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In his saintly patience, John Henry Cardinal Newman lifts up the Church's people

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Michael W. Higgins is the distinguished professor of Catholic thought at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Conn., a senior fellow at Massey College, and a former president of two Canadian universities. His most recent books are the co-authored. *Introducing John Moriarty in His Own Words* and *Impressively Free: Henri Nouwen as a Model for a Reformed Priesthood*.

This Oct. 13, John Henry Cardinal Newman will be made a saint. It's about time.

A Victorian of immense productivity in a generation of prolific high-achievers, Newman is of special significance at this moment for two reasons: his championing of the role of the laity in Catholicism, and his penetrating insights into the nature of the university and the liberal arts.

On the laity, Newman provided sound historical evidence for their necessity in church life. In one exchange, an obtuse English prelate, William Ullathorne – Newman's bishop, no less – asked, "Who are the laity?" Newman responded that "the church would look foolish without them." A strenuous advocate for the multivalent role of the laity, Newman earned for himself the anxious scrutiny of the Roman authorities, already suspicious of the famous Anglican convert's intentions and dangerously un-Roman sensibility.

Newman was no church rebel, hell-bent on upending centuries of tradition; his celebration of the gifts of the laity was in no way inspired by a closeted anticlericalism. Newman was a dutiful servant of the church, but he understood that if the laity's intellectual gifts and spiritual wisdom went unrecognized, it would result in their marginalization, reducing their faith to either superstition or indifference.

For these reasons, he defended Richard Simpson, the beleaguered editor of *The Rambler*, an independent lay-run publication of liberal view. He worked arduously to ensure that the university he was invited to establish in Dublin was clear of hierarchical interference. He promoted forthright debate around all matters theological.

No wonder Rome distrusted him. His English adversary in the Vatican, one Monsignor Talbot, was relentless in poisoning Newman's reputation, and for decades, Newman lived in the shadow of Rome's displeasure. On the election of Pope Leo XIII in 1878, though, things began to turn in his favour: He was created a cardinal and thereby rehabilitated in the eyes of most of his critics. Monsignor Talbot, meanwhile, was consigned to a madhouse.

Newman's scholarly argument for an engaged laity – although theological in its origins – was tied to his attachment to the university and all that it means. In a three-volume work on university education – *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education Addressed to the Catholics of Dublin; Office and Works of Universities; Lectures and Essays on University Subjects* – Newman articulates a point of view around the searching mind and its ideal setting for effective flourishing that has a perduring quality about it, irrespective its mid-Victorian Oxbridge social and cultural constraints.

Today, the liberal arts – the humanities and the social sciences – are under siege for their perceived irrelevance, their lack of any kind of measurable utility and revenue-generating potential. The ever-rising

tuition costs, reduced government financial support and accelerating pressures for productivity driven by commerce and industry all combine to make the perfect storm around the continued credibility of liberal arts. Why do we need the liberal arts at all, when they are simply decorative, impractical and outcomes-deficient?

Universities bravely soldier on, advancing arguments for the liberal arts that have the patina of conviction but, on closer inspection, betray a wavering belief. Quite simply, universities as sanctuaries of the mind – requiring no justification beyond their commitment to intellectual disinterestedness – have been replaced by laboratories of measurable productivity. There is, of course, a place for both paradigms, but the balance has been skewered by an unimaginative pragmatism and by the social and economic pressures for immediate results.

Newman understood the university to have as its primary function “to open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know – to give it power over its own faculties, application, method, critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression.” There is much in the modern university that conforms to this definition. But Newman added the personal and pastoral component to university living with its strong emphasis on human interaction so that the university remains not a recruitment centre but “an Alma mater, knowing her children one by one, not a foundry, or a mint, or a treadmill.”

Given that universities are currently struggling with the new and aggressive challenges contemporary undergraduates face as they arrive in a new setting – the disconnection they feel as a consequence of their crippling dependence on social media, whereby communication is ubiquitous but human communion non-existent – is only one of the obstacles they face, underscores the urgency around recapturing something of Newman’s pastoral understanding of university life.

If the academy is not to become “an arctic winter ... an ice-bound, petrified, cast-iron university,” then we must attend to its human composition. That is easier said than done. The bucolic setting of an Oxford college in Newman’s 19th-century England is not our reality. But something of his deep understanding of the university as a place for integrated human growth needs to be prioritized.

Newman is a liberator: freeing the laity to be itself in a time of clerical dissolution and freeing the university to fulfill its ancient mandate to love learning for its own sake. Few canonizations are more timely and urgent than his.