

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

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SHORT time ago the weekly magazine *America* (Nov. 22, 1941) published an open letter to its editor written by the Very Rev. Charles J. Callan, O.P. In this letter Fr. Callan expressed the earnest hope that "the time is not too far in the future when John Henry Cardinal Newman will be raised to the veneration of our altars and be declared a Doctor of the Church." The response which has since appeared in *America* and other periodicals shows that the author has aptly voiced the desire of many Newman disciples. Without doubt the figure of John Henry Newman is unparalleled in modern times. The impression which he made upon men's minds by his deeply religious life, his activities and his brilliant writings has remained a cherished treasure. Cardinal Newman still continues his work by attracting countless souls who seek to approach through him that Light to which he felt so irresistibly drawn throughout his whole life.

For John Henry Newman the journey which ended in true peace of soul was long and difficult. It was a journey which began in prejudice and error. Born under a sternly Protestant roof in 1801, it was probably his maternal descent from Huguenot stock which accounted for the strong Calvinist leanings of his earlier years. He was reared in the love of the Bible, which was so much fuel for his naturally deepseated spirit of religion. His entrance into Oxford in 1816 and the series of associations which accompanied his brilliant rise in the University circles were the backdrop for the most crucial and exciting years of Newman's life. Henceforward, intimately connected with this Alma Mater of the British clergy, Newman was in close contact with the intellectual and religious trends which surged about Oxford. It was from his early friends, especially Whately, that he came to recognize the existence of the Church as a visible and independent social unit. In addition, his acquaintanceship with High Church principles and leaders contributed to the first important breakdown of his old Evangelical attitude. Newman received orders in 1824 and was eventually offered the position of vicar of St. Mary's, the University Church, which gave him an important pulpit for his popular sermons and lectures. As time went on, these became more and more Catholic in tone. On his visit to Rome in 1832 he was deeply impressed by the organization and vitality of the Catholic Church, though his old dislike remained due to what he considered its

intransigence and sternness to other religionists and its "novelties."

In 1833, Newman began his famous Tracts, which from the beginning were strongly Catholic in sentiment. He purposed to sell to the clergy the idea of the Catholicism of the early centuries. This brought the young vicar and his colleagues to propose the solution known as the *Via Media*, a Catholicising of the English Church after the model of the Church of the Patristic period. Although he did not realize it, Newman, having come this far, was to be compelled by his studies and the force of logic to go still farther. For some time he had been studying the Fathers. His examination of the Eutychian controversy and the future Cardinal Wiseman's treatment of the Donatists which appeared at the same time revealed to him that the Anglicans were in the same position with regard to Rome as these early separatists. As his religious house of cards began to fall about him, Newman tried every expedient to avoid what was the inevitable conclusion, even to attempting a reconciliation of the Thirty-Nine Articles with Catholic principles. (Tract 90, his last). With a few young friends the disturbed man retired to quiet Littlemore where the little community spent their time in meditation, study, fasts, and abstinences, and the recitation of the breviary. The fruit of this serious thought and prayer was that Newman considered all his arguments to be empty and that he should resign his offices in the Anglican Church. Upon completion of his *Essays on Development*, which was the result of his study of the "novelties" of Rome, he saw the necessity for evolution and development in the Deposit of Faith. He was entirely convinced and came into the Church of Christ on Oct. 18, 1845. The 'Kindly Light' which had lead him on brought him safely into port.

John Henry Newman was ordained to the priesthood in Rome in 1847 and returned to England where he founded the Oratory at Birmingham. The remainder of his life was spent primarily in lecturing, preaching, attacking intolerance and explaining the Church to his fellow Englishmen. He was, as it were, the Augustine of the growing English Catholic Church. In the early years after his conversion Newman delivered one of his most beautiful sermons—*The Second Spring*, and gave perhaps his most celebrated series of lectures *On the Idea of a University*. In answer to the slurs and suspicions concerning his entrance into the Church he wrote his famous *Apologia* (1864) which forever cleared his name and brought about a better understanding of the Catholic religion in the country. To climax an already eventful life Newman was created Cardinal in 1879 in recognition of his great services and ability. The Cardinal's remaining years were passed quietly in prayer and contemplation at the Oratory at Edgbaston where he died Aug. 11, 1890.

It is not surprising that a man of Cardinal Newman's extraordinary gifts of mind and soul should have made a deep impression on his contemporaries. As the Baroness Anatole von Hügel once wrote: "There was with him (Newman), in the face and in the voice so much which made the heights and depths of his soul gleam through by moments, and show something that one does not see anywhere else—something that one full well knows one will never see again, till one may be perhaps allowed to see him shining in Heaven. The only thing that ever called that look back to me was once the look of Leo XIII making his thanksgiving after Mass."¹

That his great influence was felt in the field of religion in particular points to the special favor in which he was held by divine Providence. It was but natural that he should have been opposed, mistrusted and suspected both before and after his conversion. The humility, simplicity and brilliancy of his replies disarmed his opponents, and bespoke a character usually found in the great. Personal holiness and the search for God was the goal of Newman's ambitions and his naturally affectionate disposition tended to attract others along the same path. It was particularly fortunate for the budding English Church that, at a time when many great minds on the Continent were succumbing to the heresy of Modernism, John Henry Newman stood forth as the champion of traditional orthodoxy.

Newman's place in the pleroma of modern English literature is universally recognized. The classic dignity of his writings was hardly reached by his contemporaries. He brought to the pen originality, genius, energy and a strongly spiritual temper. These qualities Newman used in the diffusion of truth which was his lifelong pursuit. Fr. Callan has well synthesized the character of Cardinal Newman: "We have here not just another great scholar, or literary master, or unusual preacher, but a massive personality whose distinctive characteristics were: a vivid and constant awareness of the Divine, moral and spiritual elevation, intellectual power and comprehensiveness, entire detachment from the world and its prizes, oblivion of self and disregard for the esteem of men as such, and unabating strength in the pursuit of a goal which was God alone."

¹ Quoted in *Insurrection versus Resurrection* by Maisie Ward, page 118. Sheed & Ward, 1937.

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