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As Ohio Dominican University welcomes students to a new academic year, we look forward to celebrating three exceptional events this fall.

First, our campus community had a wonderful opportunity to welcome Bishop Robert Brennan to campus on August 22 to serve as the keynote speaker at ODU's annual opening convocation. The bishop's address, “Reflections on Truth,” is ODU’s key Dominican theme for this academic year.

Second, on October 12 we will celebrate the grand reopening of the historic Matesich Theatre, at the heart of the campus’ iconic tower-topped Erskine Hall. Sr. Mary Andrew Matesich, OP was an Ohio Dominican alumna, chemistry professor, and longest-serving president (from 1978-2001). With the Matesich Theatre's refurbishment, we look forward not only to serving our own students in this magnificent space, but also to welcoming Catholic and public schools, local arts groups, and other community organizations and forums as we all strive to improve the quality of life and learning in Central Ohio.

Finally, Ohio Dominican joins Catholic university educators everywhere in anticipation of the canonization by Pope Francis in October of Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, 19th century theologian and educator.

Born in London, Newman was a student, then scholar and Anglican clergyman, for almost thirty years at Oxford University. The depth of his historical study and personal prayer eventually led him to convert to Roman Catholicism in 1845. He subsequently was ordained a Catholic priest and, in 1879, named a cardinal by Pope Leo XIII.

Among Cardinal Newman’s many writings, the book most celebrated in Catholic higher education is “The Idea of a University,” a series of lectures in which Newman explains his educational philosophy. Among its key themes are: the central place of theology among the disciplines of study, since God ultimately is the source of all knowledge; a profound respect for the role of reason and conscience; and an equally profound reverence for the deposit of faith as revealed by Scripture and tradition. In short, Newman was a passionate advocate of both faith and reason—and therefore of both continuity and change.

Perhaps Newman’s overarching achievement was his ability to integrate reason and faith so seamlessly; but that integration came only with difficulty and at great cost. His embrace of Roman Catholicism caused his ostracism from the Anglican community. He also struggled for years to reconcile respect for conscience and submission to ecclesiastical authority. As a key example, he expressed different views at different times in the debate over papal infallibility, which ultimately was affirmed by the First Vatican Council in 1870.

In today’s unfortunately polarized Church, both “liberals” and “conservatives” can find proof-texts in Newman’s writings to support their views. For example, in affirming the primacy of conscience, “liberals” might quote Newman’s quip, “I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please—still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.”

Conversely, “conservatives” can point to his insistence, as Newman biographer Fr. Ian Ker has written, “that dogma was the ‘fundamental principle’ of his religion…‘for 30, 40, 50 years I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of liberalism in religion.’” Unfortunately, that sentiment, taken out of context of the full range of Newman’s thought, has led some self-styled guardians of “authentic” Catholicism to use Newman’s name to justify arbitrary judgments about which of the more than 250 Catholic colleges and universities in the U.S. are “faithfully” Catholic. In the “society” of these self-appointed judges, only about 10% of Catholic institutions earn the “faithful” label, ignoring 90% of Catholic colleges and universities that are devoted to their Catholic mission and identity—not to mention the many bishops with whom Catholic institutions are in faithful communion. Such a “society” and such judgments, wrongly associated with Cardinal Newman, cause confusion and division, while Newman himself was devoted to Church unity.

Let us hope that the canonization of Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman will inspire all Catholics to integrate faith and reason beyond partisan labels. As Fr. Ker puts it, “The truth is that Newman was neither simply conservative nor liberal. He is best described as a conservative radical or reformer.” And as Catholic columnist George Weigel elaborates, “Newman was a reformer devoted to history, who…helped the Church learn to tell the difference between genuine development and rupture.”

At Ohio Dominican University, “The Idea of a University” is part of the core curriculum. We have great reverence for Cardinal Newman, and we treasure our communion with the universal Church. We look forward to all the exciting events of this semester that exemplify our mission and that communion—beginning with Bishop Brennan’s talk on campus and culminating in Cardinal Newman’s canonization in Rome.