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Gerard Tracey

Lay archivist at the Birmingham Oratory who campaigned for the canonisation of Cardinal Newman

THE sudden death of Gerard Tracey will come as a shock to the worldwide community of Newman scholars. When, in 1976 at the age of 22, he succeeded Father Stephen Dessain as archivist of the Birmingham Oratory with responsibility for the continuing publication of the *Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, no one could have been altogether certain that the succession was in secure hands. A generation later, the question was no longer in doubt.

As a young man, the first question for Tracey to resolve was whether his vocation should be exercised in holy orders, in the great tradition of the priest - archivists who had sifted and structured the vast body of unpublished material left by Newman on his death in 1890.

Tracey had been a pupil at the Oratory Grammar School in Birmingham. He had won an exhibition at University College, Oxford, where he had read history. A.J.P. Taylor's lectures at Oxford had helped to sharpen his already accurate eye for the vanities of public life and learning. The thought of ordination preoccupied him.

However, he returned to Birmingham in 1976 not only as a graduate of Oxford, but as a graduate of a particular epoch in the annals of that university. His hair had grown to shoulder length. He offered himself to the novitiate. During the first week, he was gently invited to have his hair cut. He declined. Thus it was that the Newman Archive acquired its first lay archivist.

It was with a distinctly religious understanding of his vocation to continue the work in the spirit of Father Stephen Dessain that Gerard Tracey entered upon his duties. Dessain's phrase "*faire valoir* Newman" became for him descriptive of a way of life and a tradition which he now set himself to develop.

Now slowly and patiently, he began to master the contents of the archive. In 1980 he was appointed to the Birmingham Diocesan Commission to assemble the material for Newman's process of canonisation. The work was completed in 1986. Thereafter, he assisted the Postulator of the Cause, Father Vincent Blehl, SJ, in preparing the documentation for Rome (the *Positio*) which was the basis on which Newman's virtues were recognised in 1991 as heroic. The Church extended to Newman the title Venerable, meaning "worthy of veneration" by the faithful.

During these years visiting scholars discovered in Tracey a remarkably well - informed and intelligent man whose knowledge was freely and generously placed at their disposal. Graduates embarking on their doctorates found a mentor and friend whose kindness became proverbial. By the centenary of Newman's death in 1990, there was scarcely a Newman publication in the world that did not acknowledge Tracey's help. There were those whose doctorates

were rumoured, perhaps unkindly, to have been all but written by him. But he never looked for recognition. It was enough that Newman be recognised.

As editor of the *Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman* he combined erudition with commendable brevity. He brought the same qualities to his work, with Dom Placid Murray, on Newman's unpublished Anglican sermons, and in the preparation with David Earnest of an impending critical edition of Newman's *Oxford University Sermons*. He was tireless in assisting the Birmingham Oratory edition of Newman's published writings, and it is not difficult to recognise that his life's work, to finish what Stephen Dessain had begun, was nearing completion. He suffered from diabetes. It eventually brought about his fatal illness after Christmas 2002.

Tracey was penetrating in his assessment of human character. He was a constant source of consolation to succeeding generations of novices, initiating them into the traditions and memories of the Oratory. He laid particular emphasis on the humorous character of Oratorian life and delighted in producing a remarkable and vivid series of cartoons from the archive illustrating the foibles of an earlier generation of Fathers.

He had a keen sense of justice and an ability to mix with people of every condition. His charities were hidden. An episode from his last hours may be taken as indicative. His family were surprised by the appearance at his bedside of an Asian visitor who stood silently weeping. It emerged that Tracey had helped this man, who could not read English, to prepare his passport application and tax returns. Similar acts of unseen kindness characterised his entire life.

Tracey was an excellent and original cook and regularly made a signal contribution to Oratorian festivities. In culinary matters as in others he was ever keen to advance the frontiers of knowledge. He never married. He is survived by his mother.

Gerard David Tracey, archivist, was born on March 9, 1954. He died on January 20, 2003, aged 48.