

“What advice would St. Maria or St. Newman give to students living in today’s world?”

Saint John Henry Newman would advise students living in today’s world to pursue an education guided by an appreciation of the Sacred so that their truly virtuous character may enhance society.

Primarily, the nine discourses that St. Newman prepared or delivered in Dublin considering the purpose of a university education, and later compiled in *The Idea of a University*, provide valuable insight in approaching the question and suggesting an answer; however, there is a certain risk of abandoning a delicate nuance in extracting from St. Newman’s discourses the notion that his proposed aim of a University may be translated correspondingly to the thesis-professed advice for a student’s self-disciplined pursuit of knowledge; hence, an entrustment upon the reader’s deliberation – that of the compatibility of the principles which guide a University to those which guide its students – must be made.

Although, St. Newman’s writings do guide the reader’s consideration. The most direct commentary, arguably, for this compatibility is found in the preface to his fifth discourse, “Knowledge Its Own End,” when St. Newman says, “A UNIVERSITY may be considered with reference either to its Students or to its Studies; and the principle, that all Knowledge is a whole and the separate Sciences parts of one, which I have hitherto been using in behalf of its studies, is equally important when we direct our attention to its students” (Discourse V, Preface).

Furthermore, a contextualization of the world St. Newman experienced in relation to the world of today is necessary to honor the intricacies of St. Newman’s original assertions while theorizing the advice that he would give students living in today’s world. In 1852, when St. Newman engaged himself with these discourses, he saw, much like today, a world where the availability of intellectual recreations had expanded rapidly. In the fourth chapter of his discourse VIII, “Knowledge Viewed in Relation to Religion,” St. Newman notes the potential advantage this expansion has toward students’ modesty. “Cheap literature, libraries of useful and entertaining knowledge, scientific lectureships, museums, zoological collections, buildings and gardens to please the eye and to give repose to the feelings, external objects of whatever kind, which may take the mind off itself, and expand and elevate it in liberal contemplations, these are the human means, wisely suggested, and good as far as they go, for at least parrying the assaults of moral evil, and keeping at bay the enemies, not only of the individual soul, but of society at large” (Discourse VIII, Ch. 4). Today’s world is, in large part due to the expansion of technology, and not uniquely but more potently, fraught with engagements of the mind which lack the benefit of “liberal contemplations,” so students must heighten their diligence and guard their minds.

St. Newman also saw the context by which information was shared shift from formal education into the realm of literature. “The authority, which in former times was lodged in Universities, now resides in very great measure in that literary world,” St. Newman said. “This is not satisfactory, if, as no one can deny, its teaching be so offhand, so ambitious, so changeable. It increases the seriousness of the mischief, that so very large a portion of its writers . . . can give no better guarantee for the philosophical truth of their principles than their popularity at the moment, and their happy conformity in ethical character to the age which admires them” (Preface). Literature’s prolificacy, however, unlike the distribution of information, was restricted, although less so than by the Universities of the time, by publication and market demand. Yet today, the internet has acquired near domination over the realm and made information as accessible as erroneous. St. Newman saw a world, in likeness of form to today’s but not milder of severity, where students faced treacherous impediments to their erudition. St. Newman would

advise students of today's world to uphold their intellectual integrity, to seek information exempt from the abuses of today's world; he would advise them to aim for that which is beyond the mere evasion of evil, that which is good in its own end formed by an awareness of that which is higher.

St. Newman encapsulates this aim when he characterizes the epitomical student's intellectual determination and says, "He apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little, as he otherwise cannot apprehend them. . . . A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom" (Discourse V, Ch. 1). This student, St. Newman argues, is the exemplar of intellectual determination, but this student's aim should not be his blind compulsion in life. In chapter eight of his sixth discourse, "Knowledge Viewed in Relation to Learning," St. Newman stresses that "Education is a high word; it is the preparation for knowledge, and it is the imparting of knowledge in proportion to that preparation" (Discourse VI, Ch. 8). He stresses that an appreciation of the sacred properly imparts this "preparation for knowledge," and he warns of the dangers posed by a lack of this sacred appreciation; he exchanges the epitomical student's triumphs with his faults. "We find these men possessed of many virtues, but proud, bashful, fastidious, and reserved. . . . it is because conscience to them is not the word of a lawgiver, as it ought to be, but the dictate of their own minds and nothing more; it is because they do not look out of themselves, because they do not look through and beyond their own minds to their Maker" (Discourse VIII, Ch. 5). St. Newman reminds of the limitations of secular knowledge; he would advise students of today's world that an appreciation of sacred principles must, in avoidance of facile morality, guide the acquisition of knowledge.

The student must be especially careful, as well, to not let his or her quality of intellect be the foundation upon which his or her virtue lies, and St. Newman advises of the proclivity of the worldly intellect to interfere with, to obscure, to violate the student's submission to the Supreme. St. Newman writes, "the ordinary sin of the Intellect; conscience tends to become what is called a moral sense; the command of duty is a sort of taste; sin is not an offence against God, but against human nature" (Discourse VIII, Ch. 5). The Intellect, he writes, is deficient because "It does not supply religious motives; it is not the cause or proper antecedent of any thing supernatural; it is not meritorious of heavenly aid or reward" (Discourse VIII, Ch. 3). St. Newman then outlines the solution; he writes, "I say then, if we would improve the intellect, first of all, we must ascend; we cannot gain real knowledge on a level; we must generalize, we must reduce to method, we must have a grasp of principles, and group and shape our acquisitions by means of them. . . . in every case, to command it, is to mount above it. . . . In like manner, you must be above your knowledge, not under it, or it will oppress you; and the more you have of it, the greater will be the load.

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Mole ruit suâ'*

(Discourse VI, Ch. 7).

Perhaps it is fair to assert, by now, dear reader, that the university aims that St. Newman described may tolerably suggest the student's aims. The student, as analogous to the University, may benefit from education of the intellect, "But a University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end;" St. Newman says in chapter ten of his seventh discourse, "Knowledge Viewed in Relation to Professional Skill." He continues; "it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving

enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life” (Discourse VII, Ch. 10). Though, St. Newman objects in the eighth chapter of discourse IX, “Duties of the Church towards Knowledge,” the social privileges afforded to an educated individual and society are valuable but transitory. “Will it be much matter in the world to come whether our bodily health or whether our intellectual strength was more or less, except of course as this world is in all its circumstances a trial for the next?” Newman said. (Discourse IX, Ch. 8).

Saint John Henry Newman would advise students that social enhancement through intellectual advancement is a meritorious and necessary aim, but this aim should be supplementary, not predominant, to the Divine.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
on your own intelligence do not rely;”

(The New American Bible, revised edition, 2010, Prov. 3:5)

Works Cited

The New American Bible, revised edition. 2010. Catholic Book Publishing Corp.

Newman, John Henry. "The Idea of a University." *The Newman Reader*, Sept. 2001, Accessed Feb. 2024.