

6. Spiritual Kinship with John Henry Newman



Mother Julia largely refrained from reading spiritual literature. Already from a young age, she had felt in her conscience that the Lord asked her to do this and that she should nourish herself above all with the word of God and the sacred liturgy. The life and work of St John Henry Newman¹ was unknown to her until the 1960s. However, amid the painful experiences in Belgium, she discovered a friend and comforter in this great man of the Church. How did that happen?

A Spiritual Brother

In 1962, Fr. Herman Waerenborg CP² gave Mother Julia a book about Newman's life. The erudite Passionist, who had known the charism of The Work for a long time and often celebrated Holy Mass for the community in Villers-Notre-Dame, was convinced that she would find consolation

¹ John Henry Newman was born in London on February 21, 1801. He was a professor of theology and pastor at Oxford. Through the Oxford Movement he wanted to renew the Anglican communion in the spirit of the Church Fathers. After a long search, he converted to the Catholic Church on October 9, 1845. Ordained a priest, he founded the first Oratory of St. Philip Neri in England in Birmingham. Because of his outstanding services to the Church in England, he was appointed cardinal in 1879, by Leo XIII. He died in Birmingham on August 11, 1890. He was canonized by Pope Francis on October 13, 2019.

² Herman Waerenborg, born on April 27, 1909 in Klerken (Belgium), died on January 13, 1994, made his profession as a Passionist in 1925. He was active in internal training and management tasks as well as a Latin teacher in Lodja (Congo). For many years he worked with The Work and joined its Priests' Community as a co-worker.

through Newman. Following the priest's advice, she began reading this book and in it found light and encouragement. At that time, she was very concerned not only about the further development of *The Work*, but also about the state of the Church as a whole. Sometimes she was tempted to withdraw from her duties, but in faith she went on, like Newman.³

Mother Julia later recalled what reading this book did for her: *"I was deeply moved by it, so that from that time on I had an enduring devotion to Cardinal Newman and sometimes implored him to keep me true to the Holy Faith and the Holy Church."*⁴ Mother Julia told the priest Roger Lesage⁵ about her experience with Newman. Soon after, this learned priest gave her several Newman books, including an anthology in Dutch entitled *"From the Soul of Cardinal Newman"*⁶.

Mother Julia read to the sisters repeatedly from this collection of texts. Sr. Lisette Ruys wrote about it: *"In 1964 and perhaps even earlier, Mother often picked up the book 'From the Soul of Cardinal Newman' to read a chapter from it. I, myself, did not understand much about it then but I noticed the enthusiasm with which Mother read from it. It was a confirmation of what she herself went through and wanted to pass on to the still young vocation given by God. Mother found a brother in Newman. She said with joy and pride, 'You see, what Newman said a hundred years ago is still true now. I'm not telling you anything new, everything can be found here.' So, Newman got a place of honor with Mother and in The Work"*⁷.

Other sisters also remembered the joy with which Mother Julia was filled after the discovery of this spiritual brother. Sr. Cecile Nelissen recalled: *"Mother would sometimes read a passage from the book when we were together as a community or when I was alone in the room with her. Mother could*

³ Entry in Fr. Philip Boyce's diary of May 2, 1976.

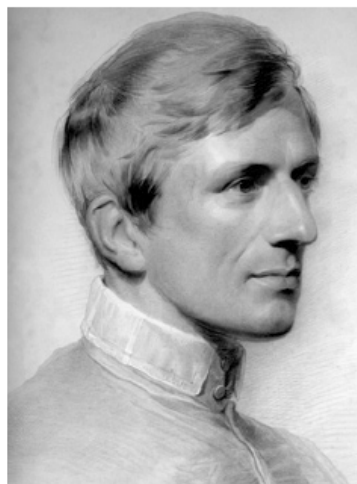
⁴ Additions by Mother Julia to the memoirs of Sr. Lisette Ruys from February 1990.

⁵ Roger Lesage, born on October 31, 1921 in Otegem (Belgium), died on August 1, 1999, was a priest of the diocese of Bruges, director of the "Ludwig College", a renowned secondary school in Bruges, and diocesan inspector of religious education.

⁶ Heyrman, J. and Th., *Uit de Ziel van Kardinaal Newman. Bloemlezing uit Zijn Werken*, Leuven, Ghent, Mechelen: De Vlaamse Boekenhalle 1924.

⁷ Memoirs of Sr. Lisette Ruys from February 1990.

be very happy about that."⁸ Sr. Gabrielle Smet⁹ testified: *"When I was in Wezembeek, Mother told me with joy that while reading the book 'From the Soul of Cardinal Newman' she discovered a real brother: 'I must really say that I feel a true kinship with this cardinal. He was a forerunner in the Church of his time. He had such a clear view of the situation in the Church back then. But his insights were not understood by many. That is why he suffered a lot. I almost have to say that he suffered for the Church and because of the Church'."*¹⁰



St John Henry Newman

From then on, Mother Julia encouraged the sisters to read Newman's writings over and over again and to get to know some of his prayers. Mother wrote to one of them: *"Were you able to read anything from Cardinal Newman? He is the model of a fighter and convert for the sake of the highest good. He is a real guide in understanding and living as a child of God in the mystical body, the Holy Church."*¹¹

For Mother Julia, John Henry Newman became a companion who gave her courage and confidence in difficult times. He strengthened her in love for the Church, also in the face of its wounds, and spurred her on to pass on the vocation she was given.

Newman Symposium in Rome

In order to make Newman's life and theology more accessible to the community, Sr. Lutgart Govaert¹² was commissioned to write a doctorate

⁸ Memoirs of Sr. Cecile Nelissen dated April 12, 2001.

⁹ Gabrielle Smet, born on November 8, 1931 in Vrasene (Belgium), died on May 24, 2020, became a member of The Work in 1949. She graduated from business school and was trained as a family helper. In many houses she worked in secretarial tasks, in training and in accompanying young vocations and was one of the sisters who cared for Mother Julia during times of illness.

¹⁰ Memoirs of Sr. Gabrielle Smet dated April 30, 2009.

¹¹ Letter from Mother Julia to Christiane Deweydt from April 1964.

¹² Lutgart Govaert, born on November 28, 1943 in Ukkel (Belgium), became a member of The Work in 1964. After studying in Innsbruck and Rome, she obtained a doctorate in theology in 1973. She worked in Innsbruck, Rome, Birmingham and Bregenz. For many years she was a translator for the plenary meetings of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the International Theological Commission. She works in the archive of The Work in the Thalbach monastery in Bregenz.

on “The Mariology of John Henry Newman” at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome in the summer of 1971. Sr. Lutgart was the first woman to receive a doctorate in dogmatics from the Gregorian. Mother Julia was genuinely happy about it.

While attending the defense of Sr. Lutgart’s doctorate on December 7, 1973, the sisters met two Newman researchers whom they invited for a visit to the “Piccola Casa”: Fr. Jean Stern¹³, Missionary of Our Lady of La Salette from France and Fr. Giovanni Velocci CSSR¹⁴, Redemptorist from Italy. During the visit, a sister said she had heard of a Newman convention in Rome in the Holy Year of 1975 and asked the two experts if they knew anything about it, but they had not heard of it. Therefore, the sister suggested asking the General Secretary of the International Newman Conferences in Luxembourg, Abbé Nicolas Theis¹⁵, for information.

Abbé Theis already sent his reply to Sr. Maria Katharina Strolz on January 10, 1974. She had worked as a secretary for a few years before joining The Work for her uncle, Father Franz Michel Willam¹⁶, a well-known Austrian writer and Newman researcher. From the letter it emerged that no Newman Congress was planned in Rome, but that Pope Paul VI had asked for suggestions on how Newman might be honored in the Holy Year of 1975 because of his importance to the Church. At the same time, Abbé Theis advised the sisters to contact the two previously mentioned Newman researchers in Rome and to organize a congress. He said: *“It is providential that you and the new doctor in your midst should light*

¹³ Jean Stern, born in 1927 to a Jewish family in Austria, converted to Catholicism and became a priest and missionary to Our Lady of La Salette. In Lyon he wrote a theological dissertation on the Bible and tradition according to Newman. For many years he worked as an archivist and in the pastoral care of pilgrims in La Salette. In 1975 he became director and professor in the newly established “Newman Study Center” at the Pontifical University Urbaniana in Rome.

¹⁴ Giovanni Velocci, born on May 16, 1924 in the province of Rome (Italy), died on July 12, 2016, was a member of the Redemptorist Order. He wrote a dissertation on “Newman Mistico” and was a professor at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome and later at the University of Cassino for many years.

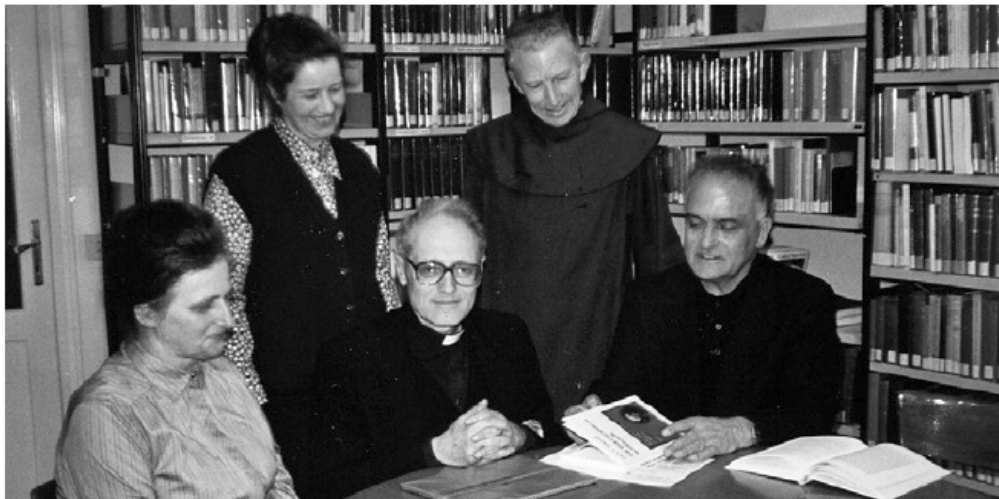
¹⁵ Nicolas Theis, born on February 3, 1911 in Luxembourg, died on August 2, 1985, was a priest of the Archdiocese of Luxembourg. He worked mainly in pastoral care. As general secretary of the Luxembourg Newman Society, he organized a number of international Newman conferences from 1956 onwards.

¹⁶ Franz Michel Willam, born on June 14, 1894 in Schopfernau (Austria), died on January 18, 1981 in Andelsbuch, was ordained a priest on June 3, 1917. In addition to his pastoral services in the Bregenzerwald, he developed an astonishing intellectual activity as a specialist in folklore, theologian, writer and Newman researcher.

some fire in Rome and bring about a union of Newmanists with regard to that congress in the Holy Year."¹⁷

After receiving this answer, Sr. Maria Katharina traveled to Innsbruck in February 1974, where Mother Julia was suffering and bedridden. Sr. Maria Katharina told her the whole story. She pointed out that the planning of a congress in Rome, with all the joy and honor associated with it, would take up much of the strength of the community and therefore, despite the wish of Abbé Theis, it should be considered whether this was in accordance with God's will. *"Then something happened that made a very deep impression on me."* Sr. Maria Katharina wrote in her memoirs. *"I can never again forget the shining and penetrating gaze of Mother on her sick bed and her clear and urgent words: 'We have to do it, God himself will be the guarantor!'"*¹⁸

Abbé Theis sent the sisters some important information about internationally known Newman researchers in order to be able to prepare the symposium well. Among the Newman experts in Rome was Fr. Philip Boyce, a Carmelite from Ireland, who had written a dissertation on the concept of holiness in Newman's work and who taught dogmatics and spirituality at the Pontifical Theological Faculty Teresianum. He was interested in the planned Newman Symposium. That is why he met with the sisters, came regularly to the "Piccola Casa" and agreed to help. He came to know the charism of The Work better and better. God arranged that he later succeeded Father Hillewaere as Mother Julia's spiritual director.



Sr. Maria Katharina, Sr. Lutgart, Fr. Stern, Fr. Philip and Fr. Velocci

¹⁷ Letter from Abbé Nicolas Theis dated January 10, 1974.

¹⁸ Record by Sr. Maria Katharina Strolz from March 18, 1974.

In the months that followed, the sisters did everything in their power to prepare the symposium in the spirit of the charism of The Work and this essentially included unity with the Church. The Oratorians in Birmingham were regularly informed and involved in the planning. Father Philip and the other two Roman Newman researchers were members of the preparatory committee. Cardinal John Wright¹⁹, Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, was won over to be president. In August 1974 a preparatory meeting took place in Villers-Notre-Dame, at which other internationally renowned Newman experts also took part and jointly created the program for the symposium. Mother Julia was happy about it and met the experts with warm openness and love.

The most respected Newman researchers at international level were invited as speakers. Many cardinals and bishops as well as around two hundred interested parties from all continents and twelve countries in Europe agreed to attend. During the preparations for the symposium, the sisters encountered various personalities in the Vatican. In this way Cardinal Newman helped to make The Work known in Rome.

Shortly before the beginning of the symposium, Mother Julia sent the Roman community a card with the words *"Send your light and your truth, they shall guide me"* (Ps 43:3) and *"I will advise you; my eye will watch over you"* (Ps 32:8). She wrote: *"Can I wish you anything more beautiful than the above words from the Psalms? You will be very busy in the days to come. But when his counsel is with you and his eye is on you and all those invited, his strength will strengthen you for his service, in order to serve his honor and glory in everything. In these days we are very united with you in prayer and heartfelt sympathy."*²⁰

The academic symposium held from April 3rd to April 8th, 1975 brought abundant blessings. Newman's spiritual legacy was acknowledged with renewed freshness in the heart of the Church. The Roman universities increasingly discovered the current relevance of the English theologian, so that many seminar papers and dissertations were written on Newman. Newman researchers around the world noticed that Rome was keenly interested in Newman. Numerous contacts were made among Newman

¹⁹ John Joseph Wright, born July 18, 1909 in Boston (USA), died August 10, 1979, was a professor of theology, auxiliary bishop in Boston (1947-1950), Bishop of Worcester (1950-1959) and Pittsburgh (1959-1969). In 1969 he was appointed Cardinal and Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy by Paul VI.

²⁰ Letter from Mother Julia to Sr. Maria Katharina Strolz from April 1975.



Newman Symposium, 1975

friends that often lasted for decades. At the papal audience for the participants in the symposium on April 7, 1975, Paul VI clearly expressed his appreciation for Newman and the importance of his spiritual heritage. He underlined that Newman was *“throughout his life, with all his heart devoted to the light of truth”* and therefore *“today becomes an ever brighter beacon for all who are seeking an informed orientation and sure guidance amid the uncertainties of the modern world - a world which he himself prophetically foresaw. Many of the problems which he treated with wisdom were the subjects of the discussion and study of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. Not only this Council but also the present time can be considered in a special way as Newman’s hour.”*²¹

Mother Julia was sincerely grateful for the successful outcome of the symposium. One sister recalled: *“Mother was very pleased with the Newman Symposium. She saw in this a rich blessing for the Holy Church at this time. Mother was convinced that Cardinal Newman was a hundred years ahead of his time, saw the consequences of the weakening of faith coming in different areas and took a stand.”*²² She wrote to a sister: *“For the beautiful fruits that have grown out of the symposium, we must be very grateful, even if it has cost us a lot. It was worth it.”*²³

²¹ *L’Osservatore Romano*. Weekly edition in English, April 17, 1975, 1.

²² Memoirs from Sr. Gabrielle Smet dated July 31, 2010.

²³ Letter from Mother Julia to a sister who was not named.

Another sister received a card with a word from Newman. Mother Julia added: *"You and yours I give this beautiful prayer from Newman. In these days of fervent remembrance of the love of the divine and human Heart of Jesus, we cannot ask anything more beautiful from him, and we believe that he will answer us. In this willingness to pray and serve, we want to think of all his favors and show him the adoration that is his due as our Lord and King."*²⁴ Mother Julia knew herself to be strengthened by Newman in the Holy Covenant with the Heart of Jesus, for which the community was especially thankful in the month of June.

Further Tasks

After the symposium, the sisters in Rome wanted to go back to their usual tasks with all their strength. In addition to serving the White Fathers and studying, since the early 1970s these also included the guided tours of pilgrims and visitors in the Roman basilicas, in the catacombs and in the excavations under Saint Peter's. But it would turn out differently. Shortly before his early death, Cardinal Luigi Raimondi²⁵, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, had granted the sisters an audience. He asked them to continue the work on Newman and to make it fruitful for the process of beatification.

Mother Julia and the sisters accepted this request in obedience to the Church. This is how the first International Center of Newman Friends came into being in the "Piccola Casa". In the special library, which was built up step by step, professors, students and ordinary believers, who were touched by Newman, could obtain useful information about his life, thoughts and work. Many theses and doctorates by students from Rome and different parts of the world meanwhile were written or suggested there. During a visit by some members of the International Theological Commission, Professor Joseph Ratzinger came to the "Piccola Casa" for the first time on September 28, 1975.

²⁴ Letter from Mother Julia to Sr. Lieve Bommerez dated June 1975.

²⁵ Luigi Raimondi, born on October 25, 1912 in Acqui Terme (Italy), worked as Archbishop and Nuncio in Haiti, Mexico and the USA. 1973 he was appointed Cardinal and Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints by Paul VI. He died on June 24, 1975 at the age of 62.

In the years that followed, newsletters were sent to Newman friends around the world. From time to time, lectures, meetings and other symposia were held to make Newman's thinking accessible to a wider public. Holy Masses were regularly organized in memory of Newman, to promote the process of beatification that had already been initiated by Pope Pius XII. Mother Julia accompanied these developments with her prayer and her heartfelt support. She wrote to the whole community in January 1977: *"In this Week of Prayer for Unity we are participating in a novena which is prayed across the continents and in which the beatification of this great convert is central. He was able to testify: 'I have not sinned against light.' He tried to make the most of the light that led him from one truth to another and purified him in the good fight for the truth and reality. The Lord led him into the Mother Church."*²⁶ In later years, other Newman Centers of The Work sprang up in England, Austria and Hungary, which continue to promote devotion to Newman, the cultivation of his spiritual heritage and the study of his works.

Meanwhile, another door had opened. On May 31, 1976, the famous Oratorian Charles Stephen Dessain CO²⁷, editor of Newman's Letters and Diaries in Birmingham, died unexpectedly. He had just started to set up the society of "The Friends of Cardinal Newman" in England. At the request of the Birmingham Oratorians, Sr. Lutgart was sent to England on June 12, 1976 to use her expertise to help build this society of Newman friends.

Through this collaboration as well as through circulars, lectures, pilgrimages and other initiatives, she was able to contribute to the awakening and the promoting of an interest in the life and work of Newman in the hearts of many people. Mother Julia supported her in her pioneering mission. Once she sent her a funny card that showed a big hand with a little bird and wrote: *"We know that there is a lot to do and that being alone can sometimes be depressing. So, I chose this little card. It would like to tell you how much you can feel like the little bird in God's fatherly hand. He watches over you and stands by you."*²⁸ Mother Julia had a sense of humor.

²⁶ Letter from Mother Julia to the whole community of January 17th, 1977.

²⁷ Charles Stephen Dessain (1907-1976), studied history at Oxford and entered the Birmingham Oratory in 1929. From 1955 he was the archivist and looked after Newman's estate. From 1961 until his sudden death, he published many volumes of the Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman.

²⁸ Letter from Mother Julia to Sr. Lutgart Govaert dated October 1976.

Sr. Lutgart remained in England until November 4, 1981 to assist the Oratorians in Newman's work. Because of this beneficial collaboration, the Oratorians asked The Work in 1986 to assume responsibility for The College at Littlemore, near Oxford, where Newman had been accepted into the Catholic Church. Thus, Newman prepared the ground for The Work to take root in the English-speaking world. On the other hand, The Work contributed in manifold ways to open Newman's life and work to people and to promote his process of beatification.

At the Thanksgiving Mass for the pontifical recognition of The Work on November 10, 2001, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger expressed the friendship between John Henry Newman and Mother Julia in the following words: *"Her primacy of Christology, her love for Christ, expresses itself in the love for the pierced Heart of Jesus. It is no coincidence, I think, that The Work considers itself a friend of Newman, with his motto 'Cor ad cor loquitur'. Mother Julia thought from the heart and out of her heart recognized the Heart of Jesus - this pierced Heart, which is the source of the Covenant, the source of our life."*²⁹

²⁹ Homily by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the Thanksgiving Mass for the pontifical recognition of The Spiritual Family The Work on November 10, 2001 in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome: *L'Osservatore Romano* on 10/11 December 2001, 8. At the beatification of Newman on September 19, 2010 in Birmingham, Benedict XVI thanked The Work publicly for the promotion of the Newman Causa. On October 13, 2019, the outstanding English theologian was accepted into the band of saints by Pope Francis.