

**Father Hermann Geissler is a member of the Spiritual Family "The Work" (*L'Opera*).** He has published numerous contributions on the life, spirituality, and theology of Saint John Henry Newman. He is also the director of the International Centre of Newman Friends in Rome and a lecturer at various theological institutes in Italy (including the Ratzinger Chair of the Pontifical Theological Faculty of Central Italy in Florence) and in Austria. He has known Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, since his years at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

**1) St. J. H. Newman, the new Doctor of the Universal Church, can also be informally defined as the 'Doctor of Conscience'. *Praise of Conscience* is also a well-known text by Joseph Ratzinger in which the theologian makes his references clear; however, it was not the first time that, since his days as a student and professor, he cited Newman in his written texts. How do you reflect on the importance of reflecting on the theme of conscience in our day, and why is it so necessary in the writings and thought of Benedict XVI?**

Conscience plays a central role in the thought of the holy Doctor of the Church, John Henry Newman, and in the theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI. Contrary to the widespread opinion today, neither understands conscience simply as one's own opinion, one's own feeling, or one's own will. Following one's conscience—according to Newman and Ratzinger—does not mean doing what I want, but doing what God wants, to the extent that I have recognized it.

Conscience is not the voice of the self, but the echo of the voice of God, the advocate of truth in my heart. Conscience is the interior orientation towards the true, the good, towards God. Naturally, it is important to listen to one's conscience and learn to distinguish it from other voices. A willingness to follow the quiet voice of conscience step by step is required. And it is indispensable to *form* one's conscience: often this voice is quiet, it can easily be distorted, and it is exposed to many influences. Good examples, the voice of Revelation, the Magisterium of the Church, and the Word of God—which is Jesus Christ in person—are irreplaceable aids for believers.

**2) What common themes or analogies are evident between the two scholars in philosophy and theology?**

Newman and Ratzinger are witnesses of conscience because they are witnesses of truth. Both constantly sought the truth, proclaimed it, and also suffered for it. Because they were rooted in the truth, in Jesus Christ, they were also men of dialogue: capable of reaching out to others and entering into public debate. They show us that people of truth are not afraid of confrontation.

Both also knew that truth is inseparably linked to love, which can only convince when word and life agree with one another and the truth of the faith manifests itself in works of charity. Indeed: "God is love" (1 John 4:16).

This God definitively showed us His face in Christ, revealed His heart, and, in Baptism, made us new men, children of God. Until the end of time, God remains present in His Church. Therefore, God, Christ, the Church, and the new dignity of man as a child of God cannot be separated from one another.

**3) How did Joseph Ratzinger discover J. H. Newman, and how does he recur within his horizons of thought?**

Joseph Ratzinger entered the seminary in Freising in 1946. There, three personalities brought him into contact with Newman. First, Alfred Läpple, who was assigned to him as a prefect in the seminary and was working on a dissertation on conscience in Newman. Through Läpple, Ratzinger became

acquainted with the personalism of John Henry Newman: for him, it was liberating to know that the "we" of the Church was not founded on the annulment of conscience (as in the Nazi dictatorship), but that, on the contrary, it could develop only starting from conscience.

Shortly thereafter, the young seminarian met a second Newman expert. When he continued his studies in Munich in 1947, he found in Professor Gottlieb Söhngen an enthusiastic follower of Newman, who introduced him to the particular mode and form of certainty regarding religious knowledge.

Some years later, he was deeply struck by a scholarly contribution by Professor Heinrich Fries, which opened access for him to Newman's doctrine on the development of Christian doctrine.

Conscience, certainty of faith, and development: these three categories of Newman's theology found fertile ground and a lively resonance in the thought of Joseph Ratzinger.

**4) Newman laments the "customs" of his times, just as Benedict XVI would later call "relativism" the intrinsic evil of this era. When Newman was created cardinal in 1879, he gave a famous speech in which, looking back on his life, he said he had fought for 30, 40, 50 years against a fundamental evil that threatened the whole Church: liberalism in religion. What did he mean? The idea that religion is not a matter of truth, but of sentiment, of taste, of opinion. The idea that religion is something purely subjective, devoid of objective and public character. This conception, which Benedict XVI described with the term "relativism," has today become the spirit of the times.**

**5) Regarding the International Association of Newman Friends and Joseph Ratzinger: How was this bond of research and spiritual and intellectual communion born and how did it evolve?** Joseph Ratzinger visited the International Centre of Newman Friends as early as 1975, when, following a first congress on Newman in Rome, it was founded by members of the spiritual family "The Work" (*Das Werk*). When he was named Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1982 and moved to Rome, he became a friend of "The Work" and the Newman Centre. He visited often, gave lectures on Newman, and celebrated liturgies in memory of Newman. He became a true friend of Newman, also because he considered Newman's thought and work extremely important for our time. It was, therefore, a particular joy for him to be able to beatify Newman in 2010.

**6) The theme of conversion, already so present in Augustine, returns predominantly in Newman. In your opinion, can this example of a lived life be one of the reasons for Joseph Ratzinger's great admiration and interest in Newman, making him spiritually and temperamentally close to him? Can one assume that they shared the vision of a continuous journey in search of truth within a widening of the horizons of reason?** Newman was convinced that growth is a sign of life. If something no longer grows and matures, it is in danger of stiffening or dying. Conversion, growth, and development point to a living bond with the Lord. Undoubtedly, this is an aspect that unites Augustine, Newman, and Ratzinger. To remain faithful to oneself—according to God's plan—constant conversion and a continuous orientation towards the true, the authentic, and the good are necessary. One can also say that the path to holiness, to which all men are called, consists in this.

**7) Choose a quote by Joseph Ratzinger that could be shared by St. J.H. Newman.** In a Christmas homily, Pope Benedict XVI said: "God is so great that He can become small. God is so powerful that He can make Himself helpless and come to meet us as a defenseless child, so that we can love Him. God is so good that He gives up His divine splendor and comes down into the stable, so that we can find Him, and so that His goodness might touch us too, infect us, and work through us." These words

could also come from Newman, who saw in the Incarnation, in God becoming man, the core of the Christian faith.

**8) A customary question: Which texts or speeches do you recommend rediscovering and studying regarding Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI?** I recommend that all interested parties start with one of Joseph Ratzinger's interview books, preferably the work *The Ratzinger Report* (Italian title: *Rapporto sulla fede*). A good and simple introduction to his thought and his faith is offered by his profound homilies, which are easily understandable and spiritually very stimulating. The three encyclicals on love (*Deus caritas est*), on hope (*Spe salvi*), and on faith (*Lumen fidei*, published by Pope Francis but largely drafted by Benedict XVI) are also suitable as introductory reading. For further study, I refer theologians to *Introduction to Christianity*; those seeking a strengthening of faith in Christ to the trilogy on *Jesus of Nazareth*; and those interested in cultural questions to the great speeches Benedict XVI gave in Regensburg, Paris, Rome, London, and Berlin.\* At the same time, I wish to emphasize that all of Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI's texts can be read with great profit.

**9) You knew Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI since he was a Cardinal working at the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. How do you remember his work there? What personal memory can you share with us?** Cardinal Ratzinger strongly promoted collaboration, dialogue, and respect towards everyone. It is no coincidence that he chose the words "Cooperatores veritatis" (Co-workers of the truth) as the motto of his episcopal and papal service. He knew that the truth can be found, believed, and transmitted only together. A condition for this "togetherness" is humility.

In this regard, I remember my first personal interview with Cardinal Ratzinger, when I started working at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at age 28. I was nervous, but he put his hand on my shoulder and said: "Father Hermann, if you are now working at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, do not forget to remain simple and humble. Then the work will go well."

Benedict XVI was a humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord. The combination of brilliant talent, profound faith, and great humility constituted his greatness and his holiness.