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“HE WAS A GREAT LOVER OF ENGLAND”

Dominic Barberi and the Conversion of J. H. Newman

by

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The Roman Peasant

No account of the conversion of John Henry Newman, the great Christian thinker and future Cardinal, should be written without a reminder of **the man who received him into the Catholic Church, namely the Passionist priest Dominic Barberi (1792-1849)**. Newman himself commemorated him in literature in **“Loss and Gain”**, his story of a convert, with the following words:

“On the Apennines, near Viterbo, there dwelt a shepherd-boy, in the first years of this century, whose mind had early been drawn heavenward; and, one day, as he prayed before an image of the Madonna, he felt a vivid intimation that he was destined to preach the Gospel under the northern sky. There appeared no means by which a Roman peasant should be turned into a missionary; not did the prospect open, when this youth found himself, first a lay-brother, then a Father, in the Congregation of the Passion.

Yet, though no external means appeared, the inward impression did not fade; on the contrary it became more definite, and, in process of time, instead of the dim north, ***England was engraven on his heart. And, strange to say, as years went on, without his seeking, for he was simply under obedience, our peasant found himself at length upon the very shore of the stormy northern sea, whence Caesar of old looked out for a new world to conquer; yet that he should cross the strait was still as little likely as before.*** However, it was as likely as that he should ever have got so near it; and he used to eye the restless, godless waves, and wonder with himself whether the day would ever come when he should be carried over them. ***And come it did, not however by any determination of his own, but by the same Providence which thirty years before had given him the anticipation of it.***¹

Fr. Dominic of the Mother of God was a spiritual son of St. Paul of the Cross (1694-1775), the founder of the Passionists, about whom Newman writes in the above-quoted novel, ***“...the thought of England came into his ordinary prayers; and in his last years, after a vision during Mass, as if he had been Augustine or Mellitus, he talked of his ‘sons’ in England.***²

¹ John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986, pp.291-292.

² Op.cit., p.291.

Founder's Vision

Dominic Barberi turned his founder's vision into action when he set off from Rome for Belgium in 1840 with three of his confrères to make preparations for founding a community in England. At this time he could already look back on decades of fruitful work in the service of his Congregation in Italy. **In 1814 as a young man he had joined the Passionist Community, newly reinstated following its abolition at the hands of Napoleon.** The spiritual illumination described by Newman about Dominic's future apostolate amongst the English occurred in these early days. The Superiors soon recognized the young priest's spiritual gifts and intellectual abilities and appointed him lecturer in Philosophy and Theology at the Order's training establishments. During these years as a teacher, from 1821 to 1831, **he wrote several works, amongst them a Mariology, a handbook of philosophy and a refutation of the writings of de Lamennais, one of the most famous Catholic writers of his age.**

In 1830, when Fr. Dominic was teaching at the Passionist Generalate in Rome, he made his first acquaintance with representatives of the nation that had long been so dear to his heart. He had been chosen to introduce Sir Henry Trelawney, a convert who was preparing for the priesthood, to the rubrics of Holy Mass. The latter's daughter in turn introduced Dominic to the English nobleman and former Anglican clergyman George Spencer (1799-1864), who had been received into the Catholic Church in 1830 and had recently arrived in Rome to begin his studies for the priesthood at the English College. **This marked the beginning of a life-long friendship.** Through Spencer he also became acquainted with Ambrose Lisle Phillipps (1809-1878) who was likewise to play an important part in the renewal process of Catholic life in England. **In 1839 Spencer sent a petition to the General Chapter of the Passionists requesting the establishment of a foundation in England.** Then in 1848, as Fr. Ignatius, he made his profession as a Passionist. During this time in Rome, these and other contacts with Englishmen brought Dominic Barberi's longed for mission to England a little closer.

But first of all in the years that followed between 1831 and 1840 he had to fulfill various duties in his Order. He was the first Superior of the newly founded monastery of L'Angelo near Lucca and the Provincial Consultor. **In 1833 he was elected Passionist Provincial for the region south of Rome.** At the same time he devoted himself to the apostolate of popular missions and spiritual exercises. During a cholera epidemic in 1837 he gave himself up wholeheartedly to helping the sick. **But in spite of all these many tasks and commitments, he never allowed himself to lose touch with his English friends.** A wealth of correspondence bears testimony to this.

The Oxford Movement

When the question of a new foundation in England was being discussed at the Passionist General Chapter in 1839, **an intellectual movement was reaching its climax in the English university town of Oxford, a movement “that was called after its place of origin, Oxford, but characterized also by Anglo-Catholicism”.**^{3[1]} The point of departure for the Oxford Movement was the battle against state intervention in the life of the Anglican Church. Newman later always regarded the sermon by John Keble (1792-1866) on “National Apostasy” on 14 July 1833 as the beginning of the Oxford Movement, of which he was soon to become its acknowledged leader.

Alongside Newman, John Keble and R. H. Froude, E. B. Pusey (1800-1882) was also one of the leading figures of this movement which strove “to show the Church to be a divine institution: with apostolic succession (bishops), binding doctrine from scripture and tradition (Church Fathers), sacramental principle and traditional liturgy” (Günther Biemer in LThK, Vol.7, 1239). In the publication series “Tracts for the Times” (1833-1841) Newman and his fellow campaigners put their thoughts up for discussion, so that they became known as “Tractarians”. When Newman and other prominent supporters converted to Catholicism the movement became less significant.

The initial phase of the Passionist foundation in England (1841-1845) coincided with Newman’s final decisive stage on his journey towards the Catholic Church. After the decision had been taken in favor of a foundation in England and **they had finally appointed Dominic as leader of the small band of pioneers** – although at first this had not seemed likely – in June 1840 the Passionists initially opened a monastery in Belgium in the Château d’Ère near Tournai. **It was from there that Dominic Barberi set out on his first exploratory trip to England** in November 1840. His stopping places were London, Birmingham and Oscott. Spencer and Wiseman received him with open arms.

Against a background of arguments about Tract 90, published by Newman, there appeared in April 1841, in the Paris journal “Univers”, an article about the attitude of the Oxford Movement towards the Catholic Church. **The author hid behind the formulation, “a young member of the University of Oxford”. He was in fact John Dobrée Dalgairns** (1818-1876), one of Newman’s supporters. This article fell into the hands of Dominic in Belgium who felt deeply moved on reading it. On 5 May 1841 he replied to it with a long letter in Latin directed “to the professors of the University of Oxford” which was also later published in the “Univers”.

As a result of this he came into contact for the first time with the main representatives of the “Tractarians”. **A deep love for his separated brothers can be discerned in his letter and at the same time he shows himself to be an expert in the fields of theology and sacred scripture.** Dalgairns for his part wrote to Fr. Dominic in July 1841 thanking him for his kindness and at the same time he set out his reasons why he and his friends could not leave the Anglican Church. The two were in correspondence from then on.

A Passionist Monastery in England

On 17 February 1842, after overcoming many difficulties, Dominic Barberi was able to found the first Passionist monastery in England, in Aston Hall near Stone. In the same year Newman finally withdrew from Oxford to Littlemore with the idea amongst other things of **“building a monastic house in the place”** (Apologia, 159).

After a period of relative seclusion in which Dominic had devoted himself more to regular pastoral care and to building up his monastic community he began to give spiritual exercises again and to preach popular missions. He gained many conversions as a result of this apostolic work.

Fr. Dominic meets Dr. Newman

Thus in June 1844 he also wanted to start a mission in a town near Oxford. *“There I hope to have an opportunity of seeing someone of these so-called Puseyites, particularly the one (Dalgairns) with whom I correspond, without ever having seen him”*,^{4[1]} he wrote to the general of his order. Dominic in fact made a short visit to Littlemore on 24 June 1844 where he met Newman personally. In a letter of 15 July 1844 to the superior general he described his impressions of this. *“When I was in the vicinity of Oxford I paid a visit to Littlemore to see the new monastery of Anglican ‘monks’, and was received with every token of cordiality and sincere regard by Dr. Newman, the founder, and by his disciples. Among them was the one who wrote to me the Latin letter of which I sent you a copy whilst still in Belgium. (...) One thing I can say is that these Oxford men work like martyrs for a good cause. Let us pray much, much.”*^{5[2]}

In the same letter Dominic also described the effect that the appearance of the Passionists had on the public. *“You could not believe the impression our habit makes when we go to preach anywhere. The people kneel down in crowds just to receive my blessing. We do more preaching here with the bare feet and religious restraint and modesty than with the tongue. Somebody told me once that they had been converted at my first sermon, although they did not understand a word I said.”*^{6[3]}

But it was precisely this holiness and authenticity in their lives for which Newman and his followers were striving. So it was not surprising that Dalgairns wrote to the Superior of the Passionists in England, *“You are, I am sure, taking the right way to win the English heart; the English Roman Catholics seem to fancy that they can do a great deal by copes and chasubles and beautiful music. They are, however, mistaken; (...) let them preach barefoot in the streets of our great towns, and, depend upon it, they will force England, or at least all who are worth having in England, to look upon them in a very different light from what they do now.”*^{7[4]}

The members of the community in Littlemore were convinced of the effectiveness of personal holiness for the growth in unity. The following request that Dalgairns made of Dominic in a letter of 3 October 1844 also speaks for this. *“But I must leave off with a request which*

perhaps will make you smile. Several persons among us are anxious to lead a more mortified life than is common among us; they have been trying in vain to procure shirts or girdles of haircloth. They have only succeeded in getting one from abroad. Could you manage to put us in the way of getting a dozen of such implements? They will be put into the hands of a person who guides many souls among us, so you need not fear their being indiscreetly used.”^{8[5]}

Dalgairns is received into the Catholic Church

Through his correspondence with Dalgairns, Dominic Barberi was in regular even if not direct contact with Newman. The latter was – as Dalgairns once stressed to Dominic – always happy to hear news of him. Dalgairns was finally received into the Catholic Church by Dominic on 29 September 1845 in Aston Hall.

On this occasion Dominic suggested making a further visit to Littlemore on his forthcoming journey to Belgium. Dalgairns later informed Newman about it and was surprised to hear him remark that he would then be received into the Catholic Church. Newman felt that he was merely keeping all his friends in a state of indecision. There were also certain things connected with the Passionist Order which made Fr. Dominic’s arrival in Littlemore at that moment appear providential to him. The Order had always prayed for England in a special way and during Mass its founder had once had a vision of his religious as preachers in England.

On 5 October 1845 Newman withdrew to his room for the whole day in preparation for his general confession. On 7 October he wrote to his former pupil Henry Wilberforce, *“Father Dominic the Passionist is passing this way on his way from Aston in Staffordshire to Belgium (...). He is to come to Littlemore for the night as a guest of one of us whom he has admitted at Aston. He does not know of my intentions, but I shall ask of him admission into the one true fold of the Redeemer.”*^{1[6]} On the eve of his conversion Newman wrote several more letters such as this in which he informed various friends of his decision.

In so doing he always spoke of Dominic as a *“simple and holy man”*, in whose coming to Littlemore he recognized an *“external call”* from God.

Newman becomes Catholic

During the night of 8th to 9th October Fr. Dominic, completely soaked through with rain, first arrived in Oxford in a carriage and was received there by Dalgairns and St. John. When he heard the good news he cried out, “God be praised!” After arriving at Littlemore he tried in vain to dry off his clothes by an open fire. **Then Newman came into the room, knelt at his feet and begged him to hear his confession.** The following evening, along with his two colleagues Bowles and Stanton, he made his profession of faith, Dominic gave them absolution and administered conditional baptism. On 10 October Newman received Holy Communion along with the others. From Belgium Dominic wrote to his general about the joyful events in Littlemore and in so doing **described Newman as “one of the most humble and lovable men”^{9[1]} he had ever met.**

Since then there have been many discussions about the role Dominic Barberi played in Newman’s development. Had he simply been an instrument in the hand of God, like Ananias in the case of Saul of Tarsus? Let us leave the final comment on this matter to Newman himself. On 2 October 1889, in connection with Dominic’s beatification process that had just begun, **Newman wrote to Cardinal Parocchi in Rome that Fr. Dominic of the Mother of God was certainly, “a marvellous missionary and preacher filled with zeal. He had a great part in my own conversion and in that of others. His very look had about it something holy.** When his form came within sight, I was moved to the depths in the strangest way. **The gaiety and affability of his manner in the midst of all his sanctity was in itself a holy sermon. No wonder that I became his convert and his penitent.** He was a great lover of England.”^{10[2]}

Death of Fr. Dominic

Dominic Barberi suffered a heart attack on 27 August 1849 on a train journey from London to Woodchester and died in a room at the railway hotel in Reading where he had been taken. **On 27 October 1963 he was beatified by Pope Paul VI.** His tomb is in St Anne’s Church in Sutton, St Helens, England.