

Wings of a Dove Tours

Christopher Cappo Santoro

A Mediterranean Pilgrimage in the Footsteps of Cardinal Newman
Proposal for an Educational Cruise

Wings of a Dove Tours is proposing a first-ever pilgrimage in the footsteps of Cardinal Newman. It would be entitled, **Spring in Sicily**, after a momentous line in his overseas correspondence when the great author is about to embark on a vessel from Naples to Palermo; a title seemingly insignificant, at first obscure, but which impresses readers with its fitness for an advertisement once the rest of the sentence is revealed:

Spring in Sicily! The nearest approach to Paradise sinful man is capable of!

April 1833, adventure is awaiting a young Newman on the smiling surface of the Mediterranean. He is only thirty-one, on the threshold of his prolific career, embodiment of the "artist as a young man." The epoch of grand touring is ending; yet these letters furnish a variety of unforgettable anecdotes and confessional insight, not to mention frivolous asides that reveal another, lighter side of the great author in his early thirties.

For instance, he writes a powerful homage to the former glory of Carthage; he observes the solemnity of Greek devotion around the archipelago; he expresses horror at the superstitious, semi-barbarous streets of Naples; he experiences profound emotion amid the ruins of Segesta: at the time, a wild, almost inaccessible hilltop-temple; today, a cultural heritage site under the protection and superintendence of UNESCO.

The tone and tempo of his overseas correspondence is a reminder that he entertained the ambition of becoming a romancier. The tempo is rollicking; the tone, naïve; like the other sentimental tourists of his epoch.

We watch as novel adventures unfold: from setting foot for the first time on foreign soil in Gibraltar, to catching glimpse onboard the *Hermes*, their steamer, of Carthage, to dropping anchor at the Catholic stronghold of Valletta, to island hopping around the outer rim of Greece's islands, to coasting passed Calabria en route to the Sicilian cities of Messina and Palermo; then heading straight to Naples and Rome and finally, almost fatally, turning back, for a last go-around, to Taormina, Catania and Syracuse.

In Sicily, the young Newman finds the countryside of his dreams, an island after his own heart. He writes a panegyric of the place; every page is packed to capacity with the acutest of observation and reflection. He calls himself "smitten." After tearing the fabric of his health, almost to the point of Death, he heads home with the first-fruits of the Spirit, a budding-genius, ripening to perfection, deep within.

We end on the threshold of the "Oxford Movement of 1833" when the fragile bud of his genius will face the winter wind of censorship and the canker of skepticism until it flowers, a decade later, on his conversion to Rome...

A Mediterranean Pilgrimage

After reading the man's incredible collected works, I thought to myself if there were perennial cruises "in the footsteps" of everyone from St. Paul to Napoleon to Yves Saint Laurent, what a shame that no one has put forward an educational tour in the name of Cardinal Newman.

I conceived the who, what, when and where of a pilgrimage: Cardinal Newman, a household name among scholars; a cruise-liner, the preferred means of getting-around; spring, the time of year that Newman calls **the most elevating and instructive time of year, which whispers of good things to come, when our bodies are to rise, and which throws the thoughts back on the Eden we have lost, and makes the heart contrite by the contrast between what is and what might be;** and the Mediterranean, the most trafficked circuit in the cruise business.

It is time someone forged a connection between these lesser-known episodes and the settled opinions that he will later express on more momentous occasions.

Furthermore, curious, other sentimental travels, so well-known to students of English Literature, have eclipsed the selfsame travels of Newman: the popularity of profane writers ever-increasing and the obscurity of sacred ever-deepening; yet an ecclesiastic wrote and traveled as long and hard as any of his worldly counterparts. Time to even the battle-field. Time to settle the score.

In America, Newman is more or less unknown outside of a small remnant of litterateurs and churchmen. To Irish-Americans, he is perhaps the founding intellectual sledge-hammer of the Catholic University of Dublin; but fewer Americans of Sicilian descent are aware of the fact that Newman passed some of the most formative months of his life touring the patrimonial sites of Sicily. Time to get the word out. Time to spread the Word.

Cardinal Newman: The Sentimental Traveler

These letters from abroad are perhaps the only light-reading in his entire corpus: ideal for an educational cruise. These three-hundred pages reveal a side of the great controversialist that people wouldn't suspect from his voluminous published works, a side so amiable that the version he would permit to be published in his lifetime are only half of what is available today in the unexpurgated edition.

From his earliest sermons, Newman wrote with the passion of a dying man, strictly with a view to what is useful and enduring; but throughout these letters, writing to his sisters and mother and to a coterie of his colleagues at Oxford, we read a series of light commentaries upon the changing landscape, fleeting in their nature, largely monotonous, but now and then reaching a pitch or depth of insight occasioned by the sudden appearance of a Mediterranean port-city or a pile of ruins.

Here, nowhere else, readers are given a glimpse of Newman, the sentimental traveler. Here, he is attempting a popular genre, Travel & Leisure, where a rambler is asked to send home picturesque accounts of his surroundings. True to form, he wrote scrolls.

They were written in a "person" perfectly fitted to ushering readers across a sea of history: many times, it almost seems that he has anticipated the modern-day cruise-liner pilgrimage when he recommends steam-travel as the best means of the discovering the Mediterranean.

His insights will eventually form the substance of those sensational Catholic controversies in the 1840's and 50's that I consider the finest apologies for the Roman communion since the Counter-Reformation; but sweeping-statements aside, if nothing else, the sheer feat-of-endurance entailed in completing such an arduous itinerary instills a certain respect, patent respect, for an author often mistaken for a sedentary historian living his whole life in the midlands of England.

Traditional Pilgrimages

Like perennial pilgrimages in the footsteps of St. Paul, St. Francis of Assisi or St. Therese of Lisieux, to the Levant, Umbria or the Loire Valley, a Cardinal Newman Cruise would combine a historical personage of insatiable ardor, seemingly indefatigable, the vigor of whose activity is a constant source of wonder to posterity and vacation destinations so beautiful that we wonder if Nature does not conspire with Spirit in forging saints out of the terrain.

The blessed memory of St. Paul, Francis and Therese were summoned from the annals of Church history to serve the pilgrimage-market and have become tried-and-tested means of spreading the Good News. Caveat. Despite Newman's popularity among artists and historians, his notoriety has not spread as far as more loveable Church servants such as St. Francis and Therese or, *a fortiori*, the single most influential expostulator of gospel truth, St. Paul. Nonetheless, Newman should not go overlooked simply because he is only known to a small remnant of scholars and artists.

Although St. Therese and Cardinal Newman were contemporaries at the end of the nineteenth century, the province in which each exerted their God-

given talents could not have been farther removed: the former, an obscure miracle-worker in the French countryside and the latter, a prolific controversialist that the then Pope would call upon to proselytize the learned and cosmopolitan classes of major metropolises around England.

Apt comparison? Notice. Though the "Blessed" Cardinal Newman has been beatified, he is not called saint. But if Literature can be said in a looser sense to possess saints, with its votaries possessing a saintly ardor, then considering the simple amount Newman would be able to write, producing a corpus as voluminous as any literary or saintly figure in history, all while sustaining a pitch of stylistic quality that has been the envy of even atheistical authors, his productivity is an out-n-out miracle.

An "Invitation au Voyage"

Young Newman penned some of the most enticing "invitations au voyage" in English literature. He does the simple yeoman-service of making-straight-a-path to going on pilgrimage. Steam is recommended as the best means of seeing a series of littoral cities **at-a-go**, while one reads and writes and walks the deck.

Whenever he invites others to travel, he begins by highlighting these literary luxuries and then insists the alternative of going over the **proverbially uninteresting** roads of the continent pales in comparison to being on the open seas. His guileless language encouraging others to cruise passed places of the highest antiquity is the best endorsement, bar-none, for the Mediterranean pilgrimage-market of today.

The French Connection

In fact, Newman's French counterparts, not fellow-countrymen, were the ones who best embodied the spirit and mirrored the itinerary of his journey. So Frenchmen like Dumas, Stendhal and Maupassant who wrote contemporary accounts of the Mezzogiorno will fill in the rare lacunas of his correspondence, helping pilgrims better imagine Mediterranean travel in the nineteenth-century.

For instance, Newman mentions some humorous reasons for passing on a climb of Mount Etna. Here we would superimpose passages from Dumas' little travel essay, Etna, in a promotional brochure of Sicily:

*7am Revelry-Call. Lauds. Charcuterie and Sicilian lemonade. See Palermo where the young Newman wrote verses for The Relics of Saints, June of 1833; and where three years later the author of The Three Musketeers, Alexander Dumas, will write: **Romans, Saracens, Normans once possessed it: and to all her different masters, each of whom finished by being her lover, she smiled the same smile: curvaceous courtesan who cannot motivate herself except for eternal volupte;** or where the Travel &*

Leisure contributor, Maupassant, wrote descriptions of Sicilian architecture as baroque as his subject-matter: ***Sicily is the country, the true, the only country of the Colonnade. All the inner courts of the ancient palaces and residences of Palermo enclose admirable colonnades that would be famous anywhere else but this island so rich in them.*** [Translations mine]. *Dinner. Music. Solemn vigil. Sleep.*

A Detour to Tunisia

As the Hermes plows forward, Newman is brought face-to-face with the landmark that ever represented the gateway from Sicily to Africa, Cape Bon, Tunisia.

Though he never set foot on African soil (yet, in his first historical novel, Callista: A Tale of the Fourth Century, his creative vision roved as far as Sicca Veneria, former Roman outpost fronting the Sahara) we would detour to Tunisia's northern coast and the classical heritage site of Carthage, a hundred-and-forty nautical miles from the southern coast of Sicily.

Expect heat. Yet, Tunisia's northern coast boasts so many specimens of antique statuary precisely because it partakes of the mildness and verdure that once blessed Greek and Roman civilization.

What is going-on-pilgrimage in the footsteps of a literary forbearer?

It is a chance of seeing for ourselves if the far-famed places of sentimental Literature bear a passing resemblance to their reality.

For instance: in a long letter from Rome, Newman is lecturing colleagues on the value of overseas travel. Before Rome, Newman has no less a teacher in the elegance of cypresses than the island of Corfu. To capture the essence of Rome, he references a laudatory line of Virgil in which the city is likened to stately cypresses:

The lines of Virgil keenly and affectionately describe the way I feel about this wonderful city. Repeat them in your memory every word and dwell on each. If you had seen the cypresses of Corfu, and the graceful, modest way in which they shoot straight up with a composed shape, yet boldly in their way, being landmarks almost for miles around, you would see the beauty of the comparison of the "inter viburna cupressi."

Those who have never been in countries where cypresses grow naturally have a chance of seeing for themselves if these trees should be dubbed "graceful, modest, composed and bold." This is, practically speaking, the length, breadth and depth of walking in the footsteps of a literary forbearer.

Yet, sometimes a location elicits a stranger reaction of the sight-seeing Newman: he is left speechless. Of Segesta, he says: **no words can describe the piercing effect of this temple.**

Strange, an author who has been ready and able to pen excellent descriptions of other Mediterranean must-sees abandons all hope of conveying the power and beauty of a ruined temple...

A Modern-Day Pilgrimage

"Pilgrimage" is not a word in Newman, the modern's, vocabulary; yet there is something of the pilgrim in his way of singing the road rather than its wayside attractions. He left unadorned descriptions of the terrain, as if his mission in getting from place to place had been to strengthen his mettle by a head-on confrontation with natural Creation; a mission less pronounced a decade later, in 1848, when we witness the convert pressing to reach the Duomo of Milan in time for Sunday morning mass, crossing a mountain-range on foot and touching upon the epic trek only in connection with a relic of worn-out shoes once owned by St. Carlo Borromeo.

For the modern luxury pilgrim, it is terrible to read of the obstacles and setbacks that Newman suffered; perhaps "pilgrimage" is not an apt word for a summer-long cruise across the Mediterranean; yet even these nineteenth-century adventures could be called luxurious in comparison to the "stripes, imprisonments, watchings and fastings" of the Apostles or of the general hardships that have dogged the steps of pilgrims in the past.

Newman will call a little inconvenience of his journey a **veritable penance**; painful longing for the comforts of hearth and home is heard in his voice. Our pilgrims will experience the lesser penance of heat-exhaustion and homesickness.

Were we to recreate the accommodations that an anonymous young Newman received from the poor people of Sicily, our pilgrims would be sleeping in a stable infested by the **inveterate enemies of slumber**, fleas. No, we would offer the amenities that a famous older Newman received from the rectory of St. Fidelis, Milan: clean, well-furnished rooms perfect for the sacrifice of Study.

Valediction

Come summer, a cruise-liner, to be christened the Hermes, named after the steamer that once carried Newman and his companions to brighter shores, could be anchoring at a port-of-call near you.

Years later, you may remember my "invitation au voyage" as the spark that ignited a new engine in Mediterranean tourism.