Next time you’re in St Mary’s Cathedral in Sydney take a close look at the stained glass window at the altar of the Irish Saints. You’ll find there a rather curious panel dedicated to the great English churchman John Henry Cardinal Newman.

To my eye, the depiction of him is warm, gentle and dignified, and the phrase “a gentleman and a scholar” springs to mind.

Newman’s life (1801–1890) spanned most of the nineteenth century. For forty-five years he was an Anglican, and for the next forty-five years a Catholic.

Educated at Oxford, he became an Anglican priest and was a principal player in the Oxford Movement, a group of reform-minded Anglicans who wanted the Church of England to reclaim some hitherto neglected elements of its Catholic heritage.

Over time, Newman found that his studies, especially of the Fathers of the Church, led him towards Catholicism, and in 1845 he was received into the Church. After studies in Rome, he was ordained a priest and returned in 1847 to establish a community of priests, the Oratorians, in England.

The conversion to Catholicism was quite challenging for Newman. Many of his former colleagues in the Church of England regarded him as a traitor, forsaking all that he had worked so hard for prior to 1845. However, among the Catholic clergy he was regarded with mistrust and often misrepresented for political purposes. In fact, Newman was rather shabbily treated by cardinals and bishops at various times after his conversion and felt as if his life and work were continually under suspicion.

So when in 1879 he was made a Cardinal by Pope Leo XIII, Newman felt as though a dark cloud had been lifted and his loyalty and dedication to the Church was now beyond question. Newman chose as his cardinalatial motto ‘Cor ad Cor Loquitur’ (Heart Speaks to Heart) and his coat of arms contains three hearts representing human beings in communion with each other and with God.

In both his Anglican and Catholic days, Newman was a prolific writer. While some few writings may be familiar to readers (e.g. the hymns, ‘Lead Kindly Light’ and ‘Firmly I Believe and Truly’) much of his scholarly output is hard going: his argumentation is
complex, his grammar and punctuation are unfamiliar, and the words are dense on the page. For me, a better entry point to Newman’s thought is his sermons, prayer and meditations. In the remainder of this article, I would like to use two such sources to reflect on Newman’s motto, *Cor ad Cor Loquitur*.

Newman was a complex human being. As a controversialist he revelled in robust public debate, but as a person he was warm and sensitive. He appreciated friendship and loyalty, and was deeply hurt by rejection, criticism and deceit. He saw relationships as central to human and Christian life, and personal influence as one of the key modes of what we might today call evangelisation.

These insights had developed in Newman from a young age and recur throughout his life. His cardinalatial motto was not something that he just plucked out of the air, but actually emerged from his reflections and way of life over many years. This is very effectively illustrated in two of his *Parochial and Plain Sermons* preached in his Anglican days.

The first is from the feast of St John the Evangelist, 27 December, 1831, titled ‘Love of Relations and Friends’. Newman begins with a theology that is first and foremost incarnational. Referring to St John as “the private and intimate friend of Christ”, he goes on to speak of how Jesus’ friendship shows the fullness of his humanity. Indeed, …we find our Saviour had a private friend; and this shows us, first, how entirely He was a man, as much as any of us, in His wants and feelings; and next, that there is nothing contrary to the spirit of the Gospel, nothing inconsistent with the fullness of Christian love, in having our affections directed in an especial way towards certain objects, towards those whom the circumstances of our past life, or some peculiarities of character, have endeared to us.

He goes on to point out that there were streams of thought – then as now – that Christians were called to love all people, and not focus their attention on one or a few individuals. Newman would argue to the contrary, that in fact it is only by loving those who are part and parcel of our everyday world – partner, children, parents, siblings, friends and colleagues – that we will learn how to love all humanity:

Now I shall here maintain, in opposition to such notions of Christian love, and with our Saviour’s pattern before me, that the best preparation for loving the world at large, and loving it duly and wisely, is to cultivate an intimate friendship and affection towards those who are immediately about us.

This statement is a powerful challenge for us to live fully in the here and now of our own world; this will be the training ground where we may come to develop a more expansive love for others. Newman puts it this way:

We are to begin with loving our friends about us, and gradually to enlarge the circle of our affections, till it reaches all Christians, and then all men. Besides, it is
obviously impossible to love all men in any strict and true sense. What is meant by loving all men, is, to feel well-disposed to all men, to be ready to assist them, and to act towards those who come in our way, as if we loved them. (sic)

Viewing all of this in the light of Newman’s motto and coat of arms, it is clear that friendship has the potential to be an incarnate expression of God’s love. As I reflect on it, I can hear echoing in the background the words:

Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (1 Jn 4:20)

This seems a good entry point into the second sermon I want to deal with, ‘Christian Sympathy’, preached on 17 February, 1839.

Beginning with a consideration of Jesus’ human nature – that he was a man like us in all things but sin – Newman develops the idea that all men and women are united with Christ in their humanity, and beyond that Christians are united also in their recognition of their sinfulness and their common hope for salvation in Christ. Once again, incarnational theology is paramount in Newman’s thinking.

Newman then speaks with an insight and wisdom we might today expect from a psychologist or psychiatrist. Despite our common humanity, our common brokenness, our common hopes and aspirations, we often fail to see our connectedness with others. We build walls around ourselves, physically and psychically, and fear to share the stories of our hearts:

Persons think themselves isolated in the world; they think no one ever felt as they feel. They do not dare to expose their feelings, lest they should find that no one understands them. And thus they suffer to wither and decay what was destined in God’s purpose to adorn the Church’s paradise with beauty and sweetness. Their “mouth is not opened,” as the Apostle speaks, nor their “heart enlarged”, they are “straitened” in themselves, and deny themselves the means they possess of at once imparting instruction and gaining comfort.

For Newman connectedness – in friendships and other relationships – is a great blessing from God, and the most natural forum for the sharing of our faith – what we might today refer to as evangelisation. Through the personal influence we exert in our speech, our example and our action for justice, we will draw relatives and friends into the spiritual journey. If we fail to seize upon these opportunities to attract people to the Gospel, we fail in advancing the reign of God here on earth.

In this sense, perhaps our current decline in church attendance and affiliation has less to do with doctrinal orthodoxy (or lack of it) and more to do with a profound lack of connectedness, warmth, welcome and truthful sharing in our relationships with each other in our families, parishes, schools and other communities.
I suspect that the words Newman addressed to his congregation in England over 160 years ago might speak loudly to us in Australia in 2006:

Perhaps the reason why the standard of holiness among us is so low, why our attainments are so poor, our view of the truth so dim, our belief so unreal, our general notions so artificial and external is this, that we dare not trust each other with the secret of our hearts. We have each the same secret, and we keep it to ourselves, and we fear that, as a cause of estrangement, which really would be a bond of union. We do not probe the wounds of our nature thoroughly; we do not lay the foundation of our religious profession in the ground of our inner man; we make clean the outside of things; we are amiable and friendly to each other in words and deeds, but our love is not enlarged, our bowels of affection are straitened, and we fear to let the intercourse begin at the root; and, in consequence, our religion, viewed as a social system, is hollow. The presence of Christ is not in it.

These are strong words, full of challenge for us as human beings, as individual Christians and as Christian faith communities. I think the challenge is clear: to initiate and nurture positive, life-giving relationships; relationships in which we share the stories of our hearts in order that God might speak more clearly to us in the circumstances of our life here and now; relationships where people matter just as much (if not more than) rules and structures; relationships of grace where human hearts may truly speak to one another, in the presence of the Great Heart of Christ.

To meet such challenges each of us will need to be willing to change, and as Newman states in his Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine,

In a higher world it may be otherwise but here below to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often.

There is yet hope!

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