new beginnings, that St John Henry began that life-long friendship, so to speak, with the Blessed Sacrament. We may perhaps hesitate to speak of friendship with the Incarnate Word, and with the Sacrament of His divine presence, yet we remember that the Word of God Himself encourages us to see our relationship to Him in just that way: 'I do not call you servants any longer, I call you friends', as He told His Apostles at the Supper in which He gave them His Body and Blood in order to continue in their presence even after His return to the Father. That friendship between St John Henry and His Lord in the Blessed Sacrament began and was nurtured here in this house, in this chapel, and in this month.

When you enter the grounds of this house, still named as Newman christened it, Mary Vale, one sees the claim: 'Home of St John Henry Newman'. Well, it can reasonably be called *a* home of the Saint, the first Catholic home indeed, one of several in those early Catholic years before he laid down his roots in Edgbaston. But it was here at Mary Vale that Newman first lived under the same roof as the Blessed Sacrament, as the incarnate Lord present among His friends to this day. When all other human friendships were to fail for one reason or another, through death, through alienation, through betrayal – it was the one firm rock in Newman's long life, the presence of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament that sustained him and kept him firm on the path where he asked not to see the distant scene, but only to accept that one step was enough for him, as long as he enjoyed the companionship and presence of our Lord.

It is also fitting that in this chapel the Mother of God is venerated as our Lady of Victories, because, as Newman discovered in Paris on his way to Rome in 1846 to study for ordination, it was prayer by Catholics before her image there that had helped to bring about his conversion to the faith. We should also remember today that one of the reasons for which Bishop Wiseman had invited Newman here was so that he might establish an apostolate of study and of teaching the faith; and therefore it is wonderful that that apostolate flourishes here to this day under the patronage both of our Blessed Lady and of St John Henry Newman.

Moreover, there are other new beginnings that show that the seed sowed in the ground of Maryvale all those years ago under the patronage of our Lady and St Philip is still producing rich fruit. For present here today are not only members of the Oratory of Birmingham, the first that Newman founded, and his own home for the second half of his long life, but also a representative of one of the newest foundations of the English Oratory, for the deacon at this Mass is Brother Henry of the Oratory of York, founded only three months ago just after the Cardinal's canonisation. Another new Oratory has also been founded three months since in Manchester, and there are two others presently in formation in Cardiff and Bournemouth. And so, we who are members of St Philip's family and

sons of St John Henry, give thanks today not only for the wonderful providence of the Oratory, but also for the privilege of being invited here by the staff of Maryvale to celebrate these anniversaries of Newman's first arrival here, and of the foundation of the English Oratory. We give thanks also that the work of Maryvale continues, and we pray for the intercession of our new saint, that if it be God's will, that work may continue and flourish until the Lord returns again.