

# CARDINAL JOHN HENRY NEWMAN WAS CANONISED LAST SUNDAY BY POPE FRANCIS IN ROME...although - or perhaps because? - his life was one of apparent failure rather than triumph!

## Succeeding by failure

*Newman's life seemed to be a series of disappointments, but he trusted in Providence*

FR IAN KER

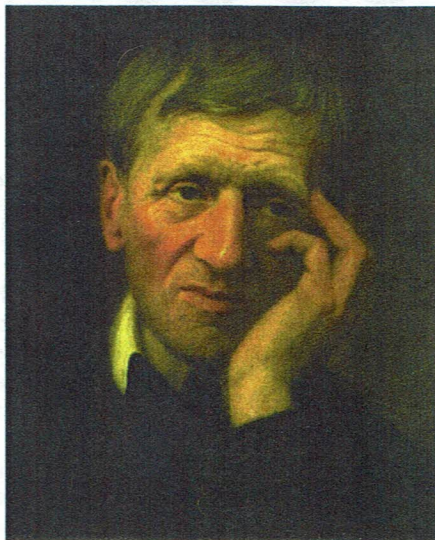
John Henry Newman's life can well be described as one of continual failures, if only because that was how he saw it. "All through life things happen to me which do not happen to others - I am the scapegoat," he wrote.

He was sad to think, as he looked back on his life, how his time had been "frittered away" and how much he might have done, had he "pursued one subject". His life seemed to be just "a history of failures". He had been "so often balked, - brought into undertakings - then left in the lurch". Plan after plan had "crumbled [in his] hands and come to nought". When he was 60 he wrote that, although not "true to the letter", he felt that he could say he had "received no piece of (personal) good news for 30 years and more", nothing but "sorrows" and "anxieties"; all his works had failed.

As an undergraduate at Oxford, Newman performed disastrously in his finals, failing mathematics and only attaining the lower division of the second class in Classics. Exactly seven years later, he suffered a nervous collapse while examining finals papers and had to withdraw. As a tutor at Oriël College, he wanted to stop the practice of undergraduates having to hire private tutors from among recent graduates and considered it preferable for college tutors to provide tuition as well as the usual lectures. However, the Provost disapproved of the change that Newman and his colleagues introduced in 1828, and Newman was effectively dismissed as a tutor.

Also in 1828 he was invited by the Bishop of London to become one of the Whitehall preachers, an acceptance he subsequently withdrew in 1832 when he discovered the bishop's theological liberalism. In 1830 he was dismissed as secretary of the Church Missionary Society because of a pamphlet he had written. In 1834 he failed to be appointed to the chair of moral philosophy.

As leader of the Oxford or Tractarian Movement and the principal architect of its theology of the *via media*, or "middle way", he began, six years after starting the movement, to have doubts. These culminated in 1841 with the publication of Tract 90, which sought to interpret the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England in a Catholic sense. This was condemned first by the vice-chancellor and heads of colleges and proctors, and then by successive bishops. Finally, in 1845, Newman renounced the *via media* and the



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Newman: 'No good news for 30 years'

Oxford Movement, convinced that the Catholic Church was the true Church.

The disappointments and failures of Newman's Catholic years were at least as grim as those of the Anglican years. In 1851 he was appointed president of the new Catholic University of Ireland, which he hoped would become the Catholic university of the English-speaking world. Unfortunately, there was much opposition to the university among Irish Catholics (including the bishops); the British government refused to validate the university's degrees, and Newman found himself involved in endless conflicts with Archbishop Paul Cullen of Dublin, who refused to allow him to set up a lay financial committee to raise money for the university.

A University Church, which Newman paid for out of money left over from the fund Catholics had raised to pay Newman's legal costs (in the libel case brought against him by the ex-friar Giacinto Achilli), was completed in 1856. But the final cost of the church was considerably higher than expected, and Newman's request to Cullen for a loan was only granted after years of correspondence.

In 1859, at the request of Bishop William Bernard Ullathorne of Birmingham, Newman reluctantly agreed to take on the editorship of *The Rambler*, a journal founded by liberal converts to Catholicism, which was threatened by condemnation from Rome. Although Newman was critical of *The Rambler's* lack

of respect for authority, he was sympathetic to its desire to raise the intellectual level among Catholics. In the May issue a passage appeared, written by Newman himself, criticising the bishops' recent pastoral letters on the royal commission on education, on the grounds that the bishops should consult the laity on the question of Catholic schools; the laity, he wrote, had been recently consulted even in the matter of the preparation of the definition of the Immaculate Conception.

Bishop Ullathorne was not pleased and advised that Newman resign as editor, advice which he was pleased to take. However, before doing so, he wrote an article for the July issue, "On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine", which was denounced to Rome by a Welsh bishop. The Holy See sent a list of objectionable passages in the article to Cardinal Wiseman of Westminster which was never sent on to Newman; Wiseman said he would deal with the matter but he never did, thus leaving Rome thinking that Newman was disobedient.

In December 1858 Newman reluctantly accepted an invitation from the American hierarchy to cooperate in preparing a translation of the Bible for English-speaking countries, on condition that the English bishops were agreeable; they never responded.

Newman had tried to found a second Oratory but Fr Frederick Faber obtained a prohibition from Rome. However, in 1864 Newman was offered a plot of land in Oxford which he thought could be used for an Oratory. Ullathorne supported the idea and Rome gave its permission, but made it plain it didn't want Newman himself at Oxford, as his presence would encourage Catholics to send their sons there (something the bishops discouraged); accordingly, the project was abandoned.

It was, he held, "the rule of God's providence that we should succeed by failure". The Anglican bishops' condemnations of Tract 90 "confirmed the interpretation which I had put upon the Fathers, that they who love the Fathers, could have no place in the Church of England". In other words, this disappointment had helped him to convert.

Similarly, success in the form of elevation to the College of Cardinals followed all his disappointments and failures as a Catholic.

Fr Ian Ker's most recent book was Newman on Vatican II (OUP)