**Newman – Scholar and Saint**

**Who is John Henry Newman?**

**Introduction**

As a brief prelude to this evening’s talk I would like to explain that I was first introduced to John Henry Newman some 50 years ago when shortly after Ordination I happened to be rummaging, as one does, through some books left on a shelf of an attic room in the presbytery of my first appointment. Among the books my attention was drawn to a copy of Newman’s: *Apologia Pro Vita Sua,* telling his faith story which after many years of searching eventually led him to the Catholic Church. Strange enough, on reading the book, it wasn’t the theological or spiritual content that attracted me at the time, but the clarity of his thought and expression in which, for me, the honesty and integrity of the man shone through and that spurred me on to read more. So I thought that Newman’s faith story as it unfolded in his Apologia would be an appropriate Subject for this evening’s talk; as I pose and seek to answer the question: Who is John Henry Newman?

**The Newman Family[[1]](#footnote-1)**

First of all as an introduction to Blessed John Henry Newman I would like to talk briefly about the Newman family. They were of humble origins, descending from a poor tailor, William Newman, of the County of East Anglia, north of London. In 1734 William’s grandson John left to make his fortune as a grocer in London; his venture was so successful that in 1764 he became a Freeman of the city of London. The grocer’s son, who was also John, became a clerk and a partner to a private banking company in London. In 1799 John married Jemima, the daughter of a wealthy paper manufacturer, who had descended from French Protestant refugees, who had fled to England from Catholic persecution. Their first child John Henry, who will shortly be Saint John Henry Newman, was born in London on the 21st of February 1801. Shortly after John was born, due to the rapid success of their banking venture, his parents decided to move to the leafy suburbs of London to live in a five storied mansion. This property was added to a few years later when his parents decided to purchase a country home for the sake of their family that, by 1805, had grown to four members; eventually in 1808 and 1809 their youngest two were born completing the family of six children, three boys and three girls.

**John’s Parents**

John’s father was a very cultured man who sought to instil a love for literature and for music in his family; although he was religious he wasn’t attached to any particular Church. He was, what was referred to at the time as, a freethinker, one who wanted to break free from the over rigid moral and legal structures of institutional religion. In that sense he was a man of his time when, at the time the more educated classes were beginning to seek rational explanations and scientific proofs even for their religious beliefs. Also, in politics, he was a liberal and I mention that because in later years his son John saw the evils of moral relativism and secularism being generated by free thinkers and by the policies being promoted within the Liberal party; and, in reaction, one of the main focuses of his life’s work was to counteract the damage being done by liberal thought and liberal policies which he felt would eventually be destructive of the religious and cultural landscape of England.

John’s mother, on the other hand, was not only religious but pious. She taught John what he called ‘Bible Religion’, which wasn’t an institutionalised form of religion and therefore consisted, as he put it, *not in rites or creeds but mainly in having a bible in the home;* Religion for him at this early stage of his life consisted of reading the Bible privately; listening to the Bible being read in Church and also in family gatherings. In the Apologia he puts his experience of religion in the following words. *I was brought up as a child to take great delight in reading the Bible; but I had no formal religious convictions till I was fifteen. Of course I had perfect knowledge of my catechism.*[[2]](#footnote-2)

**A vivid Imagination**

John seemed to have enjoyed a good relationship with his parents and with his brothers and sisters, but his life as a child was very different and removed from the carefree childish pursuits that most people would associate with childhood. He admits himself *that his school fellows have left on record that they never, or scarcely ever, saw him taking part in any game.*[[3]](#footnote-3) He seemed by nature to be an introvert; his real world was within; he loved to read and within his imagination build up a world of fantasy and make belief. He admits to having got immense satisfaction and enjoyment from this *dream world*.

When he was around twenty years old he wrote an account of those childhood memories a little of which he shared with us in his Apologia. Speaking of his vivid imagination he says: *my imagination ran on unknown influences, on magical powers and talismans… I thought life might be a dream, or I an Angel and all this world a deception; my fellow angels by a playful concealing themselves from me and deceiving me with the semblance of a material world.* He also recalls how he, as a child, on reading the Arabian Tales wished that they were true. That in itself, at least to me, is an interesting comment, because, even as a child it shows how discerning and reflective he was. The normal child and here I am thinking of myself as a child, would probably, without question, have accepted these tales and other flights of fancy as being true; perhaps out of an unconscious need to indulge in fantasy and make belief so as to escape from the more harsh realities of life. In saying that *he wished they were true;* Newman obviously had the ability to engage with a world of fantasy, live in it and thoroughly enjoy it while not allowing it become an escape from the real world.

While it would seem that he was encouraged by his parents, to give the imagination full reign in order to enable his creative and artistic potential to develop and flourish, he was also aware of the danger of confusing the world of the imagination with the real world; for him one should feed into and enrich the other without allowing the boundaries between the two worlds; the world of fantasy and the real world to become blurred. I am aware that I have laboured a little in my comments here but I do believe that the distinction between fact and fantasy and the ability to discern the real from the imaginary has been at the heart of Newman’s quest for truth and for holiness of life, as reflected in his writings which we will see are great works of art written, however, in the service of the truth.

**Childhood Memories**

Newman also mentions that in his early years he was inclined to be superstitious; he says for example that he *used to constantly bless myself before going into the dark.* And he admits that he didn’t have an idea from where this practice originated. He also mentions in his Apologia how later on in his life he was one day looking over some old copy books from his school days and of how his breath was almost taken away by surprise when he discovered, on the front page of his Latin verse-book, that he had drawn a *solid upright cross and next to it what may indeed be meant for a necklace, but what I cannot make out to be anything else but a set of beads suspended, with a little cross attached.*  He was not quite ten at the time and suggests that he may have got the idea from some *romance* he was reading at the time, or from some pictures he had seen, but it certainly wasn’t from any of his prayer books which those days were not decorated with pictures. Of course, from the perspective of his *Bible Religion* the use of holy objects or images, as in the Catholic Church, would be regarded as idolatrous and superstitious. Another memory, on the more positive side, which John related to his youngest sister Jemima in a letter he wrote in 1861 takes him back to the age of four when he remembered lying in his cot gazing at the lighted candles that had been set in the windows in celebration of the victory of Trafalgar. Light was to become a central theme in his faith journey as he groped his way towards God. His greatest poem and hymn *Lead Kindly Light* emerged from one of the darkest passages of that journey.

**His School Days**

As well as home influences the peculiar nature of how John’s childhood developed can also be attributed to the fact that barely at the age of seven, in 1808, he was sent with his younger brother Charles to a private boarding School at Ealing, a school for the sons of English gentry, which would be the equivalent of Eaton College today and he remained there until 1816, from where he went straight onto Oxford University. While at Ealing he excelled in his studies; his headmaster used to say *that no other pupil of his ran through the school curriculum at such a pace.*[[4]](#footnote-4) Although he preferred reading to games he soon established himself as a leader among his fellow students. At the age of eleven he started a club that produced a magazine called the *Spy* through which he sought to build on and develop some imaginative writings that he had already engaged in as a child.

The club also provided him with plenty of opportunity of, as he put it: *speechifying after the parliamentary manner,*[[5]](#footnote-5) which he relished. He also loved the theatre and each year he played a leading part in the schools production. From all this we can see that, although shy and introverted, he was by no means a recluse and it is interesting to see how he was ready to put his vivid imagination into good use. He seemed happy to place, the strengths he had developed over his childhood, at the service of his community and later at the service of the world in his writing of prose, poetry and drama. At this stage, however, he had arrived at a more serious phase of his faith journey. What he referred to as his ‘First’ Conversion

**His “First” Conversion**

At the age of fourteen or 15, which shows how bright he was, he found himself reading books critical of the authenticity of the Old Testament and books questioning the immortality of the human soul, even books that called to question the very existence of God; all of which seemed to be undermining the foundations on which Christianity and his Christian faith were built upon. Although he found all this reading shocking there was also a sense in which he found himself attracted to it. In the Apologia he expressed his mixed feelings at the time in the following words: *how dreadful, but how plausible.* Then he goes on to surmise how his life would have turned out had he not, at the age of fifteen, had a life changing or conversion experience. This happened at a crises period in his life. He had become ill and at the same time his father got into serious difficulties in his banking business; as a result the family had to sell their homes and move to a more modest residence, after which his father, through contacts, acquired a job managing a brewery.

As a result of his illness and home circumstances John was unable to join his family for his summer holidays that year. He had to stay on in his boarding school which was difficult for him but also fortuitous because that summer he struck up a friendship with one of his young teachers, the Rev Walter Mayers, an Evangelical Calvinist who encouraged him to read the works of the Protestant reformer John Calvin and other related works that gave him a different perspective and helped him, as he put it, to critique the more rationalist and atheistic books that he had been reading. At the time of his conversion he suggests that through a variety of people that he met and books that he read, he was being led, very gradually, from a *Bible Religion,* a religion based on *Scripture Alone,* into a more organised form of religion based on doctrines, and creeds which at first he felt that his new found Calvinist religion was offering him. While, later on, he admits that his conversion experience never left him, he also acknowledged that it challenged and changed him, changing his attitude, even toward some of what he came to regard as the erroneous teachings of Calvin, which he saw as being narrow, harsh and elitist, especially his teaching on predestination, where he was led to believe that he was among the chosen few to be saved. This even cost him his friendship with the Rev Mayers, who he had always acknowledged to be instrumental in his conversion and to whom he always remained deeply grateful. He was, as Newman, himself, put it in the Apologia *the human means of the beginning of divine faith in me.*  And so, as the search continued, a new phase on John Henry Newman’s faith journey was about to begin.

**The Word Became Flesh**

Newman’s faith up to this had been a very personal and individualistic affair; indeed a private affair between God and himself. This would be very much in line with the Evangelical Protestantism in which he was brought up; in which saw the Bible alone, through which God spoke directly to those destined for eternal life, as the necessary means to salvation; while believing that any attempt to substitute or supplant the Sacred Word by Church doctrine or liturgical practices as happened in the Catholic Church would be unacceptable and would be regarded as being contrary to the spirit of the Gospel and to the mind of Christ. His conversion experience at first seemed to confirm this belief; but, as we have just heard it also challenged him. Because, deep down, he admits to have yearned for some more concrete and living expression of the Word of God; that would do justice to the event of the Incarnation when God’s Word became flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary.

To use an analogy he had the spirit of his Christian faith but there seemed to be no bones or flesh that the spirit could give form and concrete expression to; that would, in other words, give him a more holistic understanding of his faith grounded in real life and in the real world. He was gradually coming to realise that his faith lacked definite teachings, doctrines and practices that would help him set down the foundations that, in turn, would enable him to incarnate, to make flesh the message of the Gospel; and enable him to draw body, soul and spirit together into a unity, that would further draw him into a deeper union and communion not only with God and with his fellow Christians but with all human beings and with the whole of God’s creation; which he began to realise was the real mission of Christ and of his Church. In other words he was coming to realise that the great mystery on which the Christian faith rests is the mystery of the Incarnation, when the Word of God became flesh, to save the world; when God, in other words, became human so that we human beings might become Divine.

**Finding the Pearl of Great Price**

For the young John Henry his conversion and this growing realization was like finding the missing link, indeed finding the pearl of great price, for which, in order to possess it, he was prepared to sell everything he had, to surrender his life, and even the freedom he cherished, to God. His conversion experience was a beginning that gradually gave him an ever deeper insight into the way in which God intended his message of salvation, in and through Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit, to unfold in the world; and for the rest of his life this became his mission, the object of his labours and the goal of his strivings. One could say that he sacrificed everything for the sake of realizing that vision.

**Phase II**

**Newman at Oxford**

To come back to Newman’s life story and journey of faith; shortly after his conversion, at the age of sixteen he went to Oxford University, which marked the beginning of a brilliant academic career. He excelled in the sciences as well as in the arts; he was a brilliant mathematician and a brilliant linguist. He soon won a prestigious teaching position in the University and was regarded as a leading light among the intellectuals of his time. But his life was now guided and would be determined, not by the demands of the University authorities, but by the vision imprinted deep within his heart and mind through his conversion experience, which gradually seems to have taken possession of him giving him, as he put it, *a firm belief in God’s mercy and providence and a sense of being called into a lasting relationship with Christ.* As was expressed in a book published recently: *he had [after his conversion] come to realise that life would be a long love affair with the truth; an adventure that demanded total fidelity, and that being faithful to God’s truth would mean a constant battle against the more superficial world within and about him.*[[6]](#footnote-6) And eventually he felt that his vision and the goal of his strivings was to be found in the Anglican Church of England. So at Oxford, rather than the sciences or literature, he went on to study theology and was ordained for ministry in the Anglican Church at the age of 24. And, in a special way as a priest he began his ministry by sharing his faith and vision through his weekly sermons at the University Chapel; this, of course, was but a humble, tho’ very important, beginning to the great mission that lay before him. I don’t suppose at that stage he had any idea of the magnitude of the work that he was being called to do.

**Destined for Greatness**

His presence at Oxford, then his teaching and preaching, brought him in touch with most of the great scholars of his time and with the great theologians within the Anglican Church; many of whom, we are told, took an interest in the young Newman because of his brilliance; encouraging and supporting him in his academic and theological pursuits, as well as, helping him to gain a deeper appreciation of his faith and a better understanding of the Anglican Church. He recalls with gratitude how one such friend Edward Hawkins helped him by offering a critique of his sermons before he delivered them, which both shows the humility of Newman and his eagerness to learn. Hawkins could see that his faith was still subjective i.e. between God and himself; and that his theology lacked a solid framework of teachings and doctrine provided by the Anglican Church, which Hawkins believed and Newman soon came to accept was the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

While the Catholic Church of Rome claimed to posses these marks and claimed to be the true Church founded by Christ members of the Anglican Communion believed that the Catholic Church of Rome had departed, at the end of the 4th century, from the teaching tradition of the early Christian Church and was in error guilty of promoting superstitious and idolatrous beliefs and practices; and which Newman himself believed, because of his more Evangelical and Calvinistic background, and being deeply influenced by a book on Church History by Joseph Milner, who believed that the Pope was the Antichrist talked about by the prophet Daniel and by St John in the Apocalypse. This might sound strange but Newman believed this virtually until the eve of his conversion to Catholicism many years later.

**The Restoration of the Anglican Church**

However, while Newman and colleagues, the intelligentsia within Oxford and the Anglican Church, believed that the Anglican Church was the true Church there was much in the Church that they were not happy about; and there was general agreement that the Anglican Church needed to be renewed and restored to its claim to be the true image and likeness of the early Christian Church. However, Newman was in 1827 visited by two great blows: illness and bereavement. The illness was due to over work which called for a complete break and a long period of convalescence; while the bereavement was due to the sudden death of his sister Mary at the age of nineteen, which for Newman was a grievous blow as they were very close. He soon recovered tho’and returned immediately to his teaching at the university and to his pursuit of the truth of his Christian faith and in particular to his task of establishing the authenticity of the Anglican Church and of restoring it to the pristine form of the early Christian Church.

**His first step towards the Roman Catholic Church** In his initial studies on early Church history and on the teachings of the early Church Fathers he, unexpectedly, discovered that many of the doctrines taught in the early Church, especially on its sacramental nature and its teachings on apostolic succession had been largely abandoned by the Anglicans, while they were being kept intact by the Catholic Church. In a sense this, unknown to himself, was the first step on his road to Rome, tho’ he vehemently resisted becoming a Catholic. In fact during that period he visited Rome with a friend but was more interested in its literary and secular rather than in its religious history; and during his visit he wrote about *the wretched perversion of truth* sanctioned by Rome. During that trip he was, once again, struck down by illness, this time quite severe, while visiting Sicily. It was during this illness that he began to compose the lyrics of his most famous hymn: *Lead kindly light*; a hymn he completed in the boat on his way home. In his physical weakness, in the precariousness of his mission to renew and reform the Anglican Church as well as in the darkness of the inner journey of faith the hymn was a deep and heartfelt plea for direction; for light and guidance from the Lord.

**The Oxford Movement**

On that same year, 1833, after returning home, with new vigour, he and the handful of his colleagues who had been working to renew and restore to the Anglican Church, came to realise that many of those doctrines, teachings and practices of the early Christian Church, which the Anglican Church had allowed to be dropped or to become eroded over the one hundred and fifty years since the Reformation, needed to be restored and renewed. So they decided to begin a movement, which was to become known as the Oxford Movement. The movement received a mixed reception; viewed by the general public with a mixture of interest, bemusement, condescension and cynicism. It quickly became evident, however, from the level of scholarship in their outputs that the members of the Movement were both serious and intelligent. Over the years Newman and his colleagues had been developing an old idea within the Anglican Church to become the central theme of the movement; it was known as the *Via Media,* or "the middle way" between the Anglican Church on the one hand and the Catholic Church on the other. While for them the Anglican Church was and would continue to be the true Church, it none-the-less needed to be purified of the doctrinal corruptions that had crept in over the years while at same time it needed to take on board the doctrines and devotional practises that the Catholic Church had managed to keep intact from early Church times; without, of course, as they stressed, taking on the heretical excesses that had contaminated the Catholic Church.

Soon Newman, who had built up a great reputation and following because of his preaching and writing skills, became a leading light in the movement. Based on their studies of the early Christian Church, individuals within the group then began to issue long articles in pamphlet form, which they called: *Tracts for the Times.* There were ninety in all, each well researched from primary sources; that is from the teachings of the early Father’s of the Church, covering all the essential dogmas, doctrines and practices, which gradually, Newman came to acknowledge, formed the core of the tradition and teaching deposit of the Catholic faith; doctrines on the Trinitarian nature of God on the Incarnation, on Baptism, on the Blessed Sacrament, the Real Presence; and other doctrines still regarded by many Protestant Churches as *Romish* *corruptions* of the Gospel message.

**The Tracts for the Times** Those who wrote and published those Tracts presented their teachings with clarity and defended them as part of the authentic Christian Church. Many Anglicans saw this as an attempt to Romanize their Church and this evoked strong, and sometimes, quite violent reaction. Since this could not be further from Newman’s mind as he still had an aversion to the Roman Church and was still convinced that the Anglican Church was the true Church of Christ; this became a period of great inner struggle for him. He found himself caught between two stools or as we say today between a rock and a hard place. The outcome of the Tracts, however, had convinced him that the Roman Catholic Church had held onto much of the original Christian doctrines that the Protestants had abandoned; but, he still believed that Rome had added doctrines and practices that could not be reconciled with the Gospel or with the teachings of the early Fathers. While he found himself caught between the two, many Anglicans, who could see beyond his predicament, began to move towards Rome and join the Catholic Church; so, by the early 1840's, Newman was expending a great deal of energy trying to keep Anglicans from becoming Catholic--though it was his own writings that had tipped the balance for them. He even found himself accused of being a Roman Catholic already, in secret, on a mission to steal away as many Anglicans as he could, by whatever dishonest means available.

**Tract 90 – The final blow** The final straw for Newman was the contents of Tract Ninety, the last in the series issued in 1841, where Newman stated that the Thirty-Nine Articles—the core teachings of the Anglican Church should be interpreted in the light of Catholic teaching. This caused consternation and lost him many Anglican friends among whom scholars who had supported him and were instrumental in drawing him closer to the teachings of the Catholic Church and even among them were some of his fellow Tractarians. They believed that Newman had gone a step too far. As a result he was forbidden by his own bishop to write any more tracts and bishop after bishop of the Anglican Church condemned his Tract No: 90. Thus challenging Newman to make a choice between the two; if the Anglican Church he belonged to was not, in fact, a branch of the Catholic Church, he knew he could not remain in it.

He soon retired from active ministry, leaving his university church of St. Mary's and taking up residence with a few like-minded colleagues in a village near Oxford. He still resisted going over to Rome but he couldn't remain where he was either. Before coming into the Catholic Church he first had to prove to himself that the teachings and practices of the Church were rooted in and had developed from the early Christian Church knowing that if this was so the logical next step for him after his failure to restore a Catholic sense to the Anglican Articles would be to join the Catholic Church. And so in his final years as an Anglican he set out to establish whether or not the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church were the growth and flowering of the ancient teachings of the Church of the Apostles and of the Fathers and, of course, the Church as Christ intended it to be. That did not mean that he accepted that all was well with the Catholic Church, but that is for another day, perhaps for Next Tuesday.

**John Henry Newman: A Catholic** In his ongoing search before his conversion to Catholicism he compiled one of his most significant theological as well as literary works known as the *Development of Christian Doctrine*. By the time he had finished the work he also knew that it was time to cross the threshold; or to use a more common expression: it was time to cross the Tiber. One day, a short time later after he had spent some time discussing the matter with Fr Dominic Barbarie, a Passionist missionary, he wrote more than thirty letters, to relatives, friends, and colleagues, announcing his decision. After a life’s search and a journey that had intensified over the previous twenty years, John Henry Newman came into what he was convinced was: *the One true Fold of the Redeemer* (as he himself put it), that was on October 9, 1845.

Although at this stage he had not quite passed the halfway mark of this life I would suggest that the answer to the question: Who is John Henry Newman? Which I had posed to myself, in preparing this talk, was formed, shaped and moulded by the fire of the Holy Spirit within the crucible of the events and experiences of those forty five years; printing an indelibly stamp on his heart and personality. Having found his true identity within the Catholic faith and his true home within the Catholic Church he continued his journey for the remaining half of his life on the firm footing of his true identity in Christ; fulfilling his mission, caring for his flock as a pastoral priest and Cardinal, sharing his expertise in the field of Catholic Education, answering his critics in his defence of the role of the Laity and defending his own integrity and truthfulness in his *Apologia* and finally as a S*imple, Humble Christian* in seeking to take up his cross daily and follow his Lord and Master; by which, I have no doubt, he would most like to be remembered.

1. Most of the information gleaned from: John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua: Being a history of his Religious Opinions,* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1967) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sheridan Gilley, *Newman and his Age, (*London: Darton, Longman + Todd, 1990) p.10 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Louis Bouyer, *Newman: His life and Spirituality*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1958) p.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bouyer, 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gallagher, p.17 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)