Heart Speaks Unto Heart

THE CERTAINTY OF NEWMAN: CONSCIENCE AND REALITY

This work is in response to the invitation to all of us made by Pope Benedict XVI during his journey to Great Britain in 2010 to reflect on the figure of John Henry Newman. He made this invitation above all because Newman was 'a modern man, who lived the whole problem of modernity', and because of the opportunity he saw for all of us to learn from Newman's three conversions. The three conversions can, in fact, be seen as three conversions to reality.

First conversion

The first conversion is the discovery that God and the soul are real, and that the presence of God can be perceived with the same concreteness and certainty with which one perceives the outside world, everyday objects or the faces of friends. For the young Newman this is a Copernican revolution: he realizes that what truly counts in life is the clear presence of the person of God, so that all existence becomes a dialogue between the heart of man and the heart of God.

Second conversion

The second conversion brings the realization that faith is not exhausted in an individualistic dialogue with God but becomes an awareness of the whole of reality. A faith that is not rooted in reality, that does not change the criteria with which we relate to the world, is an illusion and not a response to the deep desires of man. From here began Newman's unending battle against the dualism between things and words and his surprising discovery that a true dialogue between man and God opens up a dialogue with the hearts of other human beings.

Third conversion

The final conversion is Newman's conversion to Catholicism. It is the discovery that God decided to 'interfere in human affairs', creating a real place of His presence in the form of the Catholic Church. In this living body, the person of Christ becomes tangible. He is present in the communion between brothers of the faith. He shines in the sanctity of their lives. He lets Himself be touched in the sacraments. In the communion of the Church, the dialogue with the heart of God coincides with the dialogue between the hearts of men.

Our aim is to trace this journey of conversion by proposing a biographical and thematic path, from which it emerges that conscience was the driving force of Newman's journey towards the certainty of truth (ex umbrae in imaginem in veritatem, "out of shadows into truth"). We also consider how such a journey characterized Newman as an educator.
“I should like to recall once more the beatification 
of Cardinal John Henry Newman. Why was he beatified? What does he have to say to us? We must learn from Newman’s three conversions, because they were steps along a spiritual path that concerns us all.”

1. FIRST CONVERSION: TO GOD AS THE TRUE ESSENCE OF REALITY

The first conversion is to faith in the living God. Until that moment, Newman thought like the average man of today, who regards God as something uncertain, something with no essential role to play in their lives. ‘The self is what can be grasped; those things that can be calculated and taken in one’s hand. In his conversion, Newman recognized that it is exactly the other way round that God and the real, man’s spiritual identity, constitute what is genuinely real, what counts. There are much more real than objects that can be grasped. This conversion was a Copernican revolution. Where such a conversion takes place, it is not just a personal theory that changes, but a fundamental shape of life changes.”

(Benedict XVI, Address on the occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia, 20 Dec 2010)

2. SECOND CONVERSION: FAITH IS INTELLIGENCE OF REALITY

The second step in Newman’s lifelong journey of conversion was overcoming a subjective position: “True Christianity is shown, in obedience and not through a state of consciousness. Thus the whole duty and work of a Christian is made up of these two parts: Faith and Obedience. Nothing else matters” (fide 2-9 [...] and not according to the will [...].) He wrote that we are in danger of this day, of insisting on neither of these or worse, regarding all true and revealed consideration of the Object of faith as barren orthodoxy, technical subjectantia [...] and [...] making the test of our being religious, to consist in our loving what is called a spiritual state of heart [...]”


3. THIRD CONVERSION: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS THE BODY OF CHRIST IN REALITY

His third conversion, to Catholicism, required him to give up almost everything that was dear and precious to him: profession, profession, academic work, family ties and many friends. The sacrifice demanded of him by obedience to the truth, by his conscience, went further still. The drama of Newman’s life necessitated the study of the Church’s history, which he then had to come in contact with. His study of the Church’s history led him to see that the Church, as the Church, is the only Church in which he could find the truth. Newman then became a Catholic in full and to whose mission he devoted his entire life.

(Benedict XVI, Address on the occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia, 20 Dec 2010)

THE METHOD

The driving force that impelled Newman along the path of conversion was conscience. But what does this mean [...] For him, conscience means man’s capacity for truth: the capacity to recognize precisely in the decision-making issue of his life, the truth. At the same time, conscience – man’s capacity to recognize truth – thereby imposes on him the obligation to set out along the path towards truth, to seek it and to submit to it wherever he finds it. The path of Newman’s conversion is a path of conscience.

(Benedict XVI, Address on the occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia, 20 Dec 2010)
THE SEPARATION FROM ROME

King Henry VIII’s decision to declare himself the head of the Church in England marked the birth of the Anglican Church and resulted in the persecution of those who remained faithful to Rome.

From the time Christianity took root on its shores, England was a profoundly Catholic country, giving birth to saints and great men and women of faith such as Boniface, Bede, Julian of Norwich and Edward the Confessor. Catholic faith provided strong cultural and religious ties with the continent, acting against a certain tendency towards isolationism by providing an awareness that England belonged to a greater unity than its natural boundaries, namely Christendom.

England remained a Roman Catholic country until 1534, when it officially separated from Rome during the reign of King Henry VIII. In response to the Pope’s refusal to annul Henry’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon, Henry declared the Pope’s authority over the English Church, made himself head of the Church in England, and dissolved the monasteries and religious orders in England.

Henry himself did not see the rupture as having any specific theological content. He acted mainly for political reasons. But he promoted to power those clergyman with Protestant sympathies who supported his break with Rome. As a result, the Anglican Church was characterized from the very beginning by a variety of theological positions, its unity and most characteristic feature being the rejection of the authority of the Pope.

Failure to accept the break with Rome was regarded as treason and punished with death. In the years following the English Reformation, hundreds of recalcitrant Catholics underwent martyrdom. These included Saint Thomas More, former Lord Chancellor, and Saint John Fisher, Chancellor of the University of Cambridge and former tutor of Henry. The ‘Pilgrimage of Grace’ of 1536 and ‘Bede’s Rebellion’ of 1537, which were risings in the North against the religious changes, were bloodily repressed. Catholics’ civil rights were severely curtailed; among other constraints their right to own property or inherit land was severely limited; they were burdened with special taxes they could not send their children abroad for a Catholic education; they could not vote, and they could not join English universities. Celebration of Mass was made illegal and priests were liable to imprisonment and execution.

England’s subsequent wars with Catholic powers such as France and Spain, culminating in the attempted invasion by the Spanish Armada in 1588, supported nationalistic propaganda. This propaganda equated Protestantism with loyalty to the monarchy and the country, making every Catholic a potential traitor, and treating Catholicism as an anti-patriotic force seen as irreconcilable with English national identity.
The Catholic Church in the XVII Centuries in Newman's Age

In Newman's time Catholics were still treated with suspicion and hostility and were considered to owe their first allegiance to a superstitious tyrannical foreign power.

The break with Rome had a huge impact on the subsequent history of England. The most important political events in the following years are in fact connected, to a greater or lesser extent, with the religious problem. Religious tensions between a court with Papist elements and a Parliament with Puritan sympathies were among the major factors behind the English Civil War (1642–1651), and this led to the establishment of a strongly anti-Catholic regime under Oliver Cromwell.

Similarly, the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, which led to the depopulation of the king and the installation of a new constitutional monarchy, was triggered especially by King James' Catholic sympathies and his clear intent to work towards restoring the Church of England to the Catholic fold.

Official historiography and propaganda, through the popularity of works such as The Book of Martyrs of Fuss (1563), contributed forming in the public mind the idea of the Catholic religion as completely irreconcilable with English cultural and national identity, and of the Church of Rome as a tyrannical foreign power. This national memory became profoundly embedded in the minds of the majority; it entered popular accounts and became a central part of English folklore.

The situation of Catholics gradually improved by the end of the eighteenth century and during Newman's lifetime, culminating in the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, which gave Catholics almost equal civil rights, including the right to vote and to hold most public office.

In spite of their practical re-acquisition of civil rights, Catholics were still highly unpopular in Newman's England. They were seen as spies and conspirators, at the beck and call of a corrupt foreign power aiming to lay its hands on England's people and wealth. They were accused of perversity and superstition. Their worship was ridiculed as full of irrationality and superstition, and the Church of Rome was still thought of as the comprehensively corrupt institution of pre-Reformation times.
The Boy Newman

AND THE FIRST Conversion

“When I was fifteen, a great change of thought took place in me. I fell under the influence of a definite creed, and received into my intellect impressions of dogma, which through God’s mercy, have never been effaced or obscured.”

(Apologia pro Vita Sua)

John Henry Newman was born on 21 February 1801 in the City of London, the first child of a banker and of a descendant of French Huguenot refugees. He had two brothers and three sisters.

Newman was a strong-willed and very bright child. At boarding school he excelled at academic work, acted in Latin plays, won prizes for speeches, edited periodicals and loved playing the violin. Newman was also a very sensitive and naturally shy person, with a romantic or mystical side.

“I wished the Arabian Tales were true; my imagination ran on unknown influences, on magical powers, and talismans... I thought life may be a dream, or I an Angel, and all this world a deception.” (Apologia pro Vita Sua)

Newman was brought up in a typical Anglican environment of the time, which he was to later call “the national religion of England” or “Bible Religion”. It implied little more than formal adherence to Christianity.

Newman’s father, in particular, was something of a skeptic and worried about any sort of religious enthusiasm in his children.

In 1816, because of a financial crisis in England, his father’s bank was forced to close, causing much trauma and upheaval in the family as well as loss of wealth and status.

During this period Newman fell ill. He later noted that he had three serious illnesses in his life and that each coincided with moments of conversion. He described this illness as the “first blow, invisible one, when I was a boy of 15, and it made me a Christian.” (Autobiographical Writings)

“I believed that the inward conversion of which I was conscious [...] would last into the next life, and that I was elected to eternal glory. [...] I believe that it had some influence on my opinions, [...], in isolating me from the objects which surrounded me, in conforming me in my mind to the reality of material phenomena, and making me rest in the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator.” (Apologia pro Vita Sua)
“Our great internal teacher of religion is our conscience. Conscience is a personal guide, and I use it because I must use myself. (...) Conscience is nearer to me than any other means of knowledge.”

(George Romanes)

The personal relationship with God has primacy in Newman’s life and is based on conscience.

“Well,” (Colutta) said, “I feel that God within my heart. I feel myself in His presence. He says to me, ‘Do this, don’t do that.’ You may tell me that this dictate is a mere law of my nature, as it is to joy or to pain. I cannot understand this. No, it is the echo of a person speaking to me. Nothing shall persuade me that it does not ultimately proceed from a person external to me. It carries with it as proof of its divine origin. My nature feels it as an inner voice. An echo implies a voice; a voice a speaker. That speaker I love and I fear.” (Colutta)

Conscience is therefore the greatest weapon against atheism, which Newman, especially in the first period of his life, saw as growing strongly:

“The system of physical causes is so much more tangible and satisfying than that of final, that unless there be a pre-existent and independent interest in the inquirer’s mind, leading him to dwell on the phenomena which betoken an Intelligible Creator, he will certainly follow out those which terminate in the hypothesis of a settled order of nature and self-archived laws. (...) The practical safeguard against Atheism is in the case of scientific inquiries the inward need and desire, the inward experience of that Power, existing in the mind before and independently of their examination of His material world” (University Sermons)

The whole path of Newman is a path of obedience to conscience, a path of obedience to that voice. The essence of Christian vocation is for Newman a personal relationship with Christ:

“The one thing, which is all in all to us, is to live in Christ’s presence, to hear His voice, to see His countenance.” (Lectures, and Plain Sermons)

With such a certainty of a deep relationship between him and God, in 1817 Newman moved to Oxford where he was accepted as a student at Trinity College at the age of 16.
For Newman the most important thing was to understand and follow God’s will.

“He felt himself to be God’s creature, and responsible to Him—God’s possession, not his own.” (Loss and Gain)

In his first years at Oxford Newman’s faith struggled with a risk stemming from his agnosticism and ‘unsentimental materialism’, the subjectivism of his Evangelical background, and the liberal philosophy of the time. The risk for him was that of developing a dualism between faith and reason, i.e. between the human relation with God and the relation with reality.

The first way in which we see Newman’s faith acquiring a firmer grasp of reality is his trust in God within the circumstances of life. A prayer from the later period expresses this very well.

“Therefore I will trust in Him. Whatever, whenever I am, I can never be thrown away. My sickness, or perplexity, or sorrow may be necessary causes of some great and which is quite beyond me. He alone nothing to wine. He may prolong my life. He may shorten it. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, kick the future from me – still He knows what He is about.”

(Meditations on Christian Doctrine)

One of the most significant moments of Newman’s first period in Oxford in which we see the overcoming of this dualism is his preparation for the final School Examination. In a letter to his sister Jemima he writes:

“I cannot think much of the schools without wishing much to distinguish myself in them [...]. I am doing my part, but [...] God will be bestowing what is best for me. [...] I will not therefore ask for success, but for (good) [...]. Do you therefore, dearest sister, wish for me to obtain that which is best for me [...]; for there, whether I succeed or fail, I shall have the comfort of feeling assured that I have obtained real advantage and not apparent.”

(Letter to Jemima)
The Limits of Evangelicalism

Newman breaks away from Evangelicalism, seeking a faith in a real Christ which is capable of facing every aspect of life

In 1824 Newman became a deacon and began his ministry at St. Clement’s Parish in Oxford. He soon came to recognize there was something in evangelical doctrines which left him detached from the world. It seemed to him that Evangelicalism tended to reduce Christianity to subjective introspection and to make Christ unreal.

"It is very much the fashion at present to regard the Saviour of the world in an irrational and unreal way— as a mere idea or vision; to speak of Him as whereas and unattainable. [...] We need to learn to do this, to have some statements about His love, His willingness to receive the sinner, His imparting repentance and spiritual aid, and the like, and see Him in His universal and actual work. [...] it is very possible to speak in a vague way of His love towards us, and to use the name of Christ, yet not at all to realize that He is the Living Son of the Father, or to have any anchor for our faith within us, so as to be fortified against the rise of future defection.

(Parochial and Plain Sermons III)

The more Newman encountered the real lives of his parishioners—visiting them at their own homes, taking care of the sick and reawakening the faith of many— the more it seemed to him that evangelicalism did not work.

"But it was unreal [...] this I had actually found as a fact. Calvinism was not a key to the phenomena of human nature, as they occur in the world."

(Autobiographical Memoir)

This was a crucial moment for Newman because he began to search for a Christian faith that was not reducible to subjectivity and was capable of dealing with the full reality of human existence. In this search he was also influenced by the atmosphere at Oriel College, where he was elected fellow in 1822. Through discussions with his colleagues and the study of various Anglican theologians he changed his mind about some Evangelical theological doctrines and rediscovered the Fathers of the Church.
Newman rejects Liberalism as reducing faith to opinion

"Most people desire not to please God but to please self without displeasing God." (Parochial and Plain Sermons)

As Newman realized the limits of evangelicalism, he found he began to drift in the direction of the liberalism of the day, whereby no one can believe what he does not understand. However, a serious illness and the sudden death of his young sister Mary disturbed Newman and rendered him unsatisified with liberal approaches. He refused a religion in which each man attempts to judge for himself, and Church creed is reduced to a subject of debate.

"The elementary proposition of this new philosophy which is now so threatening is that [...] things are known and are to be received so far as they can be proved, [...] And the mode of proof is to advance from what we know to what we do not know, from sensible and tangible facts to sound conclusions. [...] Why should not that method which has done so much in physics, and also as regards that higher knowledge which the world has believed it had gained through revolution?" (Faith and Prejudice)

This position inevitably leads to what Newman calls liberalism, and what we might now call relativism:

"Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another. [...] It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion, and true. It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion. Revealed religion is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous, and it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy." (Bilotti Speech)

Newman did not deny the need for evidence, even for believers, but he realized that reason is more than "proving" and that faith requires a certain disposition of heart.

"The common and fatal error of the world [...] to think itself a judge of Religious Truth without preparation of heart. Opinion was not, having cause have not. But in the schools of the world the urge towards Truth are considered high roads open to all men, however disposed, at all times. [...] Man considers that they have as full a right to discuss religious subjects, as if they were themselves religious. They will enter upon the most sacred points of Faith at the moment, at their pleasure, — if it be happen, in a certain frame of mind, in their hopes of recreation, near the wine cup." (University Sermons)
Pastor and Tutor

Newman lived his priesthood and tutorship as a pastoral and educational mission

"May I engage in any duty in the strength of Christ, remembering I am a minister of God, and have a commission to preach the Gospel, remembering the worth of souls, and that I shall have to answer for the opportunities given me of benefiting souls under my care." (Autobiographical Memoir)

Newman was aware of his pastoral mission from the moment he was ordained a deacon when, struck by the definition nature of the step he had taken, he commented:

"For even words never to be recalled. I have the responsibility of souls on me to the day of my death ..." (Personal Journal)

This responsibility was manifested in his work both as parish minister and as college tutor.

When he was appointed as curate of St Clement’s, he immediately applied himself to his ministry. In the first 10 days he visited one-third of his 2,000 parishioners, and the remaining two-thirds within six weeks. People were pleasantly surprised to be visited by a clergyman and many came back to church. The same total commitment is witnessed by Newman’s work as vicar of St Mary’s, where his sermons were attended by parishioners and university scholars alike.

Responsibility of souls

In the same period Newman was a tutor at Oriel College, having been awarded a prestigious fellowship, despite the poor results he had achieved for his degree. Newman saw his tutorial work as not just an academic undertaking, but part of his pastoral mission since

"... a man who is religious, is religious morning, noon, and night; his religion is a certain character, a mould in which his thoughts, words, and actions are cast, all forming part of one and the same whole." (Parochial and Plain Sermons)

One of his students, J. A. Froude, recalls:

"Newman [...] spoke to us (undergraduates) about subjects of the day, of literature, of public persons and incidents, of everything which was generally interesting. He seemed always to be better informed on common topics of conversation than anyone else [...]. Thus it was that no one had ever seen such another man, [...] came to regard Newman with the affection of pupils. [...] For hundreds of young men Creeds in Newman was the genuine symbol of faith." (Short Studies on Great Subjects)
During a trip to the Mediterranean, Newman visits Rome. After recovering from a grave illness in Sicily, he comes back home convinced that God has a great work for him to do.

"I was sure that God had some work for me to do in England" (Autobiographical Writings)

On his recovery he returned home, keeping in mind the good and the bad he had witnessed and aware that God was leading him to undertake a great task. Whilst sailing back to England he wrote the famous hymn "Lead, Kindly Light."

Four days after he arrived in Oxford,

"Mr Kable preached the Amen Serena in the University Chapel. It was published under the title National Apostasy. I have ever considered and kept the day as the start of the religious movement of 1833." (Apologia pro Vita Sua)

"Oh that Rome was not Rome, but I seem to see as clear as day that a union with her is impossible." (Letter to Jemima)

As he travelled, Newman also became increasingly troubled by events in England, where Parliament was interfering ever more in the life of the Church. He was struck by the parallel between the situation in England and Italy, where the Church had had its property confiscated and was in a miserable state. Nevertheless, when Proude returned home, Newman decided to visit Sicily again. In Sicily Newman fell seriously ill with fever and nearly died. In his delirium two thoughts kept coming to him:

"I shall not die, for I have not aimed against the light" (Apologia pro Vita Sua)
Together with some friends, Newman founded the Oxford Movement as a response to the Liberalism and Evangelicalism of the time.

"We feel our opinions are true; we are sure that, for the most part, we are right, and if we are not, we shall be able to propagate them by the force of the truth; we have no need, rather we cannot afford to dispute them." (Letters and Diaries)

Newman felt that the Church of England had become complacent and secularized by Liberalism, and that the State, which was becoming hostile towards the Church, was starting to treat it like a government entity.

Together with Keble, Pusey, and other friends and colleagues, Newman decided to act, and started publishing a series of essays called "Tracts for the Times", which were spread throughout the country in order to revitalize the Church of England and confront liberalization. In Tract 1 Newman stated:

"Speak I must for the times are very evil, yet no one apostasy against them. [...] Do we not all confess the part into which the Church is come, yet sit still in its own retirement [...] Therefore suffer me, while I try to draw you forth from these pleasant retreats, which it has been our balsamous lethargy to enjoy, to contemplate the condition and prospects of our Holy Mother in a practical way." (Tract No. 1)

The Oxford or Tractarian Movement was animated by a true love for the Church and by the living bonds of affection between Newman and his friends. Newman rediscovered the Catholic theological and liturgical tradition and vigorously proposed the Via Media, seen as an intermediate path between the errors of Protestantism and those of Rome.

"I had a supreme confidence in our cause; we were upholding that primitive Christianity which was delivered for all time by the early teachers of the Church, and which was registered and attested in the Anglican formularies and by the Anglican doctrine. That ancient religion had well nigh faded out of the land, through the political changes of the last 150 years, and it must be restored. It would be in fact a second Reformation—a better reformation." (Apologia pro Vita Sua)

However, Newman’s leadership of the movement came to an end with the publication of Tract 90. This tract dealt with the 39 Articles of the Anglican Church, a collection of purportedly Protestant declarations. In Tract 90, Newman attempted to show that the Articles could be accepted in a Catholic sense. However, anti-Catholic feeling in the Church of England was an insurmountable obstacle and his view was condemned.

In 1842 Newman left Oxford and his academic and Tractarian tasks and moved to a village near St. Albans, Littlemore, to live a monastic life with a group of loyal friends.
Newman’s need for reality did not find an answer in the Anglican Church

"A great experiment is going on, whether Anglo-catholicism has a root, a foundation, a constancy... or whether... it be 'a sham.' I hold it to be quite impossible, unless it be real, that it can maintain its ground... it must fall into pieces. This is a day in which mere theories will not pass current. If it be a mere theory, it will not work..." (Letter to W.C.A. Macaulay)

Tract 90, published in 1841, was the first public manifestation of a process which had started two years previously in Newman’s life and which related to his need for ‘reality.’

The opposition between reality and ‘unreality’ is a constant theme in Newman’s thought and life: reality equals with truth, unreality with falsehood. Because he was a great thinker, theologian and controversialist, Newman was always disgusted by those who ‘mistook words for things’; and by their ‘unreal way of talking.’

The novel ‘Loss and Gain’, which he wrote three years after his conversion to Catholicism, accurately describes the contrast between the reality of life, and of the human needs which demand a real object, and the ‘unreality’ of the theological debates that Newman found in Oxford.

"The death of his dear father... was the first great grief poor Charles had ever had, and he felt it to be real. [...] He then understood the difference between what was real and what was not. All the doubts, inquisitions, revolts, sins, which had of late haunted him on theological subjects, seemed like so many shams, which fell from him, like the helpless December leaves, in the hour of his affliction.” (Loss and Gain)

The summer of 1839 onwards, Newman started using the word ‘unreality’ in reference to the Anglican Church.

He began to doubt whether the Anglican Church had a reality in itself or was rather ‘unreal’, that is, a mere human construction, a ‘sham’, a theory.

Three events, three blows, shook his convictions: in Jerusalem the Anglican Church had joined a union of ‘protestants’ to appoint a bishop; in Oxford his own bishops were attacking and censoring the Oxford movement; and lastly, in his reading of the Fathers of the Church he noticed that the Early Church had never feared to take a radical position.

"The truth lay not with the Via Medica, but with what was called 'the extreme party’.” (Apologia pro Vita Sua)
Newman understood that the Church is ‘a Living Body’, and therefore develops and may be corrupted, while, however, her divine nature gives her life and certainty.

"My friend [...], pointed out the solemn words of St. Augustine. Securus indicat orbis terrarum. He repeated these words again and again, and, when he was gone, they kept ringing in my ears. [...]. For a mere sentence, the words of St. Augustine struck me with a power which I never had felt from any words before." (Apologia pro Vita Sua)

Securus indicat orbis terrarum: the universal church judges with certainty. This certainty with which the Catholic Church, already at the beginning of her history, was able to take radical positions, struck Newman in a profound way. He understood that the certainty of the Church did not rely on her tradition, on the piety or coherence of her members, and not even on the correctness of her doctrine, but on the conviction of being the real, present, living body of Christ, 'the concrete representative of things invisible'.

However, two strong objections remained. How was it possible that many practices which seemingly were not found in the gospel, such as the veneration of saints, were found in the contemporary Catholic Church? How could Newman explain the corruption of the Church, i.e. the sins of many of her members?

Newman found the answer to those questions through understanding that the Church is a living body and her doctrine a living idea, by its very nature bound to continuously renew itself and open to corruption.

"The Church is emphatically a living body. When an idea [...] has life, [...] then it becomes an active principle within the minds, leading them to an ever-new contemplation of itself, to an application of it in various directions, and a propagation of it on every side."

(essays Critical and Historical)

"When ordinary human weaknesses are coupled with that intense absolute faith which Catholics have found acts of inconsistency, of superstition, violence etc. which are not to be looked external to the Catholic Church. [...] The corruption of the Church has existed from the time of Judas Iscariot, and indeed is no bound up with the very idea of Christianity, as to be about a dogma."

(Letters and Dissert)
Sanctity is for Newman the great sign of the reality of the Catholic Church

Sanctity is for Newman the great sign of the reality of the Catholic Church. Theological reflections were not enough for Newman, a man for whom, since he was 16, the Catholic Church had been the Antichrist ‘anti-pope’ still had a great hold on him, like ‘a stain upon his imagination’. However, as he began to understand the Catholic Church better, sanctity became for him the clearest proof of her authenticity, especially the unity among the saints, the greatest sign of the ‘essence’ of the Church. The faith of Callista was based on this.

“To her surprise, the more she thought over what she heard of Christianity, [...] the more it seemed to respond to all her needs and aspirations, [...] and the more it seemed to have eternal realities, [...] But then again, if she had been asked what was Christianity, she would have been puzzled. ‘I believe what I have been told me, as from heaven, by Chirico, Agostino, and Gasparini. What the three told her in common was at once the measure of her creed and the ground of her acceptance of it. It was that wonderful unity of sentiment and belief in persons so dissimilar from each other, so distinct in their circumstances, so independent in their testimony, which recommended to her the doctrine.’ (Callista)

In the years at Littlemore, Newman read the lives of the Fathers, English saints and the great figures of the Counter-Reformation. What he found from all these sources, across different times and places, was this same ‘essence’.

“[A]ll men agree as far as this, that [...] the Baptist and St. Paul are in their history and mode of life... in what is eternal and needs the eye [...] more like a Dominican preacher or a Jesuit missionary, or a Carmelite friar... than to any individuals... that can be found in other communions.”

(An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine)

Among the saints of the contemporary Catholic Church, a key personality was a Passionist priest, Fr. Dominick Barberi, who had come to England from a peasant background in Viterbo, following a divine call.

...faith and holiness are irresistible
Newman’s conversion to Catholicism is a path of reason and affection, and a path of obedience to God, whom he felt speaking to him through reality.

“...I felt I must go on, as well might one say that the quicksilver in the barometer changes the weather. It is the concrete being that reasons; pass a number of years, and I find my mind in a new place; here? the whole man moves: paper logic is but a record of it. All the logic in the world would not have made me move faster towards Rome than I did.”

(Apologia pro Vita Sua)

The whole man had moved - his theological convictions had changed, as had his affection for the Catholic Church. He knew he had to act, despite knowing the consequences all too well.

“But the loss of friends is a great evil is that the loss of position, of name, of action, such a sublimation of myself - such a triumph to others. It is a proud thing to see what I had said, to pull down what I have attempted to build up. And again, what quiet presence, the disturbance of mind which a change of my port would cause to so many ... the temptation to which many would be exposed of scepticism, indifference, and even infidelity.”

(Letter to J. Keble)

But he was now certain that God willed his conversion, especially because in the preceding years he had not stopped asking for “light and guidance”. Through reality, God had responded and now Newman had to trust in Him. He realized that God had never deserted him since his conversion when he was 15; half of all he had nearly died in Sicily, but had led him on step by step until he had reached his present situation.

On 7 October 1845, Newman wrote to a friend to inform him of his decision to ask Fr. Dominic Barberi to receive him into the Catholic Church. Father Dominic arrived in haste on the evening of 8 October after travelling for several hours on the upper deck of a stagecoach in driving rain.

While Fr. Dominic was standing in front of a blazing fire drying his clothes, Newman entered the room, knelt before him and asked him to hear his general confession prior to receiving him into the Catholic Church.
Newman joins the Oratory of St. Philip Neri and begins his work in Birmingham

"As a Protestant, I felt my religion dearer, but not my life - but, as a Catholic, my life dearer, not my religion." (Autobiographical writings)

Newman's initial years as a Catholic were not easy; his conversion provided a shock inside the Anglican Church and most of his friends and relatives broke relations with him.

He had to leave his beloved Oxford, probably for good, to mix with strangers and learn new and unfamiliar customs. The Catholic Church itself, while rejoicing in a spirit of triumphalism at the conversion of such an eminent personage, scarcely knew what to do with a man so brilliant and original, whose ideas were often out of step with the narrowness of Catholic thinking at the time.

"How dreary was my first year at Maryvale ... when I was in the gaze of so many eyes at Oxford, or if some wild incomprehensible blast, caught by the hunter, and a spectacle for Dr. Wiseman to exhibit to strangers, as himself being the hunter who captured it." (Autobiographical Writings)

Newman was sent to Rome to become a Catholic priest. There he met the fathers of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri. He decided to join them, and founded the first community in England at Birmingham. The Oratory offered the advantages of flexibility - being made up of relatively small and fraternal communities independent of each other - and the possibility of combining intellectual and pastoral work. Moreover, St. Philip, considered by Newman as his father, had been a champion of the fight against a purely formal Christ-unity.

...as St. Philip

"Would that we were able to do a work such as his! ... The desires of our hearts and our duty went together here. We have deliberately set ourselves down in a populous district, unknown to the great world, and have commenced, as St. Philip did, by ministering chiefly to the poor and humble. We have gone where we could get no reward from society for our deeds, nor admiration from the state, or laurel for our words. We have determined, through God's mercy, not to have the praiseworthy and popular that the world can give, but, according to our Father's own counsel, 'to love to be unknown.'" (Sermons Preached on Various Occasions)
AN IDEA OF EDUCATION:  
THE UNITY OF REALITY

Newman’s view of a true education is one of his most important achievements.

"I say that a cultivated intellect, because it is a good in itself, brings with it a power and a grace to every work and occupation which it undertakes, and enables us to be more useful, and to a greater number."  
(The Idea of a University)

In 1851, Dr. Collen, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland, set in motion what would be one of Newman’s greatest works, The Idea of a University. This is a combination of discourses, essays and lectures delivered to the subsequently established Catholic University in Dublin and published by Newman in 1873. Newman became the first Rector of the Catholic University.

Newman’s central idea of education as opposed to instruction refers to the unity of all knowledge and the need for the mind to reflect this unity.

"The practical error of the last twenty years... has been the error of dissecting and submerging the mind by an unceasing profusion of subjects; of supposing that a mastering in a dozen branches of study is not shrewdness, which it really is, but enlargement, which it is not. ... The mental vision of the Middle Ages, which grew steadily to perfection in the course of centuries, the University of Paris, or Bologna, or Oxford, has almost gone out in the night. A philosophical comprehension, an orderly experimental, an elastic constitution, must have lost them, and cannot make it up. This is why, because they have lost the idea of unity."  
(The Idea of a University)

However, Newman never scorned any of the various specialized subjects. On the contrary, he recognized that each university subject is good in its field, but that none can give a complete picture of reality – of truth. This is why Newman endorsed a combination of subjects, placed in relation to one another, and this work of comparison is what Newman defines as a university education.

Essential to this concept was the conviction that universal learning cannot exclude in advance the consideration of that deepest aspect of knowledge itself which is to reach and perceive the mysterious nature of reality. For this reason Newman placed theology at the centre of university learning.

This unity of reality is also the reason why the Church “has no knowledge”. Science and religion cannot be in conflict:

"‘Nature and Grace, Reason and Revelation, come from the same Divine Author, whose works cannot contradict each other’."  
(The Idea of a University)
Obedience and Conscience

The certainty of being part of the real Church sustains Newman in many disagreements with the Catholic hierarchy

"[Man] must have no willful determination to exercise a right of thinking, saying, doing just what he pleases, the question of truth and falsehood, right and wrong, being simply discarded." (Letter to the Duke of Norfolk)

In the following years, there were further tensions. Newman’s positive attitude towards the laity was deeply opposed by the hierarchy. One of the bishops even denounced Newman to Rome as heretical and as “the most dangerous man in England.”

There was also the issue of the discussion on Papal infallibility, which initially worried Newman, who did not want the Church to take an authoritarian and defensive stance. Eventually Newman was, however, satisfied with the final version of the dogma.

Moreover, as Newman had understood on his path to conversion, the Church is the living body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. God guarantees that revealed truth is preserved, interpreted and communicated to man in an infallible way by His Church in specific situations. The acknowledgment of the divine nature of the Church justifies the attitude of obedience towards and affection for her which Newman had throughout his life.

"I say there is only one Oracle of God, the Holy Catholic Church and the Pope as her head. To her teaching I have ever devoted all my thoughts, all my words to be confirmed." (Letter to the Duke of Norfolk)

On the other hand Newman strenuously defended the supremacy of conscience as the place of personal relationship with God:

"Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts [..] I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please,—still, to conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards." (Letter to the Duke of Norfolk)

"We, the Church, the Pope, the Hierarchy are, in the Divine purpose, the supply of an urgent demand [..] So indeed it is, did the Pope speak against Conscience in the true sense of the word, he would commit a suicidal act. He would be cutting the ground from under his feet." (Letter to the Duke of Norfolk)

Cardinal Ratzinger comments in this way on this conception, for which Newman was to accept much personal suffering:

"For us at that time, Newman’s teaching on conscience became an important foundation for theological personalism, which was drawing us all in its sway. It was liberating and essential for us to know that the ‘soul’ of the Church does not rest on a cancellation of conscience, but that, exactly the opposite, it can only develop from conscience."

(Newman Belongs to the Great Teachers of the Church)

A toast... to the conscience first and the Pope afterwards
The final years of Newman’s life were years of joy; much prejudice against him fell away and the Church looked on him as an example of faith.

"These great and burning truths, which I learned when a boy... I have found impressed upon my heart with fresh and ever-increasing force by the Holy Roman Church [...]. That Church has added to [that] simple evangelisation... but it has obscured, dulled, enfeebled, nothing of it — on the contrary, I have found a power, a resource, a consolation to our Lord’s Real Presence, in communication in His Divine and Human Person, which all good Catholics indeed have." (Letter to G.T. Edwards)

The personal relationship with God was the cornerstone of Newman’s life and the reason for the choices he made. His conversion to the Catholic Church led him back to his first years.

"It was much as to throw him back in memory on his earliest years, as if he were really beginning life again. But there was more than this happiness of childhood in his heart; he seemed to feel a nobler under his feet. It was the prophet Catholicus Patri... [He was] no happier in the Present that he had so thought better for the Past or the Future." (Law and Faith)

The last years of Newman’s life were spent peacefully at the Oratory in Birmingham, where he anxiously sought to come to the aid of hundreds of poor families living in the slums of the Oratory and continued to correspond with a host of friends and enquirers for as long as his fingers were able to hold a pen.

At the end of his life his trust in God produced many fruits.

The first fruit had already appeared in 1864 when a renowned author (and Anglican clergyman) had attacked him, saying that for Newman “truth was not a virtue for its own sake”. He replied with a religious autobiography, the Apologia pro Vita Sua, which was to become his most celebrated book.

Many prejudices against Newman fell away, so that in 1878 his old college, Trinity, made him an honorary fellow; this meant that he could go back to his beloved Oxford, which he had not seen since 1845.

The following year, Newman received the highest mark of recognition: Pope Leo XIII elevated him to the College of Cardinals. He was 78 and, summarizing all of his life, he chose as his motto the phrase Cœr ad Cœr loquitur that is, ‘Heart speaks unto heart’.

"Cor ad Cœr loquitur"
Cor ad Cor logiquituir
Heart Speaks Unto Heart

THE CERTAINTY OF NEWMAN:
CONSCIENCE AND REALITY

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