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Notre Dame lecturer plays key role in St John Henry Newman's elevation to Doctor of the Church

The University of Notre Dame Australia's theology lecturer, Shaun Blanchard, has been recognised globally as one of only 20 scholars invited to write in support of St John Henry Newman being made a Doctor of the Church.

Pope Leo XIV will officially proclaim St John Henry Newman a Doctor of the Church on 1 November at St Peter's Basilica in Vatican City.

The title Doctor of the Church is one of the highest honours bestowed upon canonised saints, recognising those who have made profound intellectual contributions to the Church through the "eminent doctrine" in their writing and teaching.

Before a saint can be named a Doctor of the Church, scholars are required to make a case for the proposed doctor in a set of writings called a *positio*. Dr Blanchard was among the 20 scholars invited to write an essay for the *positio* on Newman before it was submitted to the Vatican last year.

Dr Blanchard said it was a great honour to be invited to contribute to such a historic decision – one that holds deep significance for people around the world.

"There are only 38 Doctors of the Church, and on average just a few are declared every century," he said. "This is a rare and momentous occasion."

"At a time when there is a lot that divides us, I am so grateful to be part of something that is indisputably positive and joyful for Catholics worldwide."

Before joining Notre Dame in June 2023, Dr Blanchard was a research fellow at the National Institute for Newman Studies in Pittsburgh – an institute dedicated to exploring Newman's thought and its contemporary relevance.

His essay on Newman focused on synodality, which is a new term coined to describe a style of church life and governance that emphasises participation and discernment at every level.

"Synodality was probably Pope Francis' most important legacy, and Pope Leo seems to be of basically the same mind," he said.

“Newman wrote extensively about synods and councils and consultation in general, always emphasising that clergy must listen to the laity to serve effectively.

“He believed the story of the Christian faith was a story of mutual exchange between men and women, common people and aristocrats, and clergy and laity.

“His writings on development of doctrine, consulting the laity, the importance of consensus, and healthy debate and disagreement are, if anything, more relevant now than when he wrote them.”

The positio was completed in just a few months to allow Newman to be officially named a Doctor of the Church in the 2025 Jubilee Year.

Dr Blanchard has travelled to Rome to witness the Pope proclaiming Newman a Doctor of the Church during the Jubilee of the World of Education.

He said that over a hundred years after his death, Newman’s star was only rising.

“I think one reason is he is all things for all people: whether you’re interested in history, the Bible, theology, philosophy, Victorian prose and culture, spiritual direction and preaching, poetry and literature, Newman has something for you,” Dr Blanchard said.

“He was a person who struggled through bouts of loneliness, sadness and feeling misunderstood and judged, and he was totally open about this. He was completely open about experiencing bouts of real darkness, but he always hung on to his friends and always trusted that God would get him through whatever he was facing, even if he couldn’t see the light at the end of the tunnel.

“I think that kind of honest faith has never been more needed.”

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