

John Henry Newman: The Birth and Pursuit of an Ideal of Holiness

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To ask a person, in anything but jest, whether he is a saint, or to assert a man's holiness in his presence, nearly always produces a moment of silent embarrassment. Whether we consider ourselves to be saintly or unmistakably sinful, whether in fact we are saints residing in the higher mansions or sinners struggling to keep control of our wayward senses, we instinctively recoil from a public assessment of our holiness or our infidelity. In fact, all of us are partly saints, partly sinners, and how far the scales weigh in favour of the one or the other, we prefer to leave to God's judgment and a day of future reckoning.

Even St Paul, that stout-hearted apostle of the nations, recognized within himself the twofold element of sin and saintliness: "I do not understand my own actions ... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ... For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? God alone, through Jesus Christ our Lord! Thanks be to God! ... For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death"¹. Thus while Paul called his fellow Christians "saints"² – the appellation commonly given in the primitive Church to the baptized, or the "faithful" as we say nowadays – and numbered himself among the "perfect"³, he nevertheless declared that he was a sinner, and indeed the "foremost of sinners"⁴. No man is a good judge in his own cause; the test of time, the decision of future generations, and, above all, the unerring judgment of Almighty God will say what a man is worth in heavenly terms.

Did anyone ever ask Newman whether he was a saint? The question brings to mind the testimony given in this context by St Thérèse of the Child Jesus. During the last month of her life she admitted that she was "a very little saint", and when the petals she had plucked from a rose fell one by one from her bed onto the floor she said in all seriousness: "Gather up those petals, little sisters, they will help you to perform favours later on. ... Don't lose one of them"⁵. Again, the day before her death she said to her Prioress who had assured her

¹Rom 7:15.18.22-25; 8:2.

²Cf. Acts 26:10; Rom 12:13.

³ Cf. Phil 3:15; 1Cor 2:6.

⁴1 Tim 1:15. Cf. Eph3:8: "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints ...".

⁵ St Thérèse of Lisieux, *Her Last Conversations*. Translated by John Clarke, O.C.D., Washington D.C. 1977, September 14, No. 1, p. 190; cf. *ibid.*, August 4, No. 2, p. 131; September 3, No. 2, p. 181. On another occasion, however, she stated, in words that resemble those of Newman: "No, I'm not a saint; I've never performed the actions of a saint. I'm a very little soul upon whom God has bestowed graces; that's what I am. What I say is the truth; you'll see this in heaven" (August 9, No. 4, p. 143).

that she was prepared to die since she had always understood humility of heart: “Yes, I have understood humility of heart.... It seems to me I’m humble”⁶. Singular words indeed for a death bed!

From Newman we have no such assertion of personal sanctity but, as in the case of most persons, an avowal of the contrary when he heard through a correspondent that he had been called a saint: “I have nothing of a Saint about me as everyone knows, and it is a severe (and salutary) mortification to be thought next door to one. I may have a high view of many things, but it is the consequence of education and of a peculiar cast of intellect – but this is very different from *being* what I admire. I have no tendency to be a saint – it is a sad thing to say. Saints are not literary men, they do not love the classics, they do not write Tales. I may be well enough in my way, but it is not the ‘high line’. People ought to feel this, most people do. But those who are at a distance have fee-fa-fum notions about one. It is enough for me to black the saints’ shoes – if St Philip uses blacking, in heaven”⁷.



Yet, as we hope to show, saintliness or holiness was very much part of Newman’s life and teaching. As a youth he was captured by the ideal of Christian holiness; as an undergraduate, tutor and preacher he pursued this goal; as a Christian believer he made heroic sacrifices throughout his life to keep faithful to the demands of his ideal; and the day has now come when his own humble judgment on the matter, as has happened with so many dedicated souls, is about to be reversed by the authoritative decree of the Church.

1. The religious atmosphere of the Newman family

John Henry Newman was born into a family of what we might call moderate Anglican churchgoers. They were neither rigid Calvinists nor fervent Evangelicals. The father of the household, John Newman, officially belonged to the Church of England but had a deep-seated suspicion of anything extravagant in religious practices. “Take care”, were his words of warning to his twenty-year-old son against a headstrong acceptance of the Lutheran

⁶*Ibid.*, September 30, p. 205.

⁷*The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*. Edited at the Birmingham Oratory. XXXII Vols. London 1961-2008, Vol. XIII, p. 419.

doctrine of justification by faith only, "...Religion when carried too far induces a mental softness ... do not commit yourself, do nothing ultra"⁸.

However, the Newman family were pious-minded and law-abiding. They belonged to what Louis Bouyer termed "the middling Protestantism, the more or less colourless Anglicanism, which centred round the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer"⁹.

It was not a religion of observances and rites, but one of broad views and dogmatic indifference. The contradictory creeds that for over a century had succeeded one another on the English scene, with the same rapidity as the monarchs, bred a liberal-minded attitude to doctrine and a practical indifference to Church services, all typical of the nominal Christianity which at the present day has become a universal phenomenon. The one strong point of Newman's early religion was the all-pervading presence of the Bible. It was read in its entirety, both in Church, in the home and in private; it formed high moral principles and a religion of "sacred scenes and pious sentiments". Above all, it inculcated a deep sense of God's providence. Newman himself recalls in later years the value of the Bible religion of his childhood: "The reiteration again and again, in fixed course in the public service, of the words of inspired teachers under both Covenants, and that in grave majestic English, has in matter of fact been to our people a vast benefit. It has attuned their minds to religious thoughts; it has given them a high moral standard; it has served them in associating religion with compositions which, even humanly considered, are among the most sublime and beautiful ever written; especially, it has impressed upon them the series of Divine Providences in behalf of man from his creation to his end, and, above all, the words, deeds, and sacred sufferings of Him in whom all the Providences of God centre"¹⁰.



The intelligent and sensitive child imbibed these moral values and spiritual realities. For him, God was far more than a word, and we may take it that Newman remembered his own childhood days when sixty years later he wrote of the spontaneous reception of religious truths by any ordinary child before the harsh course of the world destroys his initial faith:

"We shall not be wrong in holding that this child has in mind the image of an Invisible Being, who exercises a particular providence among us, who is present

⁸ John Henry Newman, *Autobiographical Writings*. Edited with an Introduction by Henry Tristram of the Oratory. London and New York 1956, p. 82.

⁹ Louis Bouyer, *Newman. His Life and Spirituality*. London 1958, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. London 1909, pp. 56-57.

everywhere, who is heart-reading, heart-changing, ever-accessible, open to impetration. ... It is an image of the good God, good in Himself, good relatively to the child, with whatever incompleteness; an image, before it has been reflected on, and before it is recognized by him as a notion. Though he cannot explain or define the word 'God', when told to use it, his acts show that to him it is far more than a word. ... He has that within him which actually vibrates, responds, and gives a deep meaning to the lessons of his first teachers about the will and the providence of God."¹¹

Here we get a glimpse of the early years of Newman's religious experience. It is evident that the Presence and Providence of God were already at the heart of his beliefs, sustaining his religious convictions.

Then for a period of years during his school days at Ealing, the religious principles and the spontaneous belief of his infancy were somewhat blunted by his first encounter with agnostic authors in a milieu of indifference and disbelief, and also by the rash and questioning attitude of the critical years of adolescence. Later on he was to admit that at that period he still had no religious convictions, that he did not see the meaning of loving God, that virtue rather than religiousness was his ideal and that he took a malicious delight in some objections put forward by some atheistic authors against the immortality of the soul and the narratives of the Old Testament.

Quite unexpectedly, however, at the age of fifteen, Newman received a special conversion grace which was destined to determine his future religious course. It is usually called his first conversion. At the time, John Henry was in his final year at the boarding school of Ealing. Owing to family difficulties, his parents were obliged to leave him in residence at the school throughout the long summer vacation of 1816. During these memorable months, Newman was struck by an illness, a "keen, terrible one" he says¹². He also received from the Rev. Walter Mayers, an Evangelical clergyman, some spiritual books to read. The summer turned out to be a period of reflection, a retreat in depth for the young schoolboy, who was alert, intelligent and receptive. In this atmosphere God's grace transformed him.

2. The birth of an ideal

What interests us at the moment is one special result of this first conversion, namely, the ideal of holiness which it implanted in Newman's mind and which never left him. This ideal was the outcome of a particular awareness of God's presence which he experienced during the second half of the year 1816.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 113, 115.

¹² *Autobiographical Writings*, p. 268.

For some time beforehand the young Newman had been drifting towards a nominal Christianity and had dallied with the temptation to intellectual independence. His reasoning powers were striving to take the place of the faith of his infancy, which admittedly was childish and ingenuous. Not that he wanted to be morally unbridled; no, he always cherished the ideal of virtue. Ethical integrity and a natural virtue would alleviate the uneasiness of conscience in the face of his intellectual ambition: “Virtue alone is happiness below”¹³.

It is not difficult to perceive the danger that such a line of thought presented for a youth of Newman’s intellectual stature. It could have easily corrupted his religious life in its initial development. However, the first conversion grace opened his eyes to the danger that lay ahead. It eliminated his contentment with that kind of virtue and moral integrity that need not necessarily have anything beyond natural propriety about it, and rooted in his mind the ideal of supernatural holiness.

This deep change of thought sprang from a special awareness of God’s presence. Whatever the exact circumstances were - and Newman is tantalizingly uninforming about them¹⁴- the energetic and ambitious youth found himself at a certain moment confronted with Someone greater than himself. His proud intellect came up against a personal Lord, to whom he instinctively knew he had to submit. The ensuing surrender in faith was his conversion. Louis Bouyer explains the confrontation as follows:



“The young man, in the fullness of his intellectual pride and self-sufficiency, now becomes aware of something, of some power, which he had dimly guessed at, even when he turned away from it. Something, Someone, stronger and more wise than he, Someone who subdued him to His will, even in the proudest hour of his intellectual self-reliance. To that other Power, the mind, be it never so proudly confident, must needs defer. The very clearness with which he recognises this is a token that he has already surrendered.”¹⁵

The heart of his conversion, that which explains the change of mind and heart, is the gift of grace which we can only call a vivid awareness of God’s presence: “a chain between the

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

¹⁴ A note in an Early Journal gives us the dates within which the great change, in his conversion experience, took place: “The first or last days of the half year of my conversion, Aug. 1 and Dec. 21, 1816” (*Ibid.*, p. 181). Therefore it does not seem to have been an instantaneous transformation but a gradual process.

¹⁵ Louis Bouyer, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

soul and God (i.e. with every link complete)”¹⁶. The famous phrase from the *Apologia* “myself and my Creator” arises from this inner consciousness of, and desire for, God that permeated Newman’s life as a result of his conversion experience. His conscience had been attuned to God’s voice: he was no longer an independently ambitious intellectual, but a young man subject to a sovereign divine authority and bound by the sentences of revealed truth and definite dogma. He no longer considered himself exempt or emancipated from God’s supernatural rule but rather had the experience of belonging to Him and knew he was called on to surrender in faith. The tenets of religion were no longer uninteresting and peripheral realities in his life: under the direct influence of grace and the instrumental contact with a pious clergyman and sound spiritual literature, Newman came to have a clearer perception of an invisible world and of God’s sovereign presence. The new light was a reawakening of the luminous faith of his childhood. What he then experienced, “life a dream, I an Angel, and all this world a deception”, he now came to believe in a more mature fashion. It seems likely that he reflects his personal experience when he writes as follows of Charles Reding, the hero of his novel *Loss and Gain*: “Charles’s characteristic, perhaps above anything else, was an habitual sense of the Divine Presence; a sense which, of course, did not insure uninterrupted conformity of thought and deed to itself, but still there it was - the pillar of the cloud before him and guiding him. He felt himself to be God’s creature, and responsible to Him - God’s possession, not his own. He had a great wish to succeed in the schools; a thrill came over him when he thought of it; but ambition was not his life; he could have reconciled himself in a few minutes to failure”¹⁷.

This conversion experience had of course its intellectual and doctrinal aspect - “a great change of thought” – implying the acceptance of the tenets of revealed religion. However, it brought about religious and moral effects too: Newman’s spiritual life was transformed, his outlook changed. He now had “that vision of the Unseen which is the Christian’s life”. As an old man of eighty-four, and already a Cardinal for over five years, he could still recall the spiritual transformation that took place in his youth and write of it to Anne Mozley, who was editing his Memoirs, as follows: “Of course I cannot myself be the judge of myself, but, speaking with this reserve, I should say that it is difficult to realize or imagine the identity of the boy before and after August 1816, as the memoranda, still undestroyed, describe him. I can look back at the end of 70 years as if on another person”¹⁸.

¹⁶ *Autobiographical Writings*, p. 150.

¹⁷ *Loss and Gain. The Story of a Convert*. London 1911, pp. 230-1. William Sheffield, another character of the novel, reflects Newman’s state immediately before his conversion: “Sheffield’s whole heart was in his work, and religion was but a secondary matter to him. He had no doubts, difficulties, anxieties, sorrows, which much affected him. It was not the certainty of faith which made a sunshine to his soul, and dried up the mists of human weakness; rather, he had no perceptible need within him of that vision of the Unseen which is the Christian’s life. He was unblemished in his character, exemplary in his conduct; but he was content with what the perishable world gave him” (*Ibid.*, p. 230).

¹⁸ *Letters and Diaries*, Vol. XXXI, p. 31.

These effects of his conversion were enduring: Newman was never to lose his realization of God's presence, his respect for revealed truth and his thirst for holiness of life. Fr Stephen Dessain rightly considered this conversion event as the turning point in Newman's life, the experience that gave the rest of his life its unity and the moment at which his heart was captured by the Christian ideal of holiness¹⁹.

We do not wish to imply that Newman's conversion was an isolated event in his youth, unprepared by other circumstances. That would be quite untrue and indeed untypical of the ways by which divine providence attains its ends through secondary means and a natural evolution brought about by the experiences of life. Undoubtedly the atmosphere of peace and reflection, and the illness that afflicted him were instrumental in converting him at this most dangerous period of his life. The human instrument at work was the pious and zealous clergyman, the Rev. Walter Mayers, a convinced Evangelical. This devoted minister, who had scruples about the time given to teaching classics in Ealing in so far as it distracted him

from his more directly pastoral duties, helped to implant the seed of divine faith in Newman. A few weeks after Mayers' premature death in 1828, Newman preached a sermon in memory of him and stated that "his life was a life of prayer. The works and ways of God, the mercies of Christ, the real purposes and uses of life, the unseen things of the spiritual world, were always uppermost in



his mind. ... He lived not only to God, but as in the sight of God. 'Thou God seest me' was the language of every day with him"²⁰. Since, as already affirmed, a keen awareness of the unseen and of God's presence was at the heart of Newman's conversion, it is evident that the close friendship, the conversations and instructions of this man were highly important in the years antecedent to that grace. Newman himself was never to forget his former master and we find that forty-two years later he remembers him as his "great friend"²¹ and still prays for him at Mass on the anniversary of his death.

Mayers gave Newman some spiritual books to read. These authors were Calvinistic and Evangelical in their teaching and they had the most decisive influence on his spiritual formation. Yet Newman was never an Evangelical at heart, much less a strict Calvinist. His conversion did not pass through the conventional stages (conviction of one's personal sinfulness ; fear of damnation; hearing of Christ's redemptive work; apprehension of

¹⁹ *Newman's First Conversion. 'A great change of thought', August 1st till December 21st 1816: Newman Studien. Dritte Folge. Herausgegeben von Heinrich Fries und Werner Becker. Nürnberg 1957, pp. 52-53.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42; Cf. *Correspondence of John Henry Newman with John Keble and Others, 1839-1845. Edited at the Birmingham Oratory. London 1917, pp. 113-114.*

²¹ Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, Vol. XXV, p. 38.

Christ's merits; sense of ecstatic joy and the assurance of salvation) and he never accepted the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination to eternal death. For all that, however, he acknowledged the formative influence of Evangelicalism's rigorous beliefs on his conversion. Eight years after the event he makes the following entry in his Private Journal, referring to himself: "He has indeed been converted by it [the Evangelical teaching] to a spiritual life"²².

The book which most influenced Newman at this critical period of his conversion, 1 August to 21 December 1816, was perhaps Thomas Scott's *Force of Truth*. In the *Apologia* Newman confessed that it was Scott "who made a deeper impression on my mind than any other, and to whom (humanly speaking) I almost owe my soul"²³. It was this writer who undeceived Newman about the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination to eternal life or eternal death which he had read about in the writings of William Romaine. Scott insisted throughout his works on the importance of conscience as a moral guide and the need for a practical faith expressing itself in good works. This point made him unacceptable to Calvinists who branded him as an Arminian. He also insisted on the danger of intellectual pride and mere reasoning destroying the vigour of faith. Newman was taken by Scott's practical faith which was not a pure theory, by his "bold unworldliness", his struggle towards holiness of life for himself and his flock and his courageous obedience to the light as shown in the process of his conversion from Unitarianism to belief in the Holy Trinity. From *The Force of Truth*, Newman took two brief maxims which he came to use as proverbs or watchwords for his own life. One of these was "Holiness rather than peace". It summed up Newman's own religiousness. He consistently refused to settle down and to be at peace in a state of moral mediocrity or spiritual slumber. The ideal of scriptural holiness which he first glimpsed in the Anglican environment of his childhood, and which was reawakened and given deep conviction and a doctrinal structure by his conversion in an Evangelical milieu, was to be the guiding spirit of the rest of his life and was to find its final expression and development in the Roman Catholic Church. As David Newsome remarks with a felicitous phrase: Newman's "soul was made clean by Thomas Scott that it might be prepared for paradise by St Philip"²⁴.

3. The pursuit of an ideal

If, for a moment, we follow the course of Newman's life, it becomes quite clear that he valiantly and at times heroically followed this ideal of holiness that had been implanted in his youthful mind. His very first year as an undergraduate at Trinity College provided an opportunity to remain faithful to his principles in public. He found himself in a university

²² *Autobiographical Writings*, p. 79.

²³ *Apologia pro vita sua. Being a History of his Religious Opinions*. London 1908, p. 5.

²⁴ *The evangelical sources of Newman's power*, in *The Rediscovery of Newman: An Oxford Symposium*. Edited by John Coulson and A. M. Allchin. London and Melbourne 1967, p. 30.

atmosphere that was as yet unreformed. The general standard of scholarship was low, tutors were as a rule irresponsible in their duties, there was much idling and career hunting and, among social customs, drunkenness was common, almost an obligatory ritual of initiation for freshmen. Newman was horrified by this state of affairs, yet he saw that if he did not join in these parties he would be ridiculed and considered an outcast. The worst orgy of all was on the Monday following Trinity Sunday. It was the College Feast. On the Sunday there was corporate Communion at the Church service, and on the next day there took place the so-called Gaudy - a wine-consuming feast that ended in drunkenness and extravagance. Newman refused to take part in such parties although the social pressure was intense and he himself at an age when ridicule was hardest to bear. After his first experience at the College Feast he never again attended.

Later on as a Tutor in Oriel College he again endeavoured to have this custom of compulsory communion, followed by intoxicated revelling, abolished. Yet when Newman asked one high authority in the College, perhaps the Provost, whether undergraduates were obliged to go to communion, he was answered with an air of unceremonious indifference: “That question never, I believe, enters their heads, and I beg you will not put it into them”²⁵. Newman, because of his religious principles and higher ideals thus found himself opposed and despised in various and subtle ways. Again, when he tried to raise the moral standard of his students and claimed that a Tutor should give more than intellectual information to his pupils, his views clashed once more with those of the Provost and he soon found himself deprived of students as a result of his opinions.



However, he did not yield to the pressure by going along with the stream of public opinion at the expense of his principles. The same zeal made him impatient of the standard of religion among the clergy of the Church of England. Many of them had become more interested in their gentlemanly status and their hobbies than in the care of the souls entrusted to their pastoral ministry. It was to such as these that Newman and his friends began to send the *Tracts for the Times*, by which they tried to rouse the ministers of the Church from their “quiet worldliness” and their comfortable mediocrity to the prospect of defending the independence and the purity of the Church of Christ and of living in a manner more in keeping with their noble calling.

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²⁵ *Autobiographical Writings*, p. 89. When Newman told another College authority that some of the undergraduates intoxicated themselves at a champagne breakfast immediately after communion, he was given an equally curt reply: “I don’t believe it, and, if it is true, I don’t want to know it” (*Ibid.*).

Indeed from the time of his conversion Newman continued quietly but steadfastly in the pursuit of the vision and ideal of his youth. He answered the divine call he had been given, and shaped his ideal of holiness and union with Christ by means of the choices he made in daily life. By early 1822 he had decided to take Anglican Orders and when he was ordained Deacon in June 1824 he felt that the ordination ceremony had marked an irrevocable step in his surrender to God. “It is over. I am thine, O Lord”, he wrote that evening in his Journal, and although he felt a shudder go through his heart at the thought of giving up everything for God’s sake and of being handed over to someone else “forever” – “terrible words”, he nevertheless continued his entry as follows: “Yet, Lord, I ask not for comfort in comparison of sanctification”²⁶.

Coupled with his decision to take Orders was his choice of a single life. Although celibacy was neither imposed on nor common among Anglican clergymen²⁷, Newman felt from the time of his first conversion that it was God’s will for him to remain celibate. In the *Apologia* he calls it a “deep imagination”, which took possession of him since the Autumn of 1816²⁸. It formed part of the life of dedication to God upon which he had set out, “in hope thereby of a closer union with God”²⁹.

Finally the greatest test arrived to try the loyalty of his faith, the depth of his dedication to truth and the earnestness of his desire for union with God in a life of holiness. The Church he had so loved, the Church of his birth, the Communion he had worked for years to defend, to reform and to strengthen, appeared to him to be lacking the fullness of truth, to be separated from the Church Catholic, to be, in a word, schismatic. The condemnation of the last of the Tracts proved for Newman that the Church of England had abandoned the purity of its doctrine for a weak compromise with a secular and Protestant society. The consecration in London of an Anglican bishop for Jerusalem was obviously a political move, and it destroyed the principle of an independent clergy with apostolic succession and divine authority that did not come from the State. The notes of Christ’s Church – unity, catholicity, apostolicity – were absent from the Anglican Communion as Newman contemplated it. However, he made a final effort to defend his position. In four sermons preached during the last two months of 1841 he claimed that the Church of England still had the note of holiness. He fell back on his own religious experience, an unusual subject for him, as a final stand: he could not deny the living witnesses to sanctity of life which he had known in Anglicanism. Could a Church that produced men of such evident holiness

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²⁷ “... the whole genius, structure, working of our Church goes the other way” (*Loss and Gain*, p. 192).

²⁸ *Apologia pro vita sua*, p. 7.

²⁹ *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. London 1909, p. 408. Newman is here quoting the second-century Greek Apologist, Athenagoras: “Multos etiam apud nos reperire est, tum viros, tum mulieres, qui coelibes consensescunt, spe arctius se cum Deo conjunctum iri” (*Legatio pro Christianis*, 33; cf. Migne, PG, 6,966). “You will find many of our people, both men and women, grown old in their single state, in hope thereby of a closer union with God” (*Development of Christian Doctrine*, p. 408).

and religious earnestness as Keble, Pusey, Froude, etc., be totally abandoned and abominable in God's sight?

The four sermons referred to compare the Church of England to schismatic Samaria of Old Testament times. Although Samaria was in schism God did not abandon her. Despite the fact that the Ten Tribes of the North were separated from God's People, they were still loved by Him, cared for by prophets and in possession of a remnant of holy souls that had not bowed the knee to false gods: "The point of these sermons is, that, in spite of the rigid character of the Jewish law, the formal and literal force of its precepts, and the manifest schism, and worse than schism, of the Ten Tribes, yet in fact they were still recognized as a people by the Divine Mercy; that the great prophets Elias and Eliseus were sent to them; and not only so, but were sent to preach to them and reclaim them, without any intimation that they must be reconciled to the line of David and the Aaronic priesthood, or go up to Jerusalem to worship. They were not in the Church, yet they had the means of grace and the hope of acceptance with their Maker. The application of all this to the Anglican Church was immediate; – ... that there was no call at all for an Anglican to leave his Church for Rome, though he did not believe his own to be part of the One Church"³⁰.

Although Newman was to add a corrective to this comparison later on, it is clear that his final stand was on the holiness of the Anglican Body to which he belonged. On this one note – the holiness of some of its members, indicative of a divine presence still with her – he staked everything. Even when his *Via Media* theory crumbled and disappeared, when he was forced to admit that the Anglican Church was in schism, that she was not the one, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ, he still clung to her on the strength of her holiness and the divine presence evident in her members and her Sacraments. Thus, the whole drama of his life hinged around the question of holiness and union with Christ. It had sunk into his heart as an ideal at the time of his first conversion, it urged him to sacrifice pleasure, popularity and lawful worldly success on its behalf; it determined the course of his life; finally, it obliged him to undergo many trials, lose dear friends, give up the earthly possession he most cherished in order to enter a foreign Church, a community of strangers, a people he did not know.

Finally, through prayer and study in the seclusion of Littlemore, he arrived at the unavoidable conclusion that the note of sanctity and a greater fullness of truth were lodged in the Church of Rome. "I had made a good case [for the Anglican Church] on paper, but what judgment would be passed on it by Athanasius, Basil, Gregory, Hilary and Ambrose? The more I considered the matter, the more I thought that these Fathers, if they examined the antagonist pleas, would give it against me. ... Did St Athanasius, or St Ambrose, come suddenly to life, it cannot be doubted what communion they would mistake for their own.

³⁰ *Apologia pro vita sua*, p. 154.

All surely will agree that these Fathers, with whatever differences of opinion, 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 lodgings, or the Holy Sisterhood of Charity, or the unlettered crowd before the altar, than with the rulers or members of any other religious community”³¹.

“Holiness rather than peace” – the dictum he took from Thomas Scott still pursued him. What peace, prosperity and popularity he could have enjoyed had he not been driven by this inexorable devotion to truth and to his ideal of holiness! His search, however, was rewarded at length when he came to perceive clearly that Rome too, despite her outward appearances, had the note of sanctity and the vitality of a living Body even more than the Church for which he had been pleading. After Newman’s death, his close and loyal friend Dean Church, indicated this factor as the conclusive one in his conversion: “At least the Roman Church had not only preserved, but maintained at full strength through the centuries to our day two things of which the New Testament was full, and which are characteristic of it – devotion and self-sacrifice. ... Devotion and sacrifice, prayer and self- denying charity, in one word sanctity, are at once on the surface of the New Testament and interwoven with all its substance. He [Newman] recoiled from a representation of the religion of the New Testament which to his eye was without them. He turned to where, in spite of every other disadvantage, he thought he found them. In St Filippo Neri he could find a link between the New Testament and progressive civilization. He could find no St Filippo – so modern and yet so scriptural – when he sought at home”³².

Certainly, Newman could say: you never know how far a noble ideal will lead you or how many sacrifices you may have to make on its behalf.



The limits of this article do not permit us to examine the remainder of Newman’s life in detail. However, it would not be difficult to illustrate how he pursued this same ideal as a Catholic. After his studies in Rome, he entered the Oratory of St Philip Neri and, on his return, founded it in England. He took his share in parochial work and community duties; he endeavoured to form his brethren in the footsteps of St Philip, and in his Chapter Discourses put before them the life of perfection as handed down in the Oratorian tradition. He generously spent himself in the foundation of a Catholic University in Ireland; he supported the claims of an educated laity to defend the Church and permeate society with

³¹ *Essays Critical and Historical*. London 1919, Vol. II, pp. 74-75; cf. *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, p. 86.

³² R. W. Church, *Occasional Papers, selected from The Guardian, The Times, and the Saturday Review*. 1846-1890. 2 Vols. London and New York 1897, Vol. II, pp. 473-4.

Christian principles. He helped countless souls with letters of spiritual direction and counsel; his words and example drew many converts to the Church, while they gave light and consolation to those in search of truth. He had recourse to prayer, study, silence and trust in divine providence on the many occasions when his enterprises ended in failure, his work was not appreciated and he himself cast aside “as a useless tool”. Yet, although he suffered keenly in this respect, he admitted to his brethren how insignificant such personal considerations would be in the light of eternity: “As to what may be called wrongs to him, his own last words on such subjects – writes Father Neville – were nearly these: ‘You must not suppose that these little affairs of mine will be on the *tapis* in the courts of the next world’. This was said with a cheerfulness and gravity very expressive of great kindness, a good conscience, and solemn thought”³³.

Finally, in the years of old age he entered into an even deeper life of prayer and recollection. His profound religiousness became evident to those who lived with him. His features became refined and spiritualized by the accumulated sufferings of a lifetime that had its generous share of Christ’s Cross. The last few years were a quiet prayer, as he prepared for eternity, yet clinging to life until the end in the hope of being able to serve God in any way.



During the last nine months of his life he could no longer celebrate Mass. He then learnt by heart a Votive Mass of Our Lady and a Mass for the Dead in the hope of being able to say Mass when he got stronger, but the hoped-for opportunity never arrived. He was also deprived of the Breviary to which he had been greatly attached. He substituted the Rosary in its stead which for him was the most beautiful of all

devotions. And that is the memory that those who lived with him in his last years kept of him – at prayer, with the Rosary in his hand.

4. Newman’s holiness

Was the subject of this study – the youth who was converted to belief in a dogmatic creed and captured by the scriptural ideal of holiness, the preacher who consistently proclaimed such a lofty doctrine of perfection, the man who constantly pursued his ideal in his choices and in his conduct– was *he*, Newman, a Saint? As in the case of St Thérèse, whom we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Newman too was asked rather bluntly one day: “Which is greater, a Cardinal or a Saint?” Naturally, only a child could have the outspoken innocence to venture such a question. The Cardinal was an old and feeble man at the time.

³³ Wilfrid Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman*. Based on his Private Journals and Correspondence. 2 Vols. London 1912, Vol. II, p. 530.

Witnesses to the event do not say that he was taken aback or unsettled by the indiscreet curiosity of the child, his grand-nephew. He simply thought for a few seconds and then gave a reply that each reader may interpret as he pleases: “Cardinals belong to this world, and Saints to heaven”³⁴.

Undoubtedly Newman had his faults. His character was not without its weaknesses and oddities; he did make mistakes during his long life. But what Saint is free from all imperfection and blemish? Few, if any. If we look at the overall course of his life, his wholehearted loyalty to faith and fidelity to truth, his hope practised to a heroic degree, his prayerfulness, his utter unworldliness, his sense of the presence of God and his love for the Church, then we cannot but conclude that Newman was indeed a man of God, a person worthy to be given as an example to those who seek the light and who strive to remain faithful to it.



In fact, since the time of his conversion to the Church of Rome, English-speaking Catholics had looked to him as “their spiritual father and their guide in the paths of holiness”, and his life of singular piety and integrity, which was venerated as deeply by the non-Catholic population of England as by the members of the Catholic Church was one of the principal motives that inspired the English laity to petition Pope Leo XIII to raise Newman to the College of Cardinals³⁵. When Cardinal Manning had seen the Holy Father in Rome on 8 March 1879, and obtained permission for Newman to reside in Birmingham as a Cardinal, he wrote that very day to him and said: “The Holy Father ... told me to say to you that in elevating you to the Sacred College he intends to bestow on you a testimony to your virtues and your learning”³⁶. Similar words appear in the official letter sent from the Vatican, on 15 March 1879, by Cardinal Nina, the Secretary of State, to Newman informing him of the Pontiff’s intention to raise him to the Cardinalate: “The Holy Father, deeply appreciating the genius and learning which distinguish you, your piety, the zeal displayed by you in the exercise of the sacred Ministry, your devotion and filial attachment to the Holy Apostolic See, and the signal services you have for long years

³⁴ Louis Bouyer, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

³⁵ In a congratulatory address to Newman, the English, Irish, Scottish and American residents of Rome said : “We feel that in making you a Cardinal the Holy Father has not only given public testimony of his appreciation of your great merits and of the value of your admirable writings in defence of God and His Church, but has also conferred the greatest possible honour on all English-speaking Catholics, who have long looked up to you as their spiritual father and their guide in the paths of holiness” (*Addresses to Cardinal Newman with His Replies Etc. 1879-81*. Edited by the Rev. W. P. Neville (Congr. Orat.), London 1905, p. 72). For Cardinal Manning’s letter to Cardinal Nina, expressing the reasons urged by the English laity for Newman being made a Cardinal, cf. E. S. Purcell, *Life of Cardinal Manning, Archbishop of Westminster*. In 2 Vols. London 1896, Vol. II, pp. 555-6.

³⁶ *Letters and Diaries*, Vol. XXIX, p. 60.

rendered to religion, has decided on giving you a public and solemn proof of his esteem and good-will. And to this end he will deign to raise you to the honours of the Sacred Purple, in the next Consistory”³⁷.

In conclusion, we give the judgment of two English contemporaries of Cardinal Newman. One was his Ordinary, Bishop Ullathorne. The occasion was a visit he paid to Newman in August 1887. After the meeting in the Oratory, at which he was deeply impressed by the Cardinal’s devout and humble bearing, Ullathorne wrote: “We had a long and cheery talk, but as I was rising to leave, an action of his caused a scene I shall never forget, for its sublime lesson to myself. He said in low and humble accents ‘My dear Lord, will you do me a great favour?’ ‘What is it?’ I asked. He glided down on his knees, bent down his venerable head and said, ‘Give me your blessing’. What could I do with him before me in such a posture? I could not refuse without giving him great embarrassment. So I laid my hand on his head, and said: ‘My dear Lord Cardinal, notwithstanding all laws to the contrary, I pray God to bless you, and that His Holy Spirit may be full in your heart’. As I walked to the door, refusing to put on his biretta as he went with me, he said ‘I have been indoors all my life, whilst you have battled for the Church in the world’. I felt annihilated in his presence; there is a Saint in that man!”³⁸. And that, we may add, was not Ullathorne’s only testimony to Newman’s sanctity.

The second witness we quote comes from a very different environment. It is the very significant obituary which *The Times* (London) published on the day following Newman’s death. In it we read: “Of one thing we may be sure, that the memory of this pure and noble life, untouched by worldliness ... will endure and that whether Rome canonizes him or not he will be canonized in the thoughts of pious people of many creeds in England. The saint ... in him will survive”³⁹.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85. For the original Italian, cf. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁸ Mother Francis Raphael, O.S.D. (Augusta T. Drane), *Letters of Archbishop Ullathorne*. London 1892, pp. 511-2. Cf. Bishop Ullathorne’s letter to Cardinal Nina on February 11, 1879: “For so many erroneous statements have reached Rome in regard of Fr Newman’s disposition and mind, that as his Bishop, knowing better than most his modesty, his perfect faith, and charity, knowing, moreover, the great things he has done for the Church of God, and how many he has drawn from heresy to the Faith, and in what esteem as a writer he is held by all both within the Church and outside it, I deem it a part of my duty, in a matter of such grave moment [the false rumour that he had declined the Cardinalate], that his disposition of mind should not be misapprehended” (*Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Vol. XXIX, p. 25).

³⁹ *The Times*, August 12, 1890.



When Benedict XVI beatified the great English Newman in Birmingham on 19 September 2010, he underlined the relevance of Newman’s holiness and ministry for our days with the following words: “The definite service to which Blessed John Henry was called involved applying his keen intellect and his prolific pen to many of the most pressing ‘subjects of the day’. His insights into the relationship between faith and reason, into the vital place of revealed religion in civilized society, and into the need for a broadly-based and wide-ranging approach to education were not only of profound importance for Victorian England, but continue today to inspire and enlighten many all over the world. ... And indeed, what better goal could teachers of religion set themselves than

Blessed John Henry’s famous appeal for an intelligent, well-instructed laity: ‘I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold and what they do not, who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it’ (*The Present Position of Catholics in England*, ix, 390). As the day approaches when the author of those words will be raised to the altars, I pray that, through his intercession and example, all who are engaged in the task of teaching and catechesis will be inspired to greater effort by the vision he so clearly sets before us”⁴⁰.

Now Pope Francis will canonize Blessed John Henry Newman, who is indeed a shining example of holiness touching many people in the depth of their hearts and shedding the light of truth in their minds amid the darkness of today’s world.

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⁴⁰ *Heart speaks unto heart*. Pope Benedict XVI in the UK. The Complete Addresses and Homilies. London 2010, pp. 98-99.