

Ven. John Henry Newman

BORN 1801; DIED 1890
PRIEST
FEAST DAY: MARCH 26

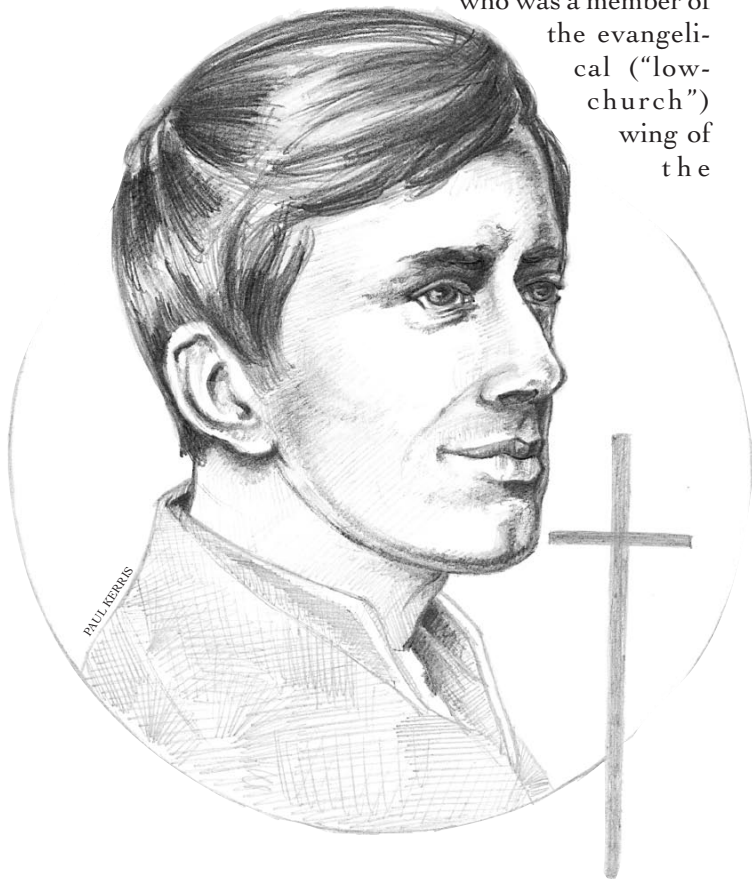
FROM the middle of the sixteenth century into the eighteenth century, Catholicism had been persecuted in England with a ferocity found in few other countries of Europe. It was into this milieu of hatred and contempt for “Papists” that Ven. John Henry Newman, the most renowned minister of the Church of England (Anglican Church) in his generation, entered the Catholic Church and initiated the restoration of Catholicism as a vital spiritual force in Great Britain.

John was the oldest of three sons and three daughters of John Newman, a banker who was a nominal Anglican, and Jemima Fourdrinier, of Huguenot (French Protestant) ancestry who was a member of the evangelical (“low-church”) wing of the

Anglican Church. Their eldest was a bookish, shy, and affectionate child, and early developed a lifelong love of drama. Although he loved reading the Bible, he lacked religious faith until, at fifteen, he underwent a conversion and became an evangelical Anglican. He also decided that following God’s call required him to remain single. He hated Roman Catholicism and believed that the Pope was the antichrist, but also understood the importance of a “definite Creed.”

At sixteen John entered Trinity College of Oxford University. Shortly after completing his degree, he was elected a fellow (member of the faculty) of Oxford’s top-ranked Oriel College, where he remained for almost ten years. At twenty-four, he was ordained an Anglican priest and, three years later, was named vicar of Oxford University’s church, St. Mary’s. Gifted with a winning personality and formidable intellectual, writing, and public-speaking skills, he quickly developed a reputation as a preacher of sermons of uncommon grace and power. By this time, he was moving toward the “high-church” wing of the Anglican Church and, in 1830, he broke his last connections with evangelical Anglicanism.

Following a dispute in 1832, he resigned from Oriel College and went with a friend on a seven-month tour of the Mediterranean. Ill in Sicily with malaria, he was stranded for weeks awaiting a ship and then on shipboard wrote his famous hymn *Lead, Kindly Light*. When John returned home, a friend delivered a sermon that set off what came to be called the Tractarian or Oxford Movement, an effort to restore doctrinal beliefs in the face of their ongoing erosion. He and four friends began publishing a series of theological essays under the general title of “Tracts for Our Times.” (In 1833, he also published *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, which explored in detail the history of the Arian heresy (holding that Jesus was not divine) in Church history. His research for this book was a vital element in the development of his understanding of the true Church.)



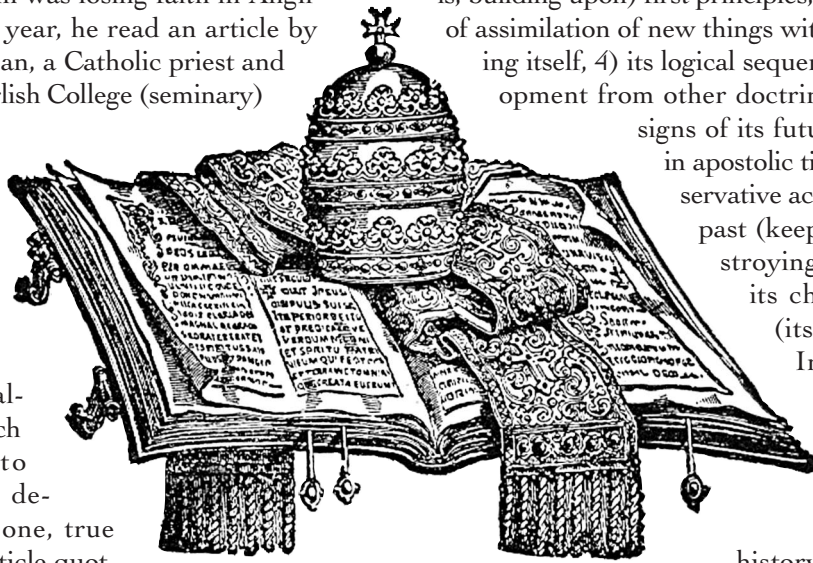


In eight years, ninety tracts were published, twenty-six of which he wrote himself, using a masterful prose style that was simple, clear, and convincing. Together with his sermons, these tracts enthralled large numbers of people. To the growing consternation of Anglican bishops, the tracts defended doctrines that the Church of England had abandoned. Many people read them and left the Church of England for Catholicism.

By 1840, John was losing faith in Anglicanism. In that year, he read an article by Nicholas Wiseman, a Catholic priest and rector of the English College (seminary) in Rome, which demolished his thesis of the Anglican *via media*, a “middle way” between Catholicism and Protestantism allowing the Church of England to claim apostolic descent from the one, true Church. The article quoted St. Augustine’s reply to heretics who claimed that they were Catholic: *Securus judicat orbis terrarum* (in English, “the Church of the whole world judges serenely who are and who are not of her communion”). He realized that the Church of England could not simply assert membership in the Catholic Church. He then began seriously to consider the truth claims of the Catholic Church. In the last of the tracts, *Tract 90*, published in 1841, he interpreted the Anglican “Thirty-nine Articles,” which had been formulated in 1571 as the fundamental doctrinal statement of the Church of England, as consistent with Catholicism. Numerous Anglican bishops condemned it and the Anglican bishop of Oxford banned any more tracts.

John’s journey toward Catholicism accelerated and, in February 1843, he publicly withdrew all his anti-Catholic statements in a newspaper advertisement. The following September, he preached his last sermon as an Anglican and resigned from St. Mary’s. He then settled in to

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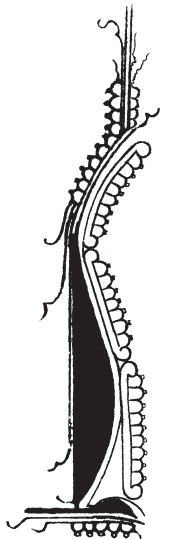


John Henry Newman came to see the necessity of papal authority for the unity of Christians

write what became the turning point in his faith, a book-length exploration of whether or not the Catholic Church’s doctrinal development was authentic, which took shape as the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (published in 1846). A work of theological genius in which his historical work on the Arians became invaluable, he identified seven “notes” of a true doctrinal development: 1) its preservation of type (organic growth), 2) its continuity of (that is, building upon) first principles, 3) its power of assimilation of new things without changing itself, 4) its logical sequence of development from other doctrines, 5) early signs of its future maturity in apostolic times, 6) conservative action upon its past (keeping, not destroying it), and 7) its chronic vigor (its longevity). In the book he famously concluded: “To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant.” He stopped work on the *Essay* the day he became

convinced that the Catholic Church was the “one true fold of the Redeemer,” and in October 1845 he and several followers were received into the Catholic Church, to the anger and dismay of an England that had followed his spiritual leadership. He went to live at Oscott College, the Catholic seminary in Birmingham, England, under the spiritual direction of Father Wiseman. He was ordained a Catholic priest in Rome in 1847.

While in Rome, John read of the work of St. Philip Neri, the sixteenth-century founder of the Oratorians as an apostolate of personal ministry. A few months after his return home, he founded a Congregation of the Oratory at Birmingham. He settled on the outskirts of Birmingham, where he lived for most of the rest of his life, focusing on preaching, writing, and working with youths and young adults. Two years later, Pope Pius IX re-established the Catholic hierarchy in England, naming Father Wiseman Cardinal and the first Arch-





bishop of Westminster. There was an enormous public backlash. The Pope was burned in effigy in several places, and stones and dung were thrown at Cardinal Wiseman's carriage. John joined Cardinal Wiseman in writing numerous letters to British newspapers, delivering lectures, and preaching sermons, and together they calmed the storm.

John's life following his conversion was filled with setbacks that tested his utter trust in God's providence. He was rumored to be appointed a bishop, but it never happened. He was appointed the general editor of a new Catholic translation of the Bible that never got started. He was invited to Dublin to help found a Catholic university that never really got off the ground, and he returned home four years later in disappointment (it was during this period that he developed his ideas of the purposes of a university education, published in 1873 as *The Idea of a University Defined*, the finest defense of Catholic educational theory ever written). Shortly after his return, he became editor of a Catholic publication, only to have his tenure cut short because his essay on consulting the faithful on doctrinal matters was censured by Rome as a statement against papal infallibility. Perhaps the hardest burden was the suspicion with which he was viewed by Church officials, including Pope Pius IX himself, for twenty years.

In 1864, an Anglican clergyman and writer attacked the Catholic clergy as uninterested in truth for its own sake, and personally attacked John as counseling religious deception. Deeply wounded and desiring to restore the good name of the Catholic priesthood, in a space of six months John published *Apologia pro Vita Sua* ("Defense of One's Own Life"), a powerful and poignant spiritual autobiography comparable to St. Augustine's *Confessions* and St. Teresa of Ávila's *The Life*. The unfavorable public opinion of John reversed completely. In 1870 he

published *Grammar of Assent*, which discussed the way individual people come to religious belief. At the same time, he opposed the growing momentum for pronouncing as dogma the infallibility of the Pope, because he felt that it was premature to do so. But once the Vatican Council I issued the dogmatic declaration in 1870, he strongly defended it.

For most of John's life, his prayer was characterized by a dryness that he saw as a severe mortification. He prized the stability and inner calmness of the habit of daily prayer and was continually aware of the working of the Holy Spirit in his meditation. He saw the tender, living,

broken heart as the garden of God, but also viewed the spiritual life not as mere feeling but as obedience to God. He also insisted on the central importance of prayer accompanied by fasting, as the two "wings of the soul":

"They alone are able truly to enjoy this world, who begin with the world unseen. They alone enjoy it, who have first abstained from it. They alone can truly feast, who have first fasted; they alone are able to use the world, who have learned not to abuse it; they alone inherit it, who take it as a shadow of the world to come, and who for that world to come relinquish it."

John's towering reputation gave such legitimacy to Catholicism that, when he was seventy-seven, he was elected the first honorary fellow by his alma mater, Trinity College. The following year, Pope Leo XIII named him a Cardinal, an honor received with joy by English Catholics. He is the first of the modern Cardinal-theologians. His theological writings had such a tremendous impact on the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) that he is often called the "Father of Vatican II," and they continue to exert tremendous influence on people considering the Catholic Church, so that he is credited with innumerable conversions not only in his lifetime, but up until the present day.

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