

Newman and Four Leos

On 1 November 2025, Pope Leo XIV declared Saint John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801-1890) a Doctor of the Universal Church. Many have noted that it was another Pope Leo, Leo XIII, who created Newman a Cardinal in 1879. In fact, Leo XIV is the fourth Pope of that name to have had a place in the life and legacy of Cardinal Newman.

Pope Saint Paul VI wrote in 1963 that "Newman ... guided solely by love of the truth and fidelity to Christ, traced an itinerary, the most toilsome, but also the greatest, the most meaningful, the most conclusive, that human thought ever travelled during the last century, indeed one might say during the modern era, to arrive at the fulness of wisdom and of peace." [1]

Consider the four Popes Leo in order of their appearance in Newman's journey of faith and witness.

Pope Leo XII

Leo XII was Pope from 1823 to 1829 when John Henry Newman was in his 20s.

Newman was brought up to take great delight in reading the Bible, but formed no firm religious convictions until the age of 15. [2] It was then that he experienced his first religious conversion under the influence of an Anglican clergyman who held Calvinist beliefs, and read two works that made a deep impression, implanting "the seeds of an intellectual inconsistency" that disabled him for many years:

I read Joseph Milner's *Church History*, and was nothing short of enamoured of the long extracts from St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and the other Fathers which I found there ... but simultaneously with Milner I read Newton, *On the Prophecies*, and in consequence became most firmly convinced that the Pope was the Antichrist predicted by Daniel, St. Paul, and St. John. [3]

Newman attended Oxford, was named a Fellow of Oriel College in 1822, and determined to enter the ministry. He was ordained a Deacon in 1824, and an Anglican priest in May of 1825.

He said later that when he was young, and after he was grown up, he had thought the Pope to be Antichrist. "At Christmas 1824-5 I preached a sermon to that effect ... From my boyhood and in 1824 I considered, after

Protestant authorities, that St. Gregory I. about A.D. 600 was the first Pope that was Antichrist" [4] In a sermon on idolatry in January 1826 he preached:

Am I speaking of things of a past day? alas they still exist, and though (thank be God) our church has been thus through grace cleansed of these enormities, this country itself was once partaker in the sin—That grand apostasy under the governance of the Bishop of Rome, survives—it is the Romish church, which has done all this wickedness, and still reigns in its polluted power in foreign countries, where are to be seen crowds kneeling before painted images, and singing praises to supposed saints.—Individuals indeed in that communion are often good and pious men, who partake not of the general sin—yet *as a church*, we must consider it as antichristian and the friend of Satan ... [5]

Thus Pope Leo XII was to Newman just another Bishop of Rome overseeing the "grand apostasy," and marks an early, anti-Catholic, stage in Newman's "toilsome" itinerary of which Saint Paul VI wrote.

Pope Leo I (the Great) (440-461)

The other influence Newman received upon his first conversion, readings from the early Church Fathers, after many years, led him into the Catholic Church.

In 1828 he began to read their works "with attention and on system" and:

... when I had thus proceeded very carefully and minutely for some space of time, I found, on looking back on what I had done, that I had scarcely done anything at all; I found that I had gained very little from them, and I came to the conclusion that the Fathers I had been reading, which were exclusively those of the ante-Nicene period, had very little in them ... I had read them simply on Protestant ideas, analysed and catalogued them on Protestant principles of division, and hunted for Protestant doctrines and usages in them ... I knew not what to look for in them; I sought what was not there, I missed what was there; I laboured through the night and caught nothing. [6]

But he persevered in his reading, and others became aware of his interest. In 1831 he wrote to his mother:

I have today received a very valuable present of books from many of my new friends and pupils, consisting of thirty-six volumes of the Fathers—among these are the works of Austin, Athanasius, Cyril Alexandrinus, Epiphanius, Gregory Nyssen, Origen, Basil, Ambrose, and Irenæus ... Altogether now I am set up in the Patristical line—should I be blessed with health and ability to make use of them. [7]

He was invited to write a history of the early Church councils for a Theological Library, but ended up writing about the Council of Nicæa, Arius, and St Athanasius, in his first book, *Arians of the Fourth Century*, published in 1833.

Newman continued his reading in early Church history, seeking to defend the position of the Anglican Church as a middle way between Protestantism and Rome. But in reading about **St Leo the Great** he experienced his first doubt about the tenableness of Anglicanism. In a letter to Mrs. William Froude, in 1844, he recalled:

In the summer of 1839, I was led in the course of my regular reading ... to the Monophysite controversy, and to the Council of Chalcedon and **St Leo's works** inclusively ... Eutyches was condemned then, who said there was but one nature in Our Lord ... I found the Eastern Church under the superintendence (as I may call it) of **Pope Leo**. I found that he had made the Fathers of the Council unsay their decree and pass another, so that (humanly speaking) we owe it to **Pope Leo** at this day that the Catholic Church holds the true doctrine. I found that **Pope Leo** based his authority upon St Peter. I found the Fathers of the Council crying out 'Peter hath spoken by the mouth of **Leo**', when they altered their decree. [8]

Later in 1839 he received "a second hit" when his attention was called to an article on St Augustine and the Donatist schism. [9]

Newman wrote to his friend John Keble in 1843:

In June and July 1839, near four years ago, I read the Monophysite Controversy, and it made a deep impression on me, which I was not able to shake off, that the Pope had a certain gift of infallibility, and that communion with the see of

Rome was the divinely intended means of grace and illumination. [[10](#)]

After much further prayer and study, he came to a decision:

What was the use of continuing the controversy, or defending my position, if, after all, I was but forging arguments for Arius or Eutyches, and turning devil's advocate against the much-enduring Athanasius and **the majestic Leo**? Be my soul with the Saints! [[11](#)]

Newman was received on 9 October 1845, was ordained a Catholic Priest in Rome in 1847, and founded the first Oratory of St Philip Neri in England in 1848.

Father Newman ended a series of lectures in 1850 with the following prayer:

... may the Eternal God, Father, Son, and Spirit, Three in One, may His Ever-blessed Mother, may St. Philip, my dear father and master, the great Saints Athanasius and Ambrose, and **St. Leo, pope and confessor**, who have brought me thus far, be the hope, and help, and reward of you and me, all through this weary life, and in the day of account, and in glory everlasting! [[12](#)]

Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903)

After thirty years of life as a Catholic, Father Newman wrote in 1875:

Persons and places, incidents and circumstances of life, which belong to my first forty-four years, are deeply lodged in my memory and my affections; moreover, I have had more to try and afflict me in various ways as a Catholic than as an Anglican; but never for a moment have I wished myself back; never have I ceased to thank my Maker for His mercy in enabling me to make the great change, and never has He let me feel forsaken by Him, or in distress, or any kind of religious trouble. [[13](#)]

Pope **Leo XIII** was elected Pope 20 February, 1878, and chose John Henry Newman as his first Cardinal. Father Newman received the official offer of the Cardinalate through Cardinal Nina in a letter dated 15 March 1879:

Very Rev. Father,

The Holy Father deeply appreciating the genius and learning which distinguish you, your piety, the zeal displayed by you in the exercise of the Holy Ministry, your devotion and filial attachment to the Holy Apostolic See, and the signal services you have for long years rendered to religion, has decided on giving you a public and solemn proof of his esteem and goodwill. And to this end he will deign to raise you to the honours of the Sacred Purple, in the next Consistory ... [\[14\]](#)

Newman replied to Cardinal Nina on 20 March:

I am overpowered, first of all, by the weight of the high dignity to which the Holy Father deigns to raise me, and still more by the words he has used to announce to me his intention, words breathing a goodness so fatherly, and implying an approval the more touching and precious that it is the Vicar of Christ who awards it. [\[14\]](#)

Father Newman had written to R W Church, after having received advance notice of the Cardinalate, on 11 March:

I did not like to write to you till I had something like official notice of my promotion. This comes within this half hour. Yet not so much official as personal, being a most gracious message from the Pope to me ... all the stories which have gone about of my being a half Catholic, a liberal Catholic, under a cloud, not to be trusted, are now at an end ... I have ever tried to leave my cause in the Hands of God and to be patient—and He has not forgotten me. [\[15\]](#)

Writing of Cardinal Newman's last years, Newman biographer Wilfrid Ward reported: "The Cardinal preached for the last time on January 1, 1888, at the celebration of the sacerdotal Jubilee of **Leo XIII** ... 'In conclusion,' so runs the newspaper report of the sermon, 'the Cardinal thanked God, as for one of the special blessings of his life, that he was allowed to stand there and say a few words that day, and that by the special favour of God he had lived thus long to see such a man.'" [\[16\]](#)

Pope Leo XIV (2025-)

After Newman's canonization on 13 October 2019, many requests were

submitted to the Holy See asking that Saint Newman be granted the title of Doctor of the Universal Church. In response to these requests, Pope Francis authorized the necessary investigatory process on 23 May 2024. On 31 July 2025, the Holy See Press Office reported that during an audience granted to Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, Pope **Leo XIV** "confirmed the affirmative opinion of the Plenary Session of Cardinals and Bishops, Members of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, regarding the title of Doctor of the Universal Church, which will soon be conferred on Saint John Henry Newman." [[17](#), [18](#)]

In a homily for All Saints Day, 1 November, **Pope Leo** announced:

.. it is a great joy to include Saint John Henry Newman among the Doctors of the Church, and, at the same time, on the occasion of the Jubilee of the World of Education, to name him, together with Saint Thomas Aquinas, as co-Patron of the Church's educational mission. Newman's impressive spiritual and cultural stature will surely serve as an inspiration to new generations whose hearts thirst for the infinite ... [[19](#)]

References

1. Pope Paul VI, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. 55, 1963, pp 1024-1025
2. *Apologia*, p 1
3. *Apologia*, pp 6-7
4. *Apologia*, p 52
5. *John Henry Newman, Sermons, 1824-1843, Volume V*, Edited by Francis J McGrath, FMS, 2012, sermon 79 no. 133, p 384
6. *Anglican Difficulties, Volume 1*, Lecture 12, p 370-371
7. *Letters and Diaries, Volume 2*, Jan 1827 to Dec 1831, p 369
8. *Letters and Diaries, Volume 10*, Nov 1843 to 6 Oct 1845, pp 196-197
9. *Anglican Difficulties, Volume 1*, Lecture 12, pp 387-388
10. *Letters and Diaries, Volume 9*, May 1842 to Oct 1843, p 328
11. *Anglican Difficulties, Volume 1*, Lecture 12, pp 387-388
12. *Anglican Difficulties, Volume 1*, Lecture 12, p 400
13. *Anglican Difficulties, Volume 2*, Postscript, p 349
14. *Letters and Diaries, Volume 29*, The Cardinalate, pp 85-86 (both Nina's letter and Fr Newman's reply)
15. *Letters and Diaries, Volume 29*, Jan 1879 to Sep 1881, p 72

16. *Life of Cardinal Newman, Volume 2*, Wilfrid Ward, pp 529-530
17. Report of the Dicastery for Causes of Saints on Newman as Saint and Doctor, 2025
18. "St John Henry Newman set to become newest Doctor of the Church,"
19. Holy Mass and Proclamation of St John Henry Newman as "Doctor of the Church," Homily for All Saints' Day, Saint Peter's Square, 1 November 2025

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