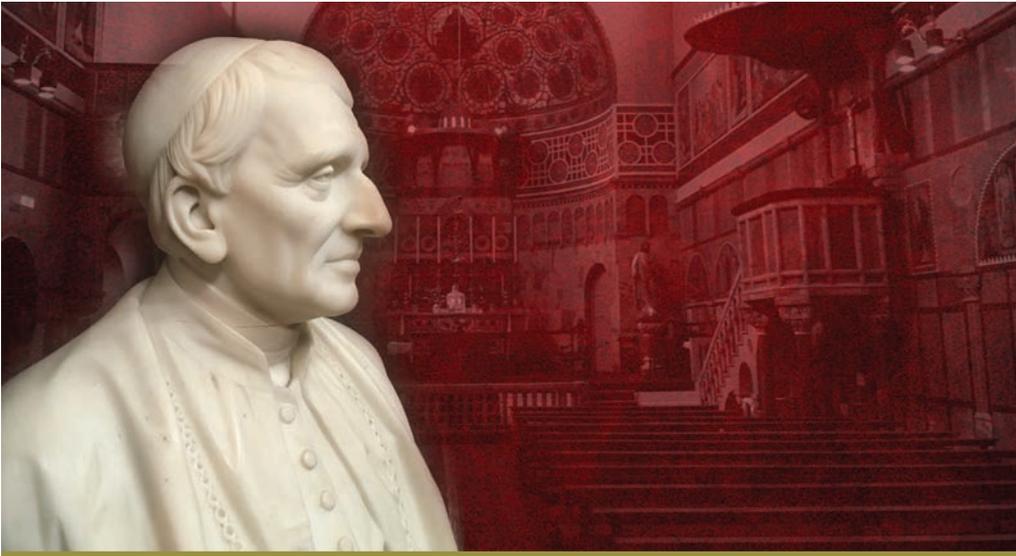




St John Henry Newman: Founding the Catholic University

The canonisation of Bl John Henry Newman honours a scholar and saint whose influence in Dublin continues to this day, through the university he founded. **Dermot Mansfield SJ**, author of *Heart Speaks to Heart: The Story of Blessed John Henry Newman (Veritas)*, gives an account of his time in Dublin.



The pulpit in Newman House from which Newman spoke

Illustrations: Brendan McCarthy

In the May issue of *The Messenger*, I wrote about the life of Blessed John Henry Newman, in view of his coming canonisation later this year. There I mentioned the time he spent in Dublin, in the 1850s. Now I offer some more details about that episode – important in his own life, and also in its way important for Ireland.

Not long a convert from

Anglicanism, Newman was settling into his new pastoral scene in Birmingham when he suddenly found himself called to Dublin – to found a Catholic University. The key figure behind this venture was Archbishop Paul Cullen, who was appointed to Dublin in early 1852. Against what he and other members of the Irish hierarchy called the ‘godless’ Queen’s



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University College Dublin as it is today

Universities then being set up by the Westminster government, Cullen wanted a proper Catholic University in Dublin. And because of Newman's background in Oxford, Cullen asked him to come over to Dublin and found the new institution.

Over the years 1852 to 1858, Newman spent much of his time and energy in Dublin, organising the fledgling university in premises on St Stephen's Green and Harcourt Street, and giving a series of important lectures on university education. In June of 1854 he was officially appointed rector, and in November the university opened its doors to the small number of students then available.

The difficulties he faced, however, were immense. Ireland at that time was in the aftermath of the Great Famine, and Catholics were still recovering from the effects of the

Penal days. Among others, the superior of the Jesuits in Ireland, Fr John Curtis, had told him there was no hope for the university. Likewise Bishop Ryan of Limerick warned him that the enterprise would fail, since it lacked government support.

In addition, Archbishop Cullen constantly criticised him, and failed to answer important letters, leaving his rector in the dark. The great nationalistic Archbishop McHale of Tuam, already in conflict with the Roman-minded and authoritarian Cullen, was stubbornly against the venture, fearing it would be largely an English institution. Newman unwittingly was caught in the middle of the skirmishes between these two formidable figures.

But still he bravely went ahead. He was very happy when his University Church was opened. His sermons there, as published, are of very

high quality. The Medical School was particularly successful, as was the journal *Atlantis*. The innovatory evening classes, for many students who could not come during the day, were eventually very popular. Then in the end, worn out and disillusioned with the clerical control being exercised – and with many pressing issues facing him in England – Newman gave up the rectorship, returning home in November 1858. Later, the Jesuits would have charge of it, and in time it would evolve into University College Dublin as we know today.

What stands out from those Dublin years? Above all, his lectures there, as later collected in the volume entitled

The Idea of a University, remain a wonderful classical account of what good education should mean – and not just for third level students but for any of us. While Newman could see how education must be useful (in gaining qualifications etc.), nevertheless he saw how our minds are enriched and fulfilled by what is beyond utilitarian knowledge. True education only occurs when in a sense we gain wisdom – when we acquire some learned understanding of life itself, in its various aspects, and when we can perceive also what is our destiny under God. Newman saw this and preached and spoke of it his whole life long. He still speaks to us today. ♡

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