

**THE CONVERSION  
OF CARDINAL  
NEWMAN**

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**REV. LUKE RIVINGTON**

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## The Conversion of Cardinal Newman.

BY THE REV. DR. RIVINGTON.

ON the 9th of October, 1845, the following letter was posted by John Henry Newman to a number of his friends, having been written the day before:

"LITTLEMOORE, *October 8, 1845.*—I am this night expecting Father Dominic, the Passionist, who, from his youth, has been led to have distinct and direct thoughts, first of the countries of the North, then of England. After thirty years' (almost) waiting, he was, without his own act, sent here. . . . He is a simple, holy man, and withal gifted with remarkable powers. He does not know of my intention; but I mean to ask of him admission into the One Fold of Christ. . . .

"P.S.—This will not go till all is over. Of course it requires no answer."<sup>1</sup>

Speaking of that same year, Dean Church writes, "It was not till the summer that the first drops of the storm began to fall. Then through the autumn and the next year, friends, whose names and forms were familiar in Oxford, one by one disappeared

<sup>1</sup> *Apologia*, ed. 1887, p. 234.

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and were lost to it. Fellowships, livings, curacies, intended careers, were given up. Mr. Ward went; Mr. Capes, who had long followed Mr. Ward's line, and had spent his private means to build a church near Bridgwater, went also. Mr. Oakeley resigned Margaret Chapel [the forerunner of All Saints, Margaret Street, London] and went. Mr. Ambrose St. John, Mr. Coffin, Mr. Dalgairus, Mr. Faber, Mr. T. Meyrick, Mr. Albany Christie, Mr. R. Simpson, of Oriel, were received [into the Church] in various places and in various ways; and in the next year, Mr. J. S. Northcote, Mr. J. B. Morris, Mr. G. Ryder, Mr. David Lewis. On the 3rd of October, 1845, Mr. Newman requested the Provost of Oriel to remove his name from the books of the College and University, but without giving any reason. The 6th of October is the date of the 'Advertisement' to the work which had occupied Mr. Newman through the year — the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. On the 8th he was, as he has told us in the *Apologia* received by Father Dominic, the Passionist. To the 'Advertisement' are subjoined the following words:

“*Postscript.*—Since the above was written the Author has joined the Catholic Church. It was his intention and wish to have carried his volume through the press before deciding finally on this step. But when he got some way in the printing, he recognized in himself a conviction of the truth of the conclusion, to which the discussion leads, so clear as to preclude further deliberation. Shortly afterwards circumstances gave him the opportunity of acting on it, and he felt that he had no warrant for refusing to act on it.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *The Oxford Movement*, by R. W. Church, Dean of St. Paul's, 1891, p. 341.

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The same writer has said of the Oxford Movement that "Keble had given the inspiration, Froude had given the impulse; then Newman took up the work, and the impulse henceforward, and the direction, were his."

The letter of October 8, 1845, contained the judgement of its leader on the true goal of that movement. It meant "Rome." Mr. Gladstone, many years afterwards, speaking of Newman's relation to "the religious mind of England," says, "Of this thirty years ago he had the leadership; an office and power from which none but himself could eject him. It has been his extraordinary, perhaps unexampled case, at a critical period, first to give to the religious thought of his time and country the most powerful impulse which for a long time it has received from any individual; and then to be the main, though no doubt involuntary, cause of disorganizing it in a manner as remarkable, and breaking up its forces into a multitude of not only severed, but conflicting bands."

Of course we, as Catholics, believe that it was Almighty God Himself who removed John Henry Newman from his position as leader of the great religious movement which began at Oxford, and who placed him in the one fold of His Eternal Son. The influence of that act of October, 1845, has by no means spent itself; had Newman done nothing else but make that decision, he would have influenced the religious thought of England as no other individual has in this century, the more so as it has pleased God that we should know more about this one conversion than we know of almost

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any other since St. Augustine wrote his Confessions. At Oxford Newman's influence was different from that of any other man, and to this hour his name exerts a spell over English minds which is quite peculiar. His sister wrote in 1841, "I am sure it is a great gift, that insight you show into human nature. When I think of people whom one calls decidedly 'clever men,' I see what I estimate in you is not their sort of talent; it is nothing intellectual, it is a sort of spiritual perception; and I wonder whether it is anything like the gifts in the Corinthian Church." \* Principal Shairp has said, "The influence he gained without apparently setting himself to seek it, was something altogether unlike anything else in our time. A mysterious veneration had by degrees gathered round him till now it was almost as if some Ambrose or Augustine of older ages had reappeared. . . . In Oriel Lane light-hearted undergraduates would drop their voices and whisper, 'There's Newman.' When, head thrust forward and gaze fixed as though on some vision seen only by himself, with swift noiseless step he glided by, awe fell on them for a moment, almost as if it had been some apparition that had passed." And of Newman's sermons, the same writer observes, "Since then many voices of powerful teachers may have been heard, but none that ever penetrated the soul like his."

It was in the heyday of his influence, when deep in the study of the Fathers, that the first shock came, which ended, nearly six years after, in his

\* *Letters and Correspondence of F. H. Newman*, vol. ii. (1891) January, 1841.



conversion. The Church of England is not strong in history: she has produced no single Church historian of eminence in three hundred years. She has been passed in this respect, by German Protestantism, which has had at least a Neander.<sup>2</sup> In the year previous to that of which I speak Newman had answered a proposal to reform the Roman Breviary by saying, "I do not think it will do to attempt to correct it by history. None of the parties concerned are strong enough, in fact, to do so." It was Newman who really broke the ice. He plunged into the history of the fourth and fifth centuries, by which the real character of the Church must ever be determined, embracing as they do the Church's settlement of her doctrine on the Incarnation. He noticed in the history of the Eutychian controversy of the fifth century "the great power of the Pope (as great as he claims now, almost)," and although he seemed to see also a "marvellous interference of the civil power," he was destined soon to discover that whilst the latter was not really submitted to by the Church, the former fact was of vital import in the controversy between England and Rome. This was in the year 1839, and the light which found its way into his mind came not when he was ill at ease or already distrustful of his position, but in the course of his historical studies. The same year there appeared an article in the *Dublin Review* in which the author (Cardinal Wise-

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps one ought to name Milman's *Latin Christianity*. From a literary point of view it is a book of great excellence, but it is so tinged with semi-Arianism that it cannot be placed on a level with even Neander.

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man) showed that the mere fact that the Church of England was out of communion with the rest of the Christian world, was its sufficient condemnation. She indeed judged the rest of the Church, but the rest of the Church judged her. St. Augustine had insisted on the principle, "the world judges in security," as being fatal to the Donatists. He could point out that they had no letters of communion to the rest of the Episcopate; the Christian world did not recognize them. St. Optatus had led the attack, pointing to the fact that the Donatists at Rome had no access to the chair and tomb of the Apostle Peter. St. Augustine added that round that See was gathered practically the whole world, and the Donatists were not in touch with this world. It was this that Cardinal Wiseman pressed home the most.\* Newman felt the force of the argument. He said in plain English that the article gave him "a stomach-ache." It was, he says, "the first real hit." "We are not," he says, "at the bottom of things." In the autumn of 1839, he tells Archdeacon Wilberforce that two things have disturbed him—(1) "the position of Leo in the Monophysite controversy," and (2) the principle *securus judicat orbis terrarum* used in the Donatist controversy. In other words, the history of the early Councils revealed the fact that Rome had some right to the claim of antiquity, and the actual

\* It has been said that the existence of the Greeks in separation from Rome alters the state of the question; but the same argument applies to those Easterns who are out of communion with Rome. The Catholic and Roman world outnumber all the other Christians put together.

state of affairs before his eyes, viz., the isolation of the Church of England, could not be reconciled with St. Augustine's arguments as to the universality of the Church. How could England be right, and the rest of the Christian world wrong? But in September of this same year he wrote a sentence which forms the key to his real character—a resolve which carried with it the secret of his conversion: for two things are required for conversion—the grace of God and the correspondence of man. Newman expressed the latter when he said, September 22, 1839, "I will not blink the question—so be it." He describes his mind in that year as being in presence of a "vista, opened, the end of which I do not see"; but he had determined not to "blink the question."

It must not, however, be supposed that Newman was actually fearful, at this time, as to the claims of the Church of England on his allegiance. It was more the effect on others that he dreaded. How could he satisfy them and make clear the strength of the Anglican claims, when in all honesty he must admit the Papal character of the Church in the fifth century, and when in all probability Cardinal Wiseman's article would infuse doubt into the minds of others?

The first antidote that he relied on was the suggestion that the children of the Church of England would best fulfil their duty to their [supposed] mother "not by leaving her, but by promoting her return, and not thinking they have a right to rush into such higher state as communion with the centre of unity." This, of course,