

NEWMAN'S RECEPTION INTO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: ITS MESSAGE AND RELEVANCE

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The date was October 9th 1845; the location, Littlemore near Oxford; the exact spot, the oratory in a row of cottages where a group of Oxford scholars had led a life of prayer and study for some years. The event that took place - John Henry Newman's reception into the Catholic Church - was to have a profound significance for the ecclesiastical history of England in the nineteenth century. Indeed, it was not circumscribed to Britain and the age in which it took place: its repercussions have been felt beyond the shores of England and continue to influence men and women down to this final decade of our own century, and we may be sure that its effects will not cease with the present sesquicentennial.

There were other receptions, around the same period, of people who were well-known in the society of their times, yet of none of them is the 150th anniversary recalled and celebrated as is that of John Henry Newman. His conversion journey is unique in many ways and still affects the lives of an undetermined number of men and women.

The event itself was extremely simple. Like many great happenings that have far-reaching consequences, it would almost appear as an anti-climax in its outward setting. Only a few staunch friends were present. The dark evening was cold and wet. The priest who performed the ceremony was not any renowned ecclesiastic of England, but an unknown Passionist, the son of peasant stock from Viterbo, in Italy. He spoke broken English and was on his way to a Chapter of his religious Congregation in Belgium. He had been requested by one of Newman's friends (J. B. Dalgairns) to break his journey at Oxford, since in Littlemore it was "very likely that there should

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be some work for you to do."¹ It was indeed a sober way of announcing the request of the renowned Mr. Newman to be received into the Catholic Church!

Fr Dominic may well have lacked some human qualities that would have made him a popular figure in Victorian England, but he more than made up for it by the sincerity of his faith and the saintliness of his life. Newman spoke in high terms of him, considering him to be a "very holy man" and wishing everyone were as charitable as he knew him to be.²

Newman himself, on the morning of his reception, described what was about to take place:

"Father Dominic, the Passionist, came here last night - and though he was just off a trying journey, let me begin my Confession to him at once. He is now gone to Mass in Oxford - and on his return I am to complete it; and, if it is so ordered, shall be received this evening into what I believe to be the One only Fold of Christ. Two friends, who live here, will be received with me."³

Newman wrote a number of such terse notes to his friends on the 8th and 9th October announcing his intention to ask to be received into what he had come to believe to be the true Church of the Redeemer. These words of his are well-known, but perhaps not so familiar is Fr Dominic's description of the event as he experienced it. We find the following account in a letter he wrote a week later from Belgium to the Superior General of his religious Congregation:

"I left Aston on the 8th, and reached Oxford at ten o'clock that night. I was in a pitiful state with all the rain that had pour-

¹ ALFRED WILSON, C.P., *Blessed Dominic Barberi*. Supernaturalized Briton. London - Glasgow, Sands & Co., 1967, p. 302.

² *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*. Edited at the Birmingham Oratory with notes and an Introduction by Charles Stephen Dessain and others. London, Nelson, 1961-1972 (Vols. XI-XII); Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973-1984 (Vols. XXIII-XXXI. IVI). Cf. Vol. XI, pp. 5-6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 12. The two friends were Richard Stanton, an Anglican deacon who was later to be a member of the first community of English Oratorians, and Frederick Bowles, an Anglican priest who would also be an Oratorian with Newman for a number of years.

ed down for four or five hours continuously...We arrived at Littlemore about an hour before midnight. I went to the fire to dry myself. But what a sight met my eyes when I saw Mr Newman on his knees at my feet, asking me to hear his confession and to admit him into the Catholic Church!

There beside the fireside, he began his general confession, with extraordinary humility and devotion

The following morning, when I had gone to Oxford to say Mass in a Catholic chapel and had returned to Littlemore, in pouring rain, I terminated Mr Newman's confession. After that, I heard the confession of two other gentlemen who were there, namely, the Rev. Stanton and the Rev. Bowles, both of whom had been protestant ministers just like Mr. Newman.

Then on the evening of the 9th, at about six o'clock, I received the profession of faith of all three gentlemen. Afterwards, I administered baptism *sub conditione*, and then completed the confession of the three of them with sacramental absolution.

The following morning, the Feast of St Francis Borgia, I said Mass for the first time in their private oratory, as a good priest⁴ had lent me all that was necessary. I gave Holy Communion to Mr. Newman and his four companions,⁵ who had been Protestants and who are now very fervent Catholics... Mr. Newman is reputed to be the most learned man in England. In my opinion, he is the most humble and likable man that I ever met in my life. I hope the results of such conversions will be incalculable"⁶

Looked at from the viewpoint of salvation history and of the abiding relevance of the event of grace that took place in the declining hours of that October evening in Littlemore, 150 years ago, we can say that Bl. Dominic Barberi's hopes have been fulfilled. God alone knows how many people have been inspired, enlightened and guided to a greater fulness of revealed truth by the example of Newman's life and reception, and by

⁴ The 'good priest' was Fr Robert Newsham, a Jesuit, who for years had been in charge of the Catholic Church of St Clement's, Oxford.

⁵ The four companions were John Dalgairns, Ambrose St John, Frederick Bowles and Richard Stanton.

⁶ *Domenico Barberi (Beato Domenico della Madre di Dio). John Henry Newman (Servo di Dio, Cardinale)*. A cura del Sac. Pietro Innocenti. Viterbo, Edizioni Cultura, 1978, pp. 50-52. Cf. *Dominic Barberi in England. A New Series of Letters*. Translated and edited by Father Urban Young, C.P.. London, Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1935, pp. 138-141.

the persuasive force of his written words. In the following pages, we wish to consider a few points that played a significant role in his spiritual Aeneid, and which are still pertinent to the times in which we live.

The principle of dogma and the authority of a teaching Church

Richard H. Hutton, who wrote a shorter but noteworthy biography of Newman in the year of the Cardinal's death, stressed the importance of dogma for him, as evidenced in his first theological book, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*. He rightly states that Newman regarded dogma as the backbone of religion, a conviction he always defended with the utmost consistency and energy: "I suppose that all clear-headed men will agree with Cardinal Newman in admitting that, without the confession of certain intellectual truths, and without a careful sifting of what these truths are, there is no possibility of the safe preservation of any Divine revelation."⁷

The only question raised by Hutton is that too much intellectual defining and dissecting, too much analysis and scrutiny, can effectively render arid and sluggish the very life and spirit of that deposit of revealed truths which dogmas are intended to protect. Consequently, he thought that Newman considered dogma a little too much as the essence, instead of as the mere protective covering of revelation."⁸

Dogmatic statements then, according to Hutton, would be needed only for those minds which cannot accept the manifestation of God's marvellous life and of his incomprehensible love for us without asking a hundred questions - questions which assuredly are far easier to ask than to answer adequately, especially since we are dealing with the mysteries of religion. The fact is, however, that we live in a world of intelligent and rational beings, who by their very nature *do* ask questions and *do* need reasonable answers and elucidations. Arius, Nestorius and Pelagius did ask questions about revelation; so did Luther, Calvin and Zwingli - and the answers they gave did not always

⁷ RICHARD H. HUTTON, *Cardinal Newman*. London, Methuen and Co., 1891, p. 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

tally with the Church's understanding of certain revealed truths as handed down by the Apostles. Therefore, the teaching Church, *ecclesia docens*, is compelled at times to give clear answers and precise formulas in dogmatic statements.

Catholic theology endeavours to determine the content of revelation and to penetrate its meaning, guided by the light of reason which in its turn is enlightened by faith. This may well be a line of escape that lies 'between the devil and the deep blue sea,' namely, between reckless freedom of thought on the one hand, and agnosticism on the other, but it is a well-nigh indispensable instrument at the service of the Church's teaching authority. Not that theologizing is without its dangers. Well-known is the figure used by Newman to describe its perils, when his *Letter to Pusey* defending Catholic teaching on the Blessed Virgin Mary was attacked and criticized not only by Protestants but also by some zealous Catholics:

"Recollect, to write theology is like dancing on the tight rope some hundred feet above the ground. It is hard to keep from falling, and the fall is great... The questions are so subtle, the distinctions so fine, and critical jealous eyes so many... you may get into hot water, before you know where you are."⁹

However, the way of sound theology, buttressed by doctrinal precision and authoritative Church guidance, for all its perils and curbs, is a much safer and surer road than the one which escapes from the shackles of dogmatic statements. And this is what Newman's book on the Arians so carefully and elaborately shows concludes Hutton.¹⁰

It is true that Newman always showed deep respect for the principle of dogmatic truth and of an ecclesial authority speaking clearly and firmly in defence of it. His famous first conversion at the age of fifteen implanted in his young mind what he calls in the *Apologia* "impressions of dogma, which, through God's mercy, have never been effaced or obscured".¹¹

The whole Oxford Movement which culminated in

⁹ *The Letters and Diaries*, Vol. XXII, p. 215.

¹⁰ *Cardinal Newman*, p. 31.

¹¹ *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. Being a History of his Religious Opinions by JOHN HENRY CARDINAL NEWMAN. Edited, with an Introduction and Notes, by MARTIN J. SVAGLIC. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967, p. 17.

Newman's reception, sprang from the need to defend the primitive purity of doctrine and divine authority of the Church of England. In July 1833, before the judges of the Assize Court, John Keble launched a vigorous protest from the University pulpit of St Mary the Virgin's in Oxford against the State's interference with matters directly under the jurisdiction of the bishops, the successors of the Apostles. The theme of his sermon was prompted by a bill that had been introduced in Parliament aimed at suppressing a number of Anglican bishoprics in Ireland. In the preface to the printed text of his sermon, Keble asked how sincere members of the Church of England, who still believed her authority divine, were to continue their communion with the Church *established*, (hitherto the pride and comfort of their lives,) without any taint of those Erastian Principles on which she is now avowedly to be governed? What answer can we make henceforth to the partisans of the Bishop of Rome, when they taunt us with being a mere Parliamentary Church? And how, consistently with out present relations to the State, can even the doctrinal purity and integrity of the MOST SACRED ORDER be preserved?¹²

Keble's qualified protest was of no immediate avail: the bill was passed in Parliament the next month (August 1833). However, it was the fillip that set in motion a Movement, whose far-reaching consequences Keble could not have imagined at that time. Taking his cue from that fateful sermon, Newman began the following month (September 1833) to write, publish and distribute the first of the *Tracts for the Times*. They were to be the literary weapons of the Oxford Movement in its battle against doctrinal liberalism and the encroachments of the State. They were earnest pleas in defence of the Church of England - of her doctrine, her apostolic succession, her liturgy and her independence of the State in religious questions. Moreover, the Tracts called the clergy to the ideal of holiness demanded by their vocation. Few pamphlets have ever roused such an immediate sensation. It was said that they sent a shiver down the spine of many complacent ecclesiastics of the day.

¹² JOHN KEBLE, *National Apostasy*. Considered in a Sermon preached in St. Mary's Church, Oxford before His Majesty's Judges of Assize on Sunday July 14th 1833. Privately printed and published: Abington Oxfordshire, The Rocket Press, 1983, p. 11.

The very first Tract, *On the Ministerial Commission*, was respectfully addressed to the clergy and it recalled some truths that were in danger of being quietly and conveniently ignored. The words sounded like a battle cry, certainly a call to a spiritual combat:

"I am but one of yourselves, - a Presbyter; and therefore I conceal my name, lest I should take too much on myself by speaking in my own person. Yet speak I must; for the times are very evil, yet no one speaks against them...There are some who rest their divine mission on their own unsupported assertion; others, who rest it upon their popularity; others, on their success; and others, who rest it upon their temporal distinctions. This last case has, perhaps, been too much our own; I fear we have neglected the real ground on which our authority is built,
— OUR APOSTOLIC DESCENT.

Therefore, my dear Brethren, act up to your professions. Let it not be said that you have neglected a gift; for if you have the Spirit of the Apostles on you, surely this *is* a great gift. "Stir up the gift of God which is in you. Make much of it. Show your value of it. Keep it before your minds as an honourable badge, far higher than that secular respectability, or cultivation, or polish, or learning, or rank, which gives you a hearing with the many. Tell *them* of your gift. The times will soon drive you to do this, if you mean to be still any thing. But wait not for the times. Do not be compelled, by the world's forsaking you, to recur as if unwillingly to the high source of your authority..."¹³

Newman's struggle was for the integrity of the Church and the practical revival of some of its doctrines which were becoming "obsolete" with many of its members. In other words, he fought against religious and doctrinal liberalism. He saw that there could be no Christian religion without a definite creed, and he knew that the Church was the divinely-appointed guardian of revealed truths. Unless there was this firm ground of religious truth upheld by an ecclesial authority that resisted compromise for political advantages and refused to sacrifice doctrine for expediency, then the Church would not fulfil the

¹³ Tract No. 1: *Tracts for the Times*. By Members of the University of Oxford. London, J.G. & F. Rivington; Oxford, J.H. Parker, 1839. Vol. I, pp. 1-4, *passim*.

mandate she received from Christ and would not survive. On this dogmatic principle he challenged his own dearly-beloved Anglican Communion, and when he failed to gain the support and approval of its authorities, he was forced to look to a Church of 'strangers' where, however, the authorities still spoke with the vigour of Athanasius of old and the clarity of Leo the Great.

In the *Apologia* he gives us a vivid description of his journey from Oxford to Rome. He spells out the principles of the Tractarian Movement through which he tried first of all to bolster and invigorate the Anglican Church. The chief proposition had to do with doctrine:

"First was the principle of dogma; my battle was with liberalism; by liberalism I mean the anti-dogmatic principle and its developments. This was the first point on which I was certain... The main principle of the movement is as dear to me now, as it ever was. I have changed in many things: in this I have not. From the age of fifteen, dogma has been the fundamental principle of my religion: I know no other religion; I cannot enter into the idea of any other religion; religion, as a mere sentiment, is to me a dream and a mockery."¹⁴

The perennial relevance of this principle can scarcely escape our notice. In our days, when the most sacrosanct truths are being questioned and sentiment tends to dictate religious decisions, Newman's sound principle of firm doctrinal clarity is more needed than ever it was.

Following on the doctrinal principle there was the ecclesial and sacramental one:

"Secondly, I was confident in the truth of a certain definite religious teaching, based upon this foundation of dogma: viz. that there was a visible Church, with sacraments and rites which are the channels of invisible grace. I thought that this was the doctrine of Scripture, of the early Church, and of the Anglican Church. Here again, I have not changed in opinion; I am as certain now on this point as I was in 1833, and have never ceased to be certain."¹⁵

¹⁴ *Apologia*, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55. Newman did change his mind with regard to the third point of which he was certain until 1833, namely, that the Pope was the

Here we have the two hinges on which Newman's religious thought was to turn. They were the guiding principles on which his religious allegiance and his adherence to a particular ecclesial Communion were to depend. Where he found them respected and lived, he found the truth and his conscience was at peace. His search demanded much laborious study, earnest prayer for light, and painful detachment from people, places and practices, he had loved. Yet, his fidelity to these principles explain the significance of his decision, and the message which his reception holds for all believers and for all times.

This dogmatic and ecclesial principle appears in certain controversies that urged Newman to take up arms to defend the Anglican Church and later to consider the claims of the Church of Rome. There was first of all the liberal onset in the years 1833-1835 against the University of Oxford, until then a bulwark of Anglicanism. A bill was introduced in Parliament aimed at abolishing religious tests at the English Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Before receiving an academic degree at either University, undergraduates had to subscribe to the 39 Articles of the Anglican faith. At Oxford, this was obligatory even at matriculation. A leading figure in this controversy was Dr Hampden. A number of his publications¹⁶ at this period not only advocated the abolition of these professions of Anglican faith in the Universities, but they also contained opinions that seemed to Newman to undermine the very foundations of Christian doctrine: they tend in my opinion (he wrote in the *Apologia*) altogether to make shipwreck of the Christian faith."¹⁷

It was not so much the presence or absence of such religious safeguards at the Universities that really worried Newman as the liberal, undogmatic and secular mentality that lay behind Hampden's argumentation. This Oriel Fellow and tutor may well have been a sharp philosopher but he was defi-

Antichrist and that the Church of Rome was in league with the Antichrist by its additions to the doctrines of the primitive Church.

¹⁶ Renn Dickson Hampden was a liberal-minded Fellow of Oriel and played a leading role in the struggle against the Tractarians. In 1832 he published his Bampton Lectures: *The Scholastic Philosophy considered in its relations to Christian Theology*, and in 1834 the pamphlet: *Observations on Religious Dissent*. His interpretation of Scripture challenged the truth of certain fundamental dogmas of the christian faith.

¹⁷ *Apologia* p. 62

nately liberal and untrustworthy in his theological thought. He maintained that religion was quite distinct from theological opinions, that dogma was simply a theological opinion formally insisted upon but open to improvement and, above all, 'that the Church of England was not dogmatic in its spirit, though the wording of the formularies might often carry the sound of dogmatism.'¹⁸ Newman was not mistaken in opposing him. But it shows how things were beginning to change and develop in the Anglican Church, when we recall that this same Dr. Hampden was appointed (albeit amid a storm of protest) Regius Professor of Divinity in 1836, and then consecrated Bishop of Hereford in 1848 - three years after Newman's reception.

The liberal trend, that compromised with worldly values on the one hand and with Protestant ideas on the other, continued as Newman had foreseen. The condemnation of *Tract 90* in 1841, by one bishop after another, was a further bitter blow for him. As an Anglican, he had unqualified faith in the word of his bishop. "I loved to act as feeling myself in my Bishop's sight, as if it were the sight of God. It was one of my special supports and safeguards against myself; I could not go very wrong while I had reason to believe that I was in no respect displeasing him".¹⁹ So much so that in announcing his reception to Bishop Wiseman, he gave him the greatest assurance of his sincerity that he could think of by stating that he 'would obey the Pope as he had obeyed his own bishop in the Anglican Church.'²⁰

In this same year, 1841, there was a final instance of compromise and weakness on the part of Church authorities. It was a question of a bishopric which the Anglican Church intended to set up in Jerusalem in conjunction with the Lutheran Church of Prussia. Each Church would nominate in turn a bishop who would have jurisdiction over any Protestants living in the Holy Land as well as over some schismatic or heretical congregations of the Middle East. The Prussian Church did not even have bishops, it was non-episcopal; hence all candidates for the See would be consecrated by Anglican Bishops. It was a compromise on a doctrinal issue for the sake of a political advantage, for England thus hoped to win prestige and power in the Middle East through Protestantism, like to what France

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

enjoyed there through the Latin Church and Russia through the Greek Orthodox Church. Such 'fraternizing,' which infringed Church discipline and ignored its doctrine was a final stroke that broke Newman's faith in the Church of his birth. He realized that a public protest would be of no avail any longer. Things had gone too far. He limited himself to an unsigned letter to the Editor of *The Times*, which in the event was never published. There was bitter irony in his words as he spoke of the Church of England not being of much worth 'if she is to be nice and mealy-mouthed when a piece of work is to be done for her good lord the State. Surely, surely, in *such* a case, some formula can be found for proving heresy to be orthodox and schism to be charity. As for Anglicans consecrating Prussian bishops: Surely it is an evil great enough to find Bishops heretics, without going on to make heretics Bishops."²¹

Three years of prayer and study went by. Newman's final difficulty was also of a doctrinal nature: had the Roman system added truths to the doctrine of Antiquity which in fact were no truths at all but superstitions, corruptions and errors? As he proceeded with his investigation on the development of doctrine, it became clear to him that a living idea, in order to remain the same, had to develop and evolve. He discovered that the Church of Rome had never been overwhelmed by its meeting with and sifting of other ideas throughout the centuries. She always seemed to rise from her struggle with heresy and errors with renewed vigour and with a fuller understanding of the truth of which she was the authentic guardian. After such periods of controversy and contention, "doctrine is where it was, and usage, and precedence, and principle, and policy; there may be changes, but they are consolidations or adaptations; all is unequivocal and determinate, with an identity which there is no disputing."²²

This message proclaimed by Newman's conversion, namely, that objective, unchanging, doctrinal truth is necessary for the true Church of Christ has lost none of its relevance in our days when many endeavour to dilute dogma and wish the Church to

²¹ Letter to the Editor of *The Times*, 10 October, 1841, quoted in IAN KER, *John Henry Newman. A Biography*. Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 235.

²² *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1909, p. 444.

change her stance on important moral and doctrinal issues. Indeed the times in which we live seem to confront us once again with threats similar to those faced by Newman in the decade before his reception. Dogma, the basic principle underlying his conversion, is as prominent an issue as ever for the Christian faith. As Fr Fergal McGrath wrote: "Even more than in his day is there need of persuasive explanation of the true meaning of this inoffensive Greek word, which is to so many quite sincere men as a red rag to a bull. In his pages they will learn that the blunt, hard sound of the word suggests a clean-cut issue that must sooner or later be faced - the issue between truth and non-truth."²³

Both Churches, the Anglican and the Roman Catholic, are now lashed by the waves of anti-dogmatic ideas and secular trends. The most sacrosanct doctrines are being questioned and at times explained away. The decision of the General Synod of the Anglican Church some years ago to permit the ordination of women to the priesthood has put many a sincere believer in a position that resembles the one Newman found himself in over 150 years ago. A prominent Newman scholar of our day has called that fatal decision of the Anglican Synod the end of the Oxford Movement. We can agree with those words, when we recall the guiding principle and aim of the Tractarians as understood by Newman. The Anglo-Catholic party in the Church of England has now been definitively overthrown by liberal groups. Anglicanism has lost that saving element which Newman had sought so much to revitalize and consolidate.

On the Catholic side, Pope John Paul II keeps raising his voice in defence of dogmatic and moral truths, proclaiming in season and out of season that the Church does not have the power to alter what has been handed down by the Apostles and is enshrined in its dogmatic tradition. He is sometimes criticized for his so-called 'conservatism' on some points, which in the light of faith is simply fidelity to his commission. Those fiery words in the penultimate page of Newman's *Essay on Development* are confirmed once again in his case, and are

²³ FERGAL MCGRATH, S.J., *The Conversion: A Tribute to Newman*. Essays on Aspects of his Life and Thought. Edited by Michael Tierney. Dublin, Browne and Nolan, 1945, p. 82.

surely a consolation for him in the silent suffering that must fill his heart at times:

"Indeed it is one of the most popular charges against the Catholic Church at this very time, that she is "incorrigible;" - change she cannot, if we listen to St. Athanasius or St. Leo; change she never will, if we believe the controversialist or alarmist of the present day."²⁴

Newman's insight, which led him to the Church of Rome, rested on his conviction that a religion, bereft of unchanging objective truths and of a firm ecclesial authority to guard them, has no lasting power and cannot produce in its members a sincere and persevering practice of religious exercises sustained by an unwavering faith. The ethical code of the gentleman (the real gentleman as distinct from the sham) was all right as far as it went, but it lacked a doctrinal foundation and an objective teaching authority. It tended in fact towards orthopraxis as an accepted code of conduct. But if orthopraxis is substituted for orthodoxy on the score that it doesn't matter what one believes provided one does what is right, then the logical conclusion in the life of the majority of ordinary believers soon follows, namely, that if it does not matter what one believes, there can be no serious obligation to believe anything at all.

In our day, a false compromise tends to erode the demands of objective doctrinal truths: it is the continuation of that liberalism in religion against which Newman fought all his life. His reception into the Catholic Church witnesses above all to his respect for the objective truth of divine revelation and to the need for an authoritative ecclesial voice to safeguard its continuing development amid the changes and challenges of the centuries. In a letter to Manning in November 1844, he says: "the reasons for which I believe as much as our system teaches, *must* lead me to believe more, and ...not to believe more is to fall back into scepticism."²⁵ His conscience was urging him to go to that Church where he saw lived out in practice those principles which had guided him from his youth and especially during the years of the Oxford Movement.

²⁴ *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, p. 444.

²⁵ *Apologia*, p. 207.

A Question of Conscience

The more Newman studied and prayed in his Littlemore retreat, the more clearly did he begin to perceive the irresistible claims of the Church of Rome and the weakness of his Anglican position. He saw the Church of the Fathers reflected in the solidity and resoluteness of Catholicism. "The Fathers made me a Catholic," he would say many years later.²⁶ Even when asked by a correspondent, four months after his reception, what exactly were the grounds for his secession to the Church of Rome, he found it difficult to formulate his reasons in a single proposition, for by doing so he seemed to leave himself open to misunderstanding and criticism. The one reason he did allow himself to state was that "were St. Athanasius and St. Ambrose now to come to Oxford, they would go to Mass in St. Clement's" - the Catholic church.²⁷ He had expressed himself in a similar way in his *Essay on Development*:

"Did St. Athanasius or St. Ambrose come suddenly to life, it cannot be doubted what communion he would take to be his own. All surely will agree that these Fathers, whatever opinions of their own, whatever protests, if we will, would find themselves more at home with such men as St. Bernard or St. Ignatius Loyola, or with the lonely priest in his lodging, or the holy sisterhood of mercy, or the unlettered crowd before the altar, than with the teachers or with the members of any other creed."²⁸

The principles which Newman had followed in bringing to life and guiding the Oxford Movement placed him before a stark choice. The whole affair became for him a question of conscience. As the years passed in Littlemore, the call of conscience became more and more imperative. On 8th January, 1845, he formulated his dilemma as follows: "The simple question is, Can I (it is personal, not whether another, but can I) be saved in the English Church? am I in safety, were I to die to-

²⁶ Letter to Pusey: *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*. London, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1910, Vol. II, p. 24.

²⁷ *The Letters and Diaries*, Vol. XI, p. 110.

²⁸ *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 97-98.

night? Is it a mortal sin in *me*, not joining another communion?"²⁹ The light of conscience and the call of duty become dominant themes in those early months of 1845. He was already working on his *Essay on Development*, in an effort to settle his remaining intellectual difficulties. The further he advanced, the more inevitable his decision seemed to become. In an intensely sorrowful letter to his sister Jemima in March, he reveals the state of his soul and of his conscience:

"As to my conviction...I cannot at all make out *why* I should determine on moving, except as thinking I should offend God by not doing so... Suppose I were suddenly dying, one may deceive oneself as to what one should do - but I think I should directly send for a Priest. Is not this a test of one's state of mind? Ought I to live where I could not bear to die?"³⁰

For a while Newman kept asking himself if he was being driven by his reason or by his conscience: "I cannot make out, if I am impelled by what seems *clear*, or by a sense of duty."³¹ But soon the inner conviction prevailed that he was being called to join the Church of Rome, and that to resist would mean sinning against the light of his conscience. Those who really knew him, understood his motives. Pusey, for example, in a letter to an unnamed friend which was published in the *English Churchman* on October 16, said: "He has gone as a simple act of duty with no view to himself, placing himself entirely in God's hands. And such are they whom God employs."³²

This loyalty to the call of conscience cost Newman immense personal sacrifice. Had he silenced its voice and remained where he was, he could have kept his friends, his admirers, his income, his career. He could have aspired, without indulging in the vagaries of human ambition, to become Archbishop of Canterbury one day. But he preferred the peace of a good conscience to the transient gain of a sin against the light. Already in early youth, he had been extremely impressed by the teach-

²⁹ *Apologia*, p. 208.

³⁰ Quoted in LOUIS BOUYER, *Newman. His Life and Spirituality*. London, Burns & Oates, 1958, p. 241.

³¹ *Apologia*, p. 208.

³² Cf. H.P. LIDDON, *Life of Edward Bollverie Pusey*. London, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1893. 3rd Edition, p. 461.

ing on conscience in the autobiography of the Evangelical clergyman Thomas Scott, *The Force of Truth*, and had taken as one of his mottos: "Holiness rather than peace."³³ In making his decision to ask to be admitted into the Catholic Church, he may certainly have lost a lot of that peace which the world gives, but his gain was immensely superior to his loss. He earned permanent peace of soul which he was never to lose. Nineteen years later, he could say: "From the time that I became a Catholic... I have been in perfect peace and contentment; I never have had one doubt."³⁴

Few people championed the full rights of conscience as Newman did, few writers pleaded so persuasively on behalf of its authority and freedom; yet he never allowed any trace of subjectivism or relativism to taint his teaching. As we saw, he struggled to uphold the vital principle, that revealed religion with its doctrinal and moral content, was an objective truth, an objective fact. Consequently, he affirmed that conscience, although it is within the human heart before it receives any training, must be formed and educated by the guidance of an external law and authority, if it is to reach maturity and the fullness of truth. In 1881, when Edmund Sheridan Purcell wanted to publish a biographical sketch of the Cardinal for *Celebrities of the Day* and submitted his manuscript to him before publication, Newman not only disapproved of the panegyrical language and the less than charitable reference to former opponents, but also declared that, on the question of doctrine and the Papacy, "to speak of 'supremacy of conscience,' is not an adequate account of what I should consider safe to say on the subject."³⁵

This whole question of conscience, which played such an important role in Newman's reception, is of extreme relevance at the present time. His life, his teaching and his conversion illustrate the true notion of the rights and limits of the individual conscience. People can easily distort the voice of conscience and appeal to it, when in fact they are only justifying their own whims and fancies. Thus obedience to an external and law-

³³ Cf. *Apologia*, pp. 18-19.

³⁴ *Apologia*, p. 214

³⁵ *Letters and Diaries*, Vol. XXIX, p. 388. Cf. JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *Autobiographical Writings*. Edited with Introduction by HENRY TRISTRAM of the Oratory. London and New York, Sheed and Ward, 1956. p. 25.

ful authority can be withheld. In this manner it can be a camouflage for obeying one's own private reasoning or selfish desires. A Christian, however, is obliged to be guided by what the Second Vatican Council calls the objective norms of what is right and wrong.³⁶

Consequently, recent Papal statements, when dealing with the theme of conscience, make frequent reference to the writings of John Henry Newman. Pope John Paul II, on the occasion of the first centenary of the Cardinal's death in 1990, mentioned this point explicitly on a number of occasions. In a Letter to the Archbishop of Birmingham, Maurice Couve de Murville, for the celebrations that marked that centenary in England, the Pope recalled Newman's "timely message" for the "present historical context," and among the topics he singled out for special mention was the Cardinal's teaching on conscience as a means to the acquisition of truth. The Holy Father stressed the need to educate the individual conscience by letting it be enlightened by an objective law. Then he cited verbatim Newman's famous phrase: "Conscience has its rights because it has its duties" declaring these words to be "unequivocal and perennially valid."³⁷

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also teaches that we are obliged to follow conscience since it is the means by which we perceive God-given commandments. In this context, it quotes Newman's words about conscience as "a messenger from Him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ."³⁸ And in the Encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, the present Holy Father, when explaining the relation between conscience, individual freedom and the duty to adhere to objective truth as soon as it is disco-

³⁶ Cf. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*), No. 16.

³⁷ *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XIII, 1 (1990), 1625. Newman's words are from his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk: Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*. Vol. II, p. 250. Cf. also the Address by Pope John Paul II to the participants of the academic Symposium and Centenary of the Death of John Henry Newman, 27 April, 1990: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XIII, I (1990), 1046-1050; and his homily in the Dutch Antilles on 13 May, 1990: *Ibid.*, p. 1302.

³⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1778 and *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*. Vol. 11, p. 248.

vered, once again quotes Newman and calls him "an outstanding defender of the rights of conscience."³⁹

Newman appears to us as a man who always acted according to the light of his conscience. His career was largely determined by the decisions that sprang from this inner sanctuary of his heart. From the time of his first definite turning to God at the age of fifteen, he understood the importance of this "echo of God's voice" within him.⁴⁰

He went to immense trouble to form his conscience in the light of revealed truth. The long hours of study, the continuous prayer for light and the sacrifices he was willing to make, manifest beyond doubt that he was sincere and consistent. At the end of 1841, when he was on his 'death-bed' as regards belonging to the Anglican Church, but still not clear in his mind about the truth of Catholicism, he dissuaded people from seceding to Rome, principally because, as he states in the *Apologia*, "what I could not in conscience do myself, I could not suffer them to do."⁴¹ It was conscience that kept him still waiting and searching for some time, defending his Anglican position on the grounds that the Church of England still had the note of sanctity among its members and consequently could not be wholly displeasing to God.⁴² That same sense of duty, when his conscience was fully informed on the matter, made him kneel at the feet of Fr Dominic and ask to be received into the Catholic Church.

³⁹ *The Splendour of Truth Shines*. Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* addressed by the Supreme Pontiff Pope John Paul II to all the bishops of the Catholic Church regarding certain fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral Teaching. Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993. No. 34.

⁴⁰ *Sermon Notes of John Henry Cardinal Newman 1849-1878*. Edited by Fathers of the Birmingham Oratory. London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1914, p. 327. T. Merrigan sums up the influence of Newman's first conversion on his life as follows: "The youth discovers that the 'voice speaking so clearly in my conscience and my heart' is a 'divine voice'. The young clergyman determines to honour it at all costs. The Catholic apologist concludes that such honour is the preamble to the reception of the Catholic faith. There is real continuity here." (TERRENCE MERRIGAN, *Numquam minus solus quam cum solus - Newman's First Conversion: its Significance for his Life and Thought: The Downside Review* 103 (1985) 113. Cf. pp. 99-116.

⁴¹ *Apologia*, p. 138.

⁴² Cf. *Apologia*, p. 140.

Thus his journey to Rome and his reception were prompted by what this inner light made clear to him. The month after he was received, he could say in a letter to Cardinal Acton: "...I have never, I do trust, aimed at any thing else than obedience to my own sense of right."⁴³

Truth above all

Part of Newman's teaching on conscience is that if it is faithfully followed it will lead us from light to light, and into an ever greater possession of the truth. This process is exemplified in his own life and in his conversion. The development of his religious convictions reflect the purity of his intentions. He had always been a disciple of truth. When he published his lectures on the theory of the *Via Media* in 1837, he made his own the noble words of a 17th century Caroline Divine, Archbishop John Bramhall: "My desire hath been to have Truth for my chiefest friend, and no enemy but error."⁴⁴

His quest, which led up to his reception in 1845, was not a search for faith in God. He already had a vibrant faith, and his life was deeply religious. The doubts and trials of the years preceding 1845 merely strengthened his belief and trust in God. The process of change in Newman's case was limited to the identification of the true Church of Christ. He was led on by the light of truth, and he courageously obeyed it at the expense of intense suffering and great sacrifice. He came to consider schismatic the Church of his birth, the Church he had loved so much and which he had loyally struggled to defend against Liberalism from within its ranks, and from Erastianism from without. This Church appeared to him, as a result of his study and prayer to lack the notes of catholicity, apostolicity, unity and even holiness which the Church of Rome, contrary to external appearances, had preserved.

In the concluding words of his last Anglican sermon, *The Parting of Friends*, he asked his audience to pray for him in time to come, "that in all things he may know God's will, and at all

⁴³ *The letters and Diaries*, Vol. XI. p. 42.

⁴⁴ *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*. Illustrated in Lectures, Letters and Tracts written between 1830-1841. London, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1911. Vol. I, Advertisement to the First and Second Editions, pp. xii-xiii.

times he may be ready to fulfil it."⁴⁵ Ultimately it was God's will, as it was manifested to him, that guided his steps, for only in this divine will, he knew, was the truth to be found. Hence, his search for the Church of Christ was a long journey looking for truth.

This is another point of that 'timely message' of Newman's conversion. It holds its relevance for our day when the very nature of truth is put into question and the possibility of acquiring truth is challenged. Pilate's question arises again from the sceptical hearts of many of our contemporaries: "What is truth?"⁴⁶ Many modern philosophies, dominated by the idea of constant evolution and subjective vision, weaken or even destroy the stability and objectivity of human and divine truth. Relativism saps the strength of our certainties and leads to subtle forms of agnosticism and syncretism. Newman's voice and the example of his sacrifice on behalf of objective truth appear extremely helpful for the present age when many are sinking into the soft sands of subjectivism.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Pope John Paul II should propose him as "an ardent disciple of truth,"⁴⁷ or that Pope Paul VI should have spoken the following words of praise in his honour:

"Newman...guided solely by love of the truth and fidelity to Christ, traced an itinerary, the most toilsome, but also the greatest, the most meaningful, the most conclusive, that human thought ever travelled during the last century, indeed one might say during the modern era, to arrive at the fulness of wisdom and of peace."⁴⁸

Yes, Newman's life was a sustained sacrifice for the truth. He often spoke about suffering for the truth, and when it fell to him to have to do so, he accepted it with persevering fortitude of spirit. In 1824, as a young Anglican curate, he wrote in his private Journal: "I think I really desire the truth, and would

⁴⁵ *Sermons bearing on Subjects of the Day*. London, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909, p. 409.

⁴⁶ John 18,38.

⁴⁷ *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XIII, 1 (1990) 1623.

⁴⁸ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 55 (1963) 1025.

embrace it wherever I found it."⁴⁹ He certainly could not have suspected at that moment what it would cost him to remain true to his words, or what he would be asked to 'embrace.' Twenty one years later, he was faced with the prospect of 'embracing' the whole system of the Roman Catholic Church, a step which, humanly speaking, involved irreparable loss on his part.

Consequently, his reception can be truly seen as a matter of obedience to the truth. He would later describe the Catholic Church as 'the truth after many shadows.'⁵⁰ When explaining the motives of his reception to his sister Jemima, he called upon his duty in conscience to follow the truth as the prevailing reason for having inflicted so much pain on so many of his dear friends, or as Keble put it, for having been the cause of so many broken hearts and bewildered spirits:

"Nor have I thrown influence away, if I have acted at the call of duty. This I have done. With what conscience could I have remained? how could I have answered it at the last day, if, having opportunities of knowing the Truth which others have not, I had not availed myself of them? What a doom would have been mine, if I had kept the Truth a secret in my own bosom, and when I knew which the One Church was, and which was not part of the One Church, I had suffered friends and strangers to die in an ignorance from which I might have relieved them! impossible. One may not act hastily and unsettle others when one has not a clear view - but when one has, it is impossible not to act upon it."⁵¹

It is no wonder then that Newman should still exercise a surprising influence over many of our contemporaries. In particular, his writings and the example of his spiritual journey from Oxford to Rome are the human cause that prompts many an inquirer of our day to start out on the same journey and finally ask to be received into full communion with the Catholic Church. Some would claim that this influence is a 'moral miracle' - difficult to prove for canonical purposes, but nevertheless

⁴⁹ *Autobiographical Writings*, p. 202.

⁵⁰ *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations*. London, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909, p. 281.

⁵¹ *The Letters and Diaries*, Vol. XI, p. 16.

a lasting source of grace for people in search of truth. In fact, his conversion process possesses the peculiar features that make it a 'prototype' for many others who follow in his footsteps. This point was made by a fine obituary in the *Tablet* shortly after the Cardinal's death:

"In his own person NEWMAN had stated and resolved the great dilemma: either Christianity is a human invention destined to have its day, or the primal indefectible Christianity is the Roman Church. It was fitting that he should have advanced to his conclusion by sure steps though slow, that logic, and history, and the voice of conscience should play their several parts, and the evidence be weighed, and objections tested, and passion laid to rest: for the process through which genius arrives at truth is in this way shortened for the many that come after. What was done in those ten years between 1833 and 1843 was done once for all; and the track in the wilderness has grown to be a clear pathway since."⁵²

This paper has focused on just a few of the relevant lessons contained in the message of Newman's reception into full communion with the Catholic Church. The heroic actions of faith accomplished by great men do not cease with their lives on earth. They remain present to all ages with a divine force that is not circumscribed by time and space, but influences salvation history in all ages. Newman's journey and his reception is a case in point.

We began by recalling the scene at Littlemore 150 years ago. To end, let us return for a moment to that same spot, using the words an eminent Newman scholar, Henry Tristram of the Oratory, wrote in 1945 to commemorate the first centenary of Newman's reception:

"That scene will live engraven deep in the memory of English Catholics - the midnight hour, the dim room, the blazing fire, the humble Italian priest, whose one weapon had been the weapon of the Saints, and Newman on his knees before him, vanquished yet victorious."⁵³

⁵² Cf. *The Press and Cardinal Newman*. Arranged by the Rev. Michael F. Glancey. Birmingham, W.J.Cosby; Dublin, M.H.Gill, n.d., p. 247.

⁵³ *Father Dominic and Cardinal Newman: Homage to Cardinal Newman 1845-1945*. Edited by Gordon Wheeler. London, The Westminster Cathedral Chronicle, 1945, p. 32.