

19th Sunday, Father of Faith

Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of the realities that at present remain unseen. What realities? Grace, angels, heaven. It was for faith that our ancestors were commended. Which one? Abraham. He was called in his eighties to do God's will. We are never too old to comply with God. Abraham was called and great promises were made: his children would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Yet, he was in his nineties and still childless, till finally Isaac was conceived. God works in a diverse time zone to ours. His vast family would come, after his death, and we are that family. Abraham is called our father of faith. Which faith? Abraham is the founder of ½ the planet's population, 4 billion people: Jews, Christians, Muslims. Recall that Abraham is of Jewish stock. Jesus came as their Messiah. All Jews were meant to become Christians. Islam is a mix of Jewish, Christian and Arabic beliefs. We Catholic have the fullness of faith today. That same faith that inspired St Mary of the Cross MacKillop at the request of Bishop Torreggiani to send sisters to twelve foundations in this diocese 140 years ago. One such place was Hillgrove, not far from here. Not much is left there today and likewise not much is left of the faith among our generation today. How are we going as stewards of faith? Have we passed on what we have received? When a man has had a great deal given him, a great deal will be demanded of him; when a man has had a great deal given him on trust, even more will be expected of him.'

How best can we pass on our faith? One person who can inspire us is St John Henry Newman, the greatest Catholic English intellect in the last five hundred years. A few days ago Pope Leo declared that he is to become the 38th Doctor of the Church. Who was he? John Henry Newman was born in 1801, and was a member of the Anglican Church, becoming a minister in 1825. He was a leader of the Oxford Movement, which sought to align the Church of England with its Catholic roots, and led to the formation of the so-called Anglo-Catholic wing of the Anglican Communion. He became a member of the Catholic Church in 1845, and was later ordained a Catholic priest. Pope Leo XIII made him a cardinal in 1879. He died in 1890, and was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010 and Pope Francis canonised him in 2019. After his canonisation, the bishops' conference of England and Wales formally petitioned the Pope to name him a Doctor of the Church. A Doctor of the Church is a title given by a Pope to a saint recognised as having made a significant contribution to theology or doctrine. Newman was noted for his teachings on conscience and doctrinal development. He is mentioned several times in the Catechism of the Catholic Church for his explanation of how the faith organically grows and develops.

Let me explain that via dogmas and doctrines. The roots of our faith are enshrined in dogmas – short pithy statements in the Creed, Scriptures, Church Fathers. Take for example, when Jesus said: "the Father and I are one" (John 10:30). What does it mean? That Jesus is God, like the Father. But how? Jesus had an earthly Mother Mary, God the Father has no physical body. Now, it took the Church six centuries and numerous Councils to nut out the correct language of the Trinity concerning nature, person, substance, hypostatic union. Today, all Christians belief in this doctrine: that God exists as three diverse Persons with a divine Nature. And that the Son of the Father, assumed a human nature from the B.V.M and became God and Man while remaining a divine Person. This is the development of doctrine that Newman so well explained in his writings. Over time, dogmas often theologically unravel or unwind themselves with the guidance of the Church into doctrines. Be it transubstantiation the doctrine to explain the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, or the doctrine on original sin to explain temporal and eternal punishment, or the doctrine on celestial beings to explain the existence of angels. Later this week, on Friday, we celebrate one of four dogmas about Our Lady – her bodily Assumption into heaven at the end of her life. This dogma is ancient and gradually developed over time till Pope Pius XII finally provided us with a doctrinal statement in 1950. So we ask her with the saints, Maximilian Kolbe and John Newman to help us to keep the faith and pass it on so that where she has gone, we hope to follow.

19th Sunday, Father of Faith