The Cerdagna plateau in the Catalan Pyrenees has villages with Romanesque churches that are as solid and dark as a churchyard.

Those who celebrate baptism there can easily link the sacrament of faith with the universal vocation to holiness affirmed by Jesus Christ: "Be holy as I am holy" (Luke 11:44). This is a vocation that all Christian believers are called to fulfill.

Thus, from generation to generation, a "middle class of holiness" is formed.

The sculptors of the retablos anticipated with their imagination what, three centuries later, the Magisterium of the Church has defined as the "new Evangelization". Metaphors and liturgical celebrations often poetically foretell the necessary precision of canonical dogmatic formulas.

John Henry Newman was canonized by Pope Francis last October 13. He is the first Englishman since those living in the 17th century to be recognized as a saint by the Catholic Church. It is no secret to anyone that the Church's "evangelization is also a sanctification," or confession – have committed themselves to sanctifying the world and themselves following in the footsteps of Christ.

At first sight it might seem that Cardinal Newman, a priest and bachelor, belongs to the circle of the "usual suspects" who are still enamored of the realism of the faith and to the "usual suspects" of the imagination. This is certainly true of the man of the imagination. However, there are many theological works that seek to connect faith and imagination. Among the pioneers is William Lynch, an English theologian, who has published "Imagery in Theology: The Old Testament and Christian Imagination". From a broader cultural perspective, there was the Jesuit theologian and literature professor Michael Paul Gallagher, who pointed out in his "Imagination and Theology" that language and literature have a significant role in the development of theological ideas.

In various articles published in La Civiltà Cattolica, the latter indicated the organic links between faith, culture and imagination. In particular, in an article that appeared on the occasion of the beatification of Newman in 2010, he showed that the new blessed had been one of the first Christian thinkers to have explicitly investigated the link between faith, life, reality, heart, conscience and imagination.

Imagine today a credible evangelical holiness.

One of the most important fruits of the Second Vatican Council was the broadening of the horizons with regard to evangelization. With the proclamation of the Gospel in Rome, and also for those who watch the canonization liturgies in the media, it is truly a "next door" holiness.

We often ask ourselves how we can proclaim the Gospel in a credible way today. It is no secret to anyone that the Church is asked to be credible in today's world. But we also need to ask ourselves: How will anyone believe the Gospel if we are not saints? It is not only the Church's mission to evangelize the world, but also to sanctify the world and itself.
Now, to achieve this goal, one cannot prescind from imagination. Mere conceptualization, in fact, does not allow fruitful knowledge and action. It requires from us, as we shall see, an imagination shaped by Christ, by his parables, by his life, death and resurrection.

Nineteen-year-old Newman is therefore already well aware of the deceptions of a certain type of romantic imagination. In a letter to his mother, written in 1827, he states severely that it is not the same thing to write poetically about a holy martyr and to be a true Catholic. In his view, the poetry of imagination is a deception, and we cannot afford this kind of romantic illusion.

In a sermon of 1840, he even wrote that philosophers and theologians re-evaluate the contributions that imagination can bring to knowledge and action. He states that it is not the same thing to write poetically about a holy martyr and to be a true Catholic. In his view, the poetry of imagination is a deception, and we cannot afford this kind of romantic illusion.

In many of his subsequent sermons on holiness we find a more calm and mature tone, the fruit of his experiences. In his preaching, Newman suggests that imagination is a powerful tool, but it must be used responsibly. He believes that it is not the same thing to write poetically about a holy martyr and to be a true Catholic. In his view, the poetry of imagination is a deception, and we cannot afford this kind of romantic illusion.

In some of them, the preacher uses his imagination to describe the life of some real saints, apostles and evangelists, or to relate the stories of religious life, such as Saint Peter, Saint Matthew, Saint Benedict, Saint Dominic and Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

In the fifth speech of this volume, Newman describes the intimate impressions of the girl who discovers the Gospel and faith with the aid of vision, images and creative imaginations, animated by the Holy Spirit, free because of – not despite – obedience to God and the Church.

In the sixth speech of this volume, “Knowledge Viewed in Relation to Learning,” he explains that the principle that is not the same thing to write poetically about a holy martyr and to be a true Catholic is not the same thing to write poetically about a holy martyr and to be a true Catholic. In his view, the poetry of imagination is a deception, and we cannot afford this kind of romantic illusion.

The Christian faith according to Newman: imagining the real to sanctify oneself

Newman describes the intimate impressions of the girl who discovers the Gospel and faith with the aid of vision, images and creative imaginations, animated by the Holy Spirit, free because of – not despite – obedience to God and the Church.

The severe tone of Newman’s first parish sermon may surprise you. It certainly presents some Calvinist accents, including the notion that imagination is the great enemy to faith. Newman was aware of this and he wrote that it is not the same thing to write poetically about a holy martyr and to be a true Catholic.

But, in addition to the cognitive value, imagining the Four Last Things also has an ethical value, linked to action. The ungodly would not want to go to hell. The thing is simple; the place is one, but the scholastic adage applies: Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur.

Therefore, Newman would later return several times to preach on holiness, both as an Anglican and as a Roman Catholic.
Newman wrote that "the heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination.”

His motto as a cardinal, cor ad cor loquitur, takes us from the Heart of Christ to our heart, and from one human heart to another. Holiness. With Newman, and in many ways, we can affirm that “holiness is the most attractive face of the Church.”


1. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate [GE], No. 14.
2. Pope Francis often refers to this beautiful literary expression, coined by the French novelist Joseph Malègue: for example, in GE 7, footnote 4.
4. Following a trip to Italy, where he risked dying of a serious illness contracted in Sicily, on his return to England he was)... famous lectures on the nature of a university. However, the new institution was not successful and he resigned in 1858.
5. Although he never questioned his decision to become a Catholic, Newman lived through some difficult years, feeling... and died on August 11, 1890” (M. P. Gallagher, “Il beato Newman, ‘defensor fidei’” in Civ. Catt. 2010 IV 8, footnote 1).
6. For an overview of the role and the theological place of imagination according to these and other authors, see N. Steeves, Grazie all’immaginazione. Integrare l’immaginazione in teologia fondamentale, Brescia, Queriniana, 2018.
8. GE 7.
10. Paul VI, Address to the members of the “Consilium de Laicis” October 2, 1974, quoted in the Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi (EN), No. 41.
13. Cf., for example, Thomas Aquinas, Sum. Theol. I, q. 75, a. 5, resp.
15. Id., Parochial and Plain Sermons, op. cit., I, 1, 8-9.
Id., The Idea of a University, ibid., 1907, VI, 1, 114.


Cf. Id., Grammar of Assent, op. cit., I, 4, in particular § 3.


Francis, Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate, No. 9.

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