

A ROMAN CONVERT

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NE thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see." With the words of the erstwhile blind man whose healing St. John records, Arnold Lunn prefaces his famous apologia, *Now I See*, in which he describes his victorious spiritual conflict. But Mr. Lunn did not come by his cure as easily as did St. John's blind man. In his case ten years elapsed from the time when the divine hand first started to apply the medicinal mud until the time when it was washed off in the pool and Lunn was ready to show himself to the priests.

About 1921, a serious young man, almost an Oxford graduate, turned his keen mind to and on the Catholic Church. What, he asked himself, was there about an old leaky tub like the bark of Peter that caused such splendid men as Newman, Manning, Chesterton et al to enlist as members of her crew when all the wise men of the times were sailing on the luxurious, up-to-the-minute, modern liner of free thought? Perhaps sailing on an old windjammer appealed to the romantic side of their natures. At any rate (so he concluded) such a choice must be one of the heart and not of the head. And, with this as a premise, he proceeds to diagnose the causes of conversion "fairly."

Lunn was warned by friends that he was playing with fire. Many another bright young man, he was told, had set forth to conquer Rome armed with the sword of reason and girded with the buckler of cynicism, but their fate could be summed up by putting the climax of Caesar's famous dictum in the passive voice: Veni, Vidi, Victus sum. But Arnold Lunn was undaunted. Not to him, a cynical son of the age of reason, would come the fate of Newman the sentimentalist. Fortified by the findings of modern science and sustained by the light of modern philosophy he would take Rome and reduce it to ashes. He met the enemy in a pitched battle and published the report of his imaginary victory under the title *Roman Converts*. In this work he considers conversion by studying the lives of famous converts: Newman, Manning, Knox, Tyrrell and Chesterton. Newman,

he finds was a living example of William James's doctrine of "the will to believe." James, one gathers, might have rounded out practically every conclusion of his famous work with "ex-empli gratia, Newman." Newman wanted to believe in the Church so he argued himself into it. Manning was tired of settling things for himself; He wanted to shift the burden to other shoulders. Tyrrell was "haunted by the Infinite."¹ "He distrusted reason, and had a profound faith in experience." Catholicism appealed to him, "first and foremost, because it is a natural religion, because it has grown slowly, and it has adapted itself to the religious needs of the normal man. It is not a thought-out religion, like all true religions it is a growth, not a manufacture."² But the Church was too slow and antiquated, concludes Lunn juvenis, even for Tyrrell. He joined Loisy in trying to modernize it and was promptly excommunicated.

Ronald Knox's mingling of wit with apologetics irks Lunn juvenis and in his chapter on that famous writer he comes as closely as any true gentleman can to ungentlemanly abuse. The only conclusion he can seem to reach in the case of Father Knox is that Knox became a Catholic just to be smart.

Chesterton he finds is a born anarchist. If there is anything established then Chesterton is against it. The intellectual man in England is expected to be a liberal in religion, so Chesterton, true to his cross-grained form, does just the opposite and becomes a Catholic.

Roman Converts is a delightful book—the cleverest controversial work it has ever been my privilege to read. Although the book is delightfully written, its author started unfortunately with false premises. He himself was suffering from that intellectual malady he ascribed to Newman—a preconceived idea which at all costs must be sustained. He sustains it brilliantly and with a dialectic skill worthy of a better cause. Lunn was wasting great strength in an ignoble cause. However, reading this work of Lunn's would never cause me, as it did a friend of his, to predict that its author would one day become a Catholic. Yet in *Roman Converts*, despite his evident prejudice, Lunn does show honesty in his attempts to be fair. For example:—"If the Ultramontanes come into power, you and I will not be able to complain that the Pope had not warned us that he still

¹ *Roman Converts* p. 144

² *Ibid.*, p. 146.

claimed the right to put heretics to death, to censor the Press, to restrict the rights of free speech and generally to encourage only that type of freedom which consists in being allowed to do what the Pope thinks we ought to do . . . In an age of humbug such candour is refreshing.”³ Lunn juvenis, however, manifests great ignorance of Catholic doctrine when he attributes the “invention” of the doctrine of free-will to the Jesuits and when he considers Papal infallibility in passages such as the following: “The Pope might even be induced to extend infallibility to art and literature, and we should be saved all the mental fatigue which is now expended in determining whether Cezanne is a better painter than Landseer, or *Tarzan of the Apes* a greater masterpiece than Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*.⁴ But on with the war. The honors of the first battle all go to Arnold Lunn. He thinks the Roman legions are in disgraceful retreat. His confidence in his own prowess, however, received its first jolt when he read what Catholic book reviewers had to say of *Roman Converts*. G. K. Chesterton, Shane Leslie, Stanley James, all gave it long reviews and Dom Cuthbert Baker in his biography of Bishop Butler mentioned it as being characteristic of the spirit of the times. The dominant note of each of the reviews was amused tolerance. Lunn was praised for his attempt at fairness and for his sportsmanship in taking to task Mr. Strachey for his unfair treatment of Newman and Manning in his *Eminent Victorians* (a book written by that pseudo historian for the purpose of calumniating the famous converts), but the main thesis of *Roman Converts*, namely, that the basis of all religion is irrational, an old and much answered objection, the reviewers dismissed in a few sentences. Arnold Lunn was perplexed. He decided to retire from the field for a while and study the tactics of the enemy. He purchased a few hand-books on war, books of Apologetics by minor strategists of the Roman camp, and through them was led to the study of Catholicism’s greatest tactician, the immortal warrior, Thomas of Aquin.

As he proceeded in his study of the great fighter’s methods, Lunn’s reserves, modern philosophy and science, began to desert him, and he, a mere boy, was left to battle alone with this man who had been a warrior from his youth. He turned from his study of Thomas to attack bitterly his quondam allies in *The Flight From Reason*—a remarkable defense of Scholastic Philos-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

ophy and Theology if we consider Lunn's background and lack of instruction at the time. He had come to realize that modern so-called rationalism, to which name "it owes much of its success," is in reality irrational. Lunn concludes that the sovereignty of true reason received a fatal blow from Francis Bacon, the father of modern Science, and that since that time most of the kingdoms of the earth have rebelled from its dominion.

"Now if rationalism be, as the rationalists claim, founded on reason, the rationalist must be prepared to prove the first article of his creed—'I believe in truth.' But the rationalist who is challenged to demonstrate that truth is always to be preferred to falsehood shows signs of irritation as if you were taking unfair controversial advantage. He is apt to reply that there are certain axioms which no sensible man should be required to prove. There well may be, but the obligation to truth is not one of them."⁵ Lunn found, however, that St. Thomas Aquinas had undertaken to demonstrate this very point, i.e., that truth should always be preferred to falsehood.⁶ Therefore, Lunn concluded: "Rationalism is based on blind faith. The Christian begins by proving, the rationalist by assuming, the first article of their respective creeds."⁷ "'I believe in truth,' says the rationalist, but he must turn to the theist to justify that belief. 'I believe in reason' he continues, and naturalism replies that reason and unreason are alike the products of the moral law. 'I believe in science' continues the rationalist in despair and the theist smiles, for he knows that theism alone can vindicate the idealism of science and alone can provide a reasoned basis for that mysticism which is the true inspiration of scientific research."⁸ Thus as Attila, the invading Hun of old, was met by Leo at the gates of Rome and dissuaded from razing the city, so was Lunn, a modern invader, met at the gates of the Holy City by Thomas before whose austere majesty he stood uncovered, unable to carry out his fierce design. And as he stood thus with the reverent simplicity of a little child, there descended from on high on this new Attila, grace. And the would-be conqueror entered the city a prisoner in chains of gold.

⁵ *The Flight from Reason*, p. 176.

⁶ *Contra Gentiles*, Lib. II, Chap. 23.

⁷ *The Flight from Reason*, p. 181.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 182.