

**“Cor ad cor loquitur: Heart speaks unto heart.”**

In the wake of the recent announcement of Our Holy Father, Pope Leo, it seemed fitting to round off our series of sermons on prayer with a look at the motto of the latest saint to be declared a Doctor of the Church.

St John Henry Newman's motto, *Cor ad cor loquitur*: 'Heart speaks unto heart,' is perhaps one of the most well-known things about him. After he became a Catholic in 1845, he became a member of the Congregation of the Oratory founded by St Philip Neri in the sixteenth century. One of St Philip's mystical experiences was to influence St John Henry profoundly.

As St Philip was praying in the catacomb of San Sebastiano on the eve of the feast of Pentecost in 1544, the Holy Spirit in the form of a ball of flames appeared to him and entered his mouth and descended to his heart. The sudden expansion of his heart broke two of his ribs, even though it left him without pain. This infusion of the love of God caused physical palpitations and a warmth so heated that even in the coldest of Roman winters the saint would walk around with his cassock unbuttoned. There were times when the intensity of this fire of God's love in his breast caused St Philip to fall to the ground shouting, *Basta!* *Basta!* – “Enough! Enough!”

Unfortunately St Philip left almost no writings, but St Francis de Sales, an Oratorian before becoming Bishop of Geneva, was so imbued with the spirit of St Philip that his writings very much convey St Philip's thought and spirituality. In his *Treatise on the Love of God*, St Francis wrote extensively on prayer, describing it as the chief way in which we come to love God as well as being the principal expression of our love of God. For St Francis, prayer is a lived contemplation of God, and – taking his lead from the *Song of Songs*

– he considered prayer to be a whispered conversation as between lovers, between the soul and her God, a conversation made up not only of words but of our daily activities also. In just one chapter St Francis uses the phrase, “heart speaks unto heart” (or its equivalent: see *The Love of God: A Treatise*, Bk 6, chap. I) at least four times, emphasizing that prayer is at its most profound and intimate whenever we approach Our Lord in the privacy of our hearts.

It is from St Philip’s mystical experience in the catacomb, and from these writings of St Francis, that Newman took his motto: “Heart speaks unto heart.”

For Newman, public acts of worship are the primary form of prayer because it is through the Church’s own rites that we are initiated into the Mystical Body of Christ. Our Lord has bestowed His blessings upon the Church, into which members are admitted through Baptism: the Church does not depend upon the individual member, rather the individual member depends upon – and grows closer to Christ in – the Church. Since the Church mediates and applies the blessings of Christ to the individual through the sacraments, then, says Newman, public prayer precedes private.

Nor is prayer chiefly a matter of feelings, for whilst emotions will occasionally break through into prayer, prayer itself is principally an act of the will uniting heart and mind to God. Far from heightened emotions being an indication of earnestness in prayer, one of the purposes of formal prayer is, Newman writes, “to still emotion, to calm us, to remind us what and where we are, to lead us to a serener and purer temper, and to that deep unruffled love of God and man, which is really the fulfilling of the law and the perfection of human nature,” (PPS, I, Sermon 20, ‘Forms of Private Prayer’)

In addition to the Church’s acts of worship – but never instead of them – Newman practised a type of prayer that he referred to as “holding communion with God, or living in God’s sight,” (PPS, VII, Sermon 15, ‘Mental Prayer’) and which we might call, ‘living in the presence of God,’ something which can be done at all times and in all places.

Newman adds that a man of prayer, “Sees God in all things... [E]very occurrence of the day, every event, every person met with, all news which he hears, he measures by the standard of God’s will.” Such a person, he goes on, “may be said almost literally to pray without ceasing,” as St Paul teaches we should (1 Thess 5:17), “so placing God’s presence and will before [him], and so consistently acting with reference to [God],” that he witnesses “without ceasing” to the God who made him, and whose servant he is.

Perhaps none of us can practise this continuously and perfectly, but that simply means we are not perfect yet. Nevertheless, it is this habit of prayer, this continually living in the presence of God, that enables us to live and grow in grace, and in the knowledge and love of our Saviour “who alone,” writes Newman, “lived in the perfection of unceasing prayer.”

Whilst it is indeed the depth and truth of Newman’s writings that have led him to be named a Doctor of the Church, it was his being conformed into a likeness of Christ through his continual habit of *practising the presence of God* that made him a saint!

Saint John Henry Newman, pray for us.