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### ***Origins of the University of Queensland Newman Society***

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It is difficult to say exactly when the University of Queensland Newman Society started. Michael Head S.J writes in his history of St Leo's College that it "commenced in the early 20s and led a rather shadowy existence into the 30s when it faded away at the end of Monsignor English's rectorship." According to Head, Monsignor John English, who was rector of St Leo's College, worked with the small number of students involved in the early unit of the Newman Society throughout his rectorship from 1926 to 1935.

What is clear, however, is that it has been in existence, in an official capacity, since 1940. Head writes that in 1940, a "new and student-recognised Newman Society, with a more definite and sounder foundation" began, and a membership of approximately 35 people met regularly during the war years at the University. A notebook from the time, owned by Brendan Ryan, also records the first AGM of the Society to have been held in that year, on April 2 at St Stephen's School.

#### **Activities of the Newman Society**

Despite the changes that have taken place in the University and in society over the past eight decades, there are clear links between the activities of the Newman Society now and in the past. In all that time, it seems to have remained committed to being a Catholic group and a social group - that is, by having both socially and spiritually based activities.

In the 1950s and 1960s, popular social activities included the Newman Society Ball, Holiday Camps at Tallebudgera, boat cruises, Fresher's Welcome Dances and Fresher's Return Dances and tennis days. Attendance was large, often numbering in the hundreds. Camps reports of the early 1950s quoted 60 or so as having attended camps, and by the late 1950s, camps regularly had over 100 people participating and sometimes much more than that - 200 in 1960, 240 in 1963 and 400 in 1964 for the orientation camps. This was in line with the membership numbers in the late 1950s and early 1960s when numbers skyrocketed,

with around 200 members in 1959 and 550 members in late 1964. The Newman Society Balls also attracted hundreds of people, often around 200 (1955). A boat cruise in 1955 had 130 in attendance, and a welcome to overseas students in 1956 had 80 in attendance.

Spiritual activities included U.C.F.A Conferences, Commem Mass and Breakfast, Winter School, lunch-hour talks and Theology lectures at St Leo's College. Even these had a fair number of participants - in the newsletter in March 1958, it was noted that over the last two years, attendance at U.C.F.A Conferences had increased from 180 (Adelaide, 1956) to 220 (Hobart, 1957) to 280 (Perth, 1958). A contingent of 50 or more Queenslanders was common at the inter-state conferences. In 1962, the conference held in Brisbane had a total attendance of 300 delegates. A Corpus Christi Procession had 250 undergraduates and postgraduates marching behind the Newman banner. Other figures quoted in reports from the time include 58, 120 and 130 at the Commem Mass/Breakfast in 1955, 1956 and 1961 respectively, 20 at Theology Lectures and 75 for a Winter School (1958).

From today's perspective, these numbers seem staggering. However, despite the much lower numbers and much lower profile of the group today, it has in recent years been one of the most active groups on campus, in terms of the number of activities that it has. Still popular among the group today are BBQs, boat trips and holiday camps - both orientation camp in February and the camp in August, now known as the mid-year camp. Numbers have not been large enough to contemplate a dance, although this year's executive held a Young Christian's Ball (thereby incorporating Angsoc, SCM and other such groups on campus) in celebration of the year 2000, which had an attendance of about 40 people.

### **Involvement in Social Issues**

Over much of their history, the Newman Society has maintained an interest and, on many occasions, involvement in social issues of the time. In *Via*, the journal published by the society between 1954 and 1960, there were regular articles dealing with social issues.

One of the most common themes of the 1950s in *Via*, as in other media, was communism. The articles published on this topic included a statement from the U.C.F.A condemning the N.U.A.U.S acceptance of "the invitation for a Communist paid visit to Communist China by Australian University Students". Another was an article on Communism versus Christianity and the role of the Church. It noted:

*"The Catholic Church, in the face of such a threat as Communism, could not, and does not remain silent. As the champion and defender of*

*truth and justice, She has an obligation to the world. In actual fact, the Church has been the most effective and faithful of all bodies in our present civilisation in warning the world against the perils of communism”.*

As a Catholic journal, *Via* often delved into the highly controversial topics of abortion, euthanasia and contraception. In 1959, Arts Student Don Moss wrote a couple of articles on the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia. He wrote it was “a product of this century, of an age which as in birth prevention, divorce and other ethical problems, is only too ready to compromise vital principles to the appeal of comfort and ease. It represents a regression to the pagan behaviour of the past. If we are to condone it, then we must cease to call ourselves Christian”. His tone appeared even more urgent in the next edition: “As Catholics, it is important for us to realise the practice is morally wrong and why it is morally wrong. Supreme domination over life belongs to God alone. Man has not supreme domination over his own life; he has only the use of it”. There were many more articles of this nature published in *Via* over its six years of publication.

In July 1967, a furore over the Society’s support of a protest over traffic regulations that prevented protests hailed the beginning of a decade of serious involvement in the major social issues of the time by the Newman Society. In this case, the Newman Society was listed as a sponsor of the Civil Liberties Coordinating Committee protest after a motion to support the march “in principle” rather than directly participate in the march was passed. Criticism from the rector and vice-rector of St Leo’s and other prominent Catholics came thick and fast. Attempted talks with Premier Nicklin only delayed the march, which went ahead on September 8 with the active support of the Newman Society.

At the 1967 AGM, the debate flared further. The Newman Society accused Archbishop O’Donnell, through a motion, of being partially responsible for the clash of students and police by “not making public the view that his representative (on the Committee convened to propose reform of the traffic regulations) held on the question of Civil Liberties”. After meetings between the Archbishop, the rector and vice-rector of St Leo’s and students, the matter was temporarily smoothed over and died out with the onset of exams, though it flared again briefly in the following year.

The following year, an appeal went out to the Society members, suggesting that their actions the previous year had been “a pretence” based on their apathy about various causes. These actions included support of “peace-making activities of Pope Paul, gradual diminution and final abolition of nuclear weapons, use of

atomic energy for the peace and development of all nations". They also included formulation of a practical proposal to allow civil aid duties to be used as an alternative to national service, and raising interest in moves to reverse world trade policies increasing the gap between rich and poor, and raising interest in migrants, Aborigines and education issues. It challenged them to participate in a cause that didn't have "the attraction of participating in THE MARCH, of confronting THE POLICE, and of TV publicity ... in other words, work without glamour"

A product of the time was Bullring, a magazine that covered a wide range of social and political issues. It delved into the Queensland "gerrymander" system, takeover of sacred land in Bouganville to build accommodation for Con Zinc Riotinto Australia personnel, the role of the Church in modern society, the activities of Action for World Development, abortion and many others. In 1970, they entered into the Vietnam Moratorium issue. The issue was discussed and debated in a number of issues and in the edition of April of 1970, it was announced that a Special General Meeting had been held to discuss the said Moratorium, to be from May 8-10. Following four hours of debate, the motion below, an amended version of the original, failed to pass, with 17 votes for and 19 votes against.

*"That we as Christians and Members of the Newman Society, believing that it is contrary to the teachings of Christ and the whole spirit of Christ's life to use violence to achieve political and social objectives, hereby support the aims of the Vietnam Moratorium Campaign"*

It was 1974 that proved to be the year of Social Action for the University of Queensland Newman Society. In the first "Newman News" for the year, members of the Society entered into the debate over the Queensland, New South Wales and Federal Government's decision to flood the Texas Caves in building the Pike Creek Dam. The article published in Newman News presented arguments that showed the project to be economically dubious and that the governments were going to proceed anyway.

In the June 1974 "Newman News", an article from the Action for World Development Group was published, encouraging readers to change their lifestyle "to one that is based on community sharing and love and not on consumerism, luxuries, competing with each other and hating". In the same edition, the Queensland Aborigines Act 1971 and Aborigines Regulations of 1972 were analysed, with the article suggesting that "even the most cursory reading of these two documents will show the almost complete disregard for the human rights on which they are based".

Another protest entered into was that over 11 Markwell St, Bowen Hills. In an article published in the Newman News of August 1974, the Freeway Protest Movement accused the Main Roads Department of making uninhabitable a house “not yet required for freeway construction” despite a critical accommodation shortage and of the destruction of 20 homes in Markwell Street. They called for people to join the resistance by putting their name on a contact list, to be contacted if demolition began.

It is not known at this stage if there were any major protests or social action issues after the mid-1970s. It is likely there would have been, but unlikely they would have been on the same scale as earlier protests. In recent times, the role of the Society in social action has been limited to the participation of its members in Edmund Rice Camps, holiday camps for children who are disadvantaged, and the invitation of various charities to speak at their meetings. I believe this is largely due to the nature of the university and the Newman Society in the 1990s. Social action groups have been reduced to a minority, as has the membership of the Newman Society. None has the number of members - and therefore membership power - which they did in the late 1950s to early 1970s.

### **Relationship with other Christian groups**

The relationship between the Newman Society and other Christian groups on campus appears to have been fairly non-existent for much of the Newman Society’s history. That is, each of the groups appears to have been happy running its own shows. This is even the case for Angsoc and S.C.M, the groups that the Newman Society is similar in nature to. There was only one period during the years for which I have journals (1956 - 1974) in which an attempt appears to have been made to establish links. This was in the late 1960s. In May of 1967, it was reported that a motion to look into possibilities for amalgamation with S.C.M was amended to replace amalgamation with “closer liaison”. The reasons given for this was that the motion did not come from “grass-roots” members, that it was too idealistic and that Newman’s task to mould freshers could not, apparently, be done with S.C.M. The author notes that this latter feeling is “reeking of a slightly modified fortress mentality”. In June and July of 1967, the Newman Society and S.C.M went so far as to publish a combined newsletter. In the first of these, a comment is made on “present relations between Newman and S.C.M”:

*“At present, the relationship between the religious societies would be described as friendly and cordial by those in the know. Are they? Seems to me that at present, the entire relationship between them is at an ambassadorial level, so to speak. The Newman hierarchy is very friendly with the S.C.M hierarchy, they meet occasionally to discuss matters of*

*common interest, they go to each other's parties but never stay long because they don't fit, and on the whole make sure they don't step on each other's toes. Very nice and charitable but hardly real.*

*It is time the Presidents of the religious clubs, and that includes Angsoc, ceased thinking of themselves as representatives of opposing fortresses who have decided to be good to each other because that's the current trend. It all boils down to the fortress mentality. It may well be that my analysis of the situation is too simple to be true or that this situation is such that these sorts of relations are the only kind possible if there are to be any relations at all. I believe there is enough community feeling among ordinary members to make a more meaningful relationship possible. And my hope is that a time will come when there won't be any need to ask about relations between the religious societies because there won't be any blocs to refer to"*

In 1968, an Angsoc-S.C.M-Newman camp and a combined Newman-S.C.M conference were held, and "Bullring" was, for most of 1969, a product of both the S.C.M and the Newman Society. From then on, there appears to be little mention of S.C.M or Angsoc.

For the most part, the description in the 1967 journal of the relationship between the three groups could also be applied to their relationship over the past decade. There appears to be have been little time for people in the Newman Society to run activities for their own group, let alone events that involved organisation and cooperation with Angsoc or S.C.M. However, a growing climate of ecumenism means that there have been students who have been members of more than one of these organisations and in May this year, the Newman Society will host a "Young Christian Jubilee Ball 2000". The future relations between the three groups then, may yet prove to be much closer than they have been in the past.

### **Changes that have occurred and future directions**

The future directions of the Society are not totally clear. It seems evident that it will never have the numbers or the strength that it once did. It is now a very small minority of over 25,000 University of Queensland students. However, it continues to provide those who participate in it with social and spiritual activities, and with strong support networks.

The make-up of the Newman Society has remained essentially the same over the history of the group - young men and women, aged 18 to 21. One thing that has changed is the role of women. In the September 1955 edition of *Via*, a notice calling for executive committee nominations specified that the President had to

be either a male graduate or male undergraduate who is in or has completed his third Academic year. This alone shows that society in general, and the Newman Society, has come a long way.

The friendships and relationships that emerge today from this group are just as strong as those that emerged many decades ago were. The fact it has managed to attract students, albeit a small group, in the 1990s is an indication that there's still a need for the Newman Society. It is also an indication of the fact that there are still young people committed to an active spirituality, despite the massive changes that have taken place in the Church and society and the often-negative perception of young people today.