

**CONVERSION OF AUGUSTINE.
REPRINTED FROM NEWMAN'S
"HISTORICAL SKETCHES" WITH
INTRODUCTION**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649751709

Conversion of Augustine. Reprinted from Newman's "Historical Sketches" with Introduction by John Henry Newman

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

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AUGUSTINE AND HIS MOTHER.

INTRODUCTION

This little book should be interesting not only because of the man and the event it deals with but also because of the writer and the writing.

The likeness between St. Augustine and Cardinal Newman is very striking. Whatever difference exists is but the accident of distance. Transposing both from the ends of fifteen centuries of years we can conceive of either as doing exactly what the other did.

It was this kinship of mind which enabled Newman to interpret the life of Augustine so faithfully and to write of his conversion as no one else had written before him or ever will write. Indeed there is no need for further writing. Whoever reads this sketch knows St. Augustine—sees the soul of him laid bare by the most sympathetic hand that ever put kind and gentle thoughts into perfect language. Was Newman thinking of his own dark hour while he wrote? There can be little doubt of it. And so we have the story of two strangely beautiful lives compiled and complete in one short chapter.

For who can write of sorrow but who has wept? or who can tell of strife but who has striven? or who can sing of victory but who has fought and won? Newman's language

here is high art. He does not waste words on little things or even on big things: he takes the great things in the saint's career and with a few bold strokes the picture is complete, perfect. He met Augustine soul to soul and he tells us what he saw.

The object in reprinting this sketch is to give the people of St. Augustine's parish a knowledge of their patron. This knowledge cannot ever be conveyed so well as in the words of Newman. And in a spiritual way it must be helpful. What better means can be used for leading sinners to repentance or for guiding those who are groping darkly towards the light than to put before them the life of one who did himself sin and sorrow for it—blazing a trail for us to the kingdom of heaven through obstacles which appear insurmountable but are not?

There is yet another object and it is this: The parish lies at the very gates of a great university. In all modern secular schools of higher learning there is unquestionably an atmosphere of unfaith in formal Christianity and a general assumption that religious belief and practice are incompatible with high intellectual culture. I do not say this in a fault-finding or damnatory spirit: I merely state what is generally conceived to be a fact, and the friends of the universities will not object to it; why should they? Now, whether we admit it or not, the greater number of us take

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whatever beliefs we may have on the authority of others, of men whom we know to be our superiors intellectually, whose characters we admire and whose opinions we respect. Of course there are those who like to strike the intellectual pose, who wish to have it thought that they work out all the problems of life for themselves by themselves, but they are not to be taken seriously. The many follow the beaten way to conviction—"our fathers have told us"—and as at present "our fathers" happen to be, for the most part, men who do not believe in Divine Revelation, it is very natural that those who sit at their feet should think with them. A knowledge of the lives and characters of the two men brought together in this little book will help to meet this difficulty. We need make no apology, nor may we take any shame to ourselves for that we belong to a Church which reckoned among her most loyally obedient children such minds as Saint Augustine and Cardinal Newman.

J. McD.



CONVERSION OF AUGUSTINE

"Thou hast chastised me and I was instructed, as a steer unaccustomed to the yoke. Convert me, and I shall be converted, for Thou art the Lord my God. For after Thou didst convert me, I did penance, and after Thou didst show unto me, I struck my thigh. I am confounded and ashamed, because I have borne the reproach of my youth."—*Jer. xxxi, 18, 19.*

Augustine was the son of a pious mother, who had the pain of witnessing, for many years, his wanderings in doubt and unbelief, who prayed incessantly for his conversion, and at length was blessed with the sight of it. From early youth he had given himself up to a course of life quite inconsistent with the profession of a catechumen, into which he had been admitted in infancy. How far he had fallen into any great excesses is doubtful. He uses language of himself which may have the worst of meanings, but may, on the other hand, be but the expression of deep repentance and spiritual sensitiveness. In his twentieth year he embraced the Manichæan heresy, in which he continued nine years. Towards the end of that time, leaving Africa, his native country, first for Rome, then for Milan, he fell in with St. Ambrose; and his conversion and baptism followed in the course of his thirty-fourth year. This memorable event, his conversion, has been celebrated in the Western

Church from early times, being the only event of the kind thus distinguished, excepting the conversion of St. Paul.

His life had been for many years one of great anxiety and discomfort, the life of one dissatisfied with himself, and despairing of finding the truth. Men of ordinary minds are not so circumstanced as to feel the misery of irreligion. That misery consists in the perverted and discordant action of the various faculties and functions of the soul, which have lost their legitimate governing power, and are unable to regain it, except at the hands of their Maker. Now the run of irreligious men do not suffer in any great degree from this disorder, and are not miserable; they have neither great talents nor strong passions; they have not within them the materials of rebellion in such measure as to threaten their peace. They follow their own wishes, they yield to the bent of the moment, they act on inclination, not on principle, but their motive powers are neither strong nor various enough to be troublesome. Their minds are in no sense under rule; but anarchy is not in their case a state of confusion, but of deadness; not unlike the internal condition as it is reported of eastern cities and provinces at present, in which, though the government is weak or null, the body politic goes on without any great embarrassment or collision of its members one with another, by the force of inveterate habit.