



*Il Superiore Generale  
dei Passionisti*

## CIRCULAR LETTER

### Reflection on the Missionary Spirit of Blessed Dominic Barberi

(on the occasion of the Canonization of John Henry Newman)

On 13 October 2019, Pope Francis will canonize **Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801–1890)** in St. Peter's Square, Rome. While this is an event in which the entire Church will rejoice, it is also an event with a special significance to our Congregation. This is so because Newman, while already a pastor and a well-known Anglican theologian and a professor at Oxford University, chose to be received into the Catholic Church in 1845 by our

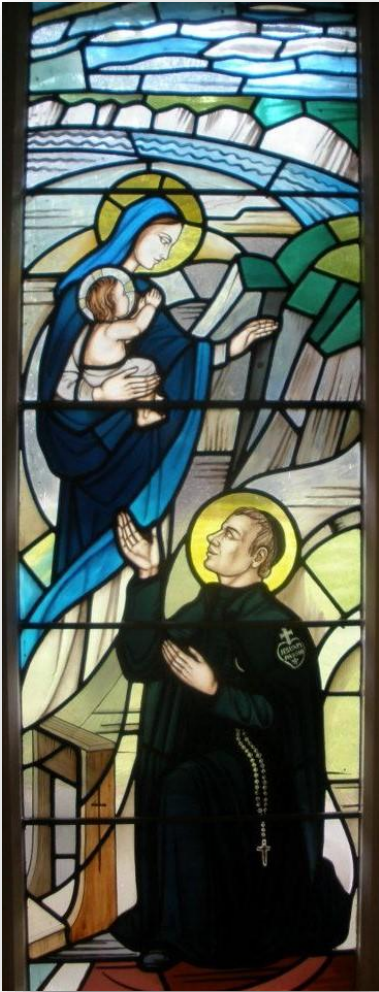
Passionist brother: **Blessed Dominic Barberi (1792-1849)**. Dominic, first Passionist apostle and missionary to England, had a great role to play in the conversion of Newman and countless others.



I would like to take the occasion of this special event of the canonization of John Henry Newman to share some reflections on the characteristics of the person of Blessed Dominic Barberi, his conviction and struggle in pursuing the mission to England, his relationship with and the role he played in Newman's conversion, and, above all, his witness of authentic holiness.

Through these reflections, I hope we will appreciate some insights to inspire us in our call at this time of our Congregation's history in **“Renewing our Mission”**.

There is no doubt that God had a chosen mission for Dominic within the Congregation of the Passion. However, for Dominic to come to discern this plan of God, it was essential that he first **listen** to the 'voice of God' in his



prayer life. We know that Dominic received an interior call which led him to believe that he was destined to preach the Gospel in far off lands. Apparently, towards the end of 1813 (when he was only 21 years old), Dominic heard “the voice of God” tell him that he “*was destined to bring stray sheep back to the way of salvation*”. But how and where would this prophecy be fulfilled? It was nearly a year later, while in prayer before the altar of the Blessed Virgin, that God communicated to Dominic again: **his mission was to be in England**. It is worth listening to John Henry Newman’s description of Dominic Barberi in his philosophical novel, *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert* written in 1848, because we get a good understanding here of the work of Providence which Dominic had to wrestle with in order to comprehend, and finally – assisted by his **listening in prayer** - arrive at the strong conviction that this is the call of God for him to mission:

*“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.”*

As we know, our founder, St Paul of the Cross also had a great enthusiasm for the conversion of England for which he prayed each day. This had a strong impact on Dominic; he knew that St. Paul of the Cross had predicted that his sons would one day arrive in England. As Newman wrote in ***Loss and Gain***:

*“...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.”*

This knowledge of the founder’s hope would have been further confirmation for Dominic that the ‘stirring’ and desire within him was genuine and from God. However, even though Dominic was so convinced that this is a call and mission from God, he did not have the authority to act on his own; he needed the permission of the Superior General to send him (with others) in the name of the Congregation...and this required further communal discernment which, necessarily, takes time. It would mean establishing a Passionist presence and community with all the associated concerns surrounding such a project.

As it turned out, this became a long 28 years period of waiting, accompanied by many disappointments and setbacks which Dominic called his ‘crosses’. But in hindsight, we can also appreciate that this was a time of preparation during which he was gaining experiences and discovering his potential and resources that would assist in sustaining him to meet the challenges of so much adversity which he



would experience later on in England. We can get a feel of Dominic's challenges as he describes his experience in England thus:

*"[There were] innumerable crosses and difficulties and such that at times I saw myself at the very end and almost at the point of turning back. I am certain that many people would want to come here; but if they saw what I saw and had to suffer what I suffered, almost all of them would change their mind. Oh, my God! My God! How much I have to suffer! I have been preparing for this for 28 years and I see that this preparation is not enough. The divine will alone sustains me: I am here because God has wanted this from all eternity. Blessed be his holy Name. This is my only strength."*

The time of waiting for the 'acceptable' moment was not in vain. As it turned out - (or was it meant to be?) - it was during this time that Dominic was engaged with teaching in Rome and became acquainted with three Englishmen (converts from Anglicanism) who were studying in preparation for the priesthood. They were: Sir Harry Trelawney, Hon. George Spencer (who later became a Passionist) and Ambrose de Lisle Phillipps. These three men were significant in playing decisive roles later in Dominic's life, with regard to his meeting Newman and in the pursuit of Catholicism in England. We can say that a "sign of the times" highlighted during this period was the vision of Christian unity, requiring a spirit of ecumenism and a readiness to engage in inter-faith dialogue. And Dominic was responding to this call of the Spirit.

We must also appreciate the complete newness which the Congregation's superiors would have been called to grapple with in their discernment at this time: Passionist missionary activity outside of Italy, in foreign lands. Further, it would seem from all accounts that Dominic Barberi was considered far from being the right candidate for a foreign mission and, in any case, he was far more needed in Italy because of his intellectual capabilities and leadership qualities. In fact, when the General Chapter in 1839 voted to accept an invitation to found the mission in Belgium, Dominic was not selected to be part of this first band of missionaries. Instead, he was re-elected as Provincial of the South for a second term. However, in an



extraordinary sequence of events, the Superior of the Belgium mission appointed by the General suddenly asked to be dispensed and, in an unprecedented move, Dominic was asked by the Superior General to resign his office as Provincial and lead the group in the first mission outside Italy. And so it was, that on 26 May 1840, Dominic and three other religious left Italy for Belgium. In Dominic's mind, he knew that this was a first stepping-stone for his mission to England. From the perspective of faith, it is not difficult to recognize the hand of God in the unfolding of a greater plan.

We can clearly see that **obedience** (as a **listening** to God and to his superiors), **dialogue, prayer, discernment, patience, persistence, conviction, trust** and **courage** to "*launch into the deep*" were marks which characterized this Passionist apostle and missionary, Dominic Barberi, who, like Jesus Crucified, was prepared to follow God's will in his life and mission – no matter the cost.

We can only imagine what thoughts and emotions must have been swirling around in Dominic's mind and heart when, eventually, he first set foot on English soil, especially as he was greeted with stares and suspicion – not only as a Catholic priest, but for his strange dress: the Passionist habit. It was now that he needed to draw on all his life experiences and resources. He was truly a stranger by his nationality, culture, language, religiosity and spirituality. Surely, he must have drawn his strength and courage from the Cross of Jesus in this moment and sought comfort and protection from his patroness, Mary the Mother of God.

Nothing could have prepared Dominic for what he was to encounter in England. The people were divided into two groups: the Protestant majority who were fiercely anti-Catholic and anti-foreign, and the small Catholic minority who were accused of disloyalty to the nation and subject to persecution. This is the moment when he had to remember that the mission is God's, not his own and thus he needed to respond with love and understanding, with peace and dialogue, and with trust and courage as Jesus did.

J. Brodrick S.J. in his work on the ‘Second Spring’ of Catholicism in England, says of Father Dominic’s arrival:

*“The second spring did not begin when Newman was converted nor when the hierarchy was restored. It began on a bleak October day of 1841, when a little Italian priest in comical attire shuffled down a ship’s gangway at Folkstone.”*

High praise indeed for a humble and holy Passionist!

After 28 years of patient waiting and persistent efforts, the Passionists were finally established at Aston Hall, Staffordshire in February 1842. It is worth noting that Dominic was 50 years old at this time. As he wrote at the time:



*"After 28 years of desire, His Divine Majesty has vouchsafed to grant my prayers. I shall never be able sufficiently to thank the Divine Goodness for so great a favour. My duty is to do all I can; I will therefore seek to employ all my weak powers for the glory of God and for the salvation of my dear brethren in Jesus Christ."*

While Dominic saw this as the work and sign of God’s Providence and sang God’s praises, the mission in England was far from being the arrival at a destination, but rather the beginning of a new journey with many obstacles yet to overcome. Once again, it asked for persevering faith in searching for the way of the Lord and following God’s paths which will eventually bear fruits of unity and community, but only after much sacrifice and a response of suffering-love and reconciliation – not revenge and violence.

The reception of Dominic and his fellow Passionists in Aston was less than welcoming. The local Catholics feared the arrival of these newcomers would cause renewed persecutions. Dominic was also met with ridicule because of his poor grasp of the English language; his attempts to speak and read prayers in English were met with the laughter of his congregation. However, gradually the community increased in numbers and as the people of Aston grew to know Dominic, they became enamoured of him and he soon began

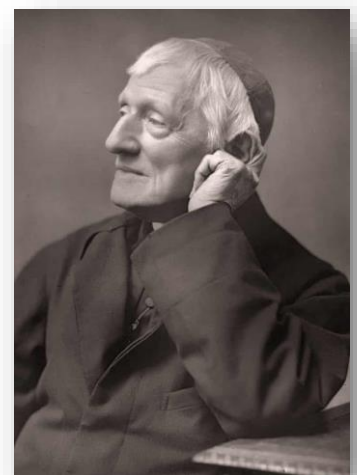
to receive a steady stream of converts. A centre was also set up in neighboring Stone where Dominic would say Mass and preach to the local populace. Here also Dominic experienced opposition when local youths would throw rocks at him, though two youths took to the decision to become Catholics when they were greatly edified to see Dominic kiss each rock that hit him and place it in his pocket. It is said that during many of these frequent attacks Dominic was lucky to escape death. Further, local Protestant ministers often held anti-Catholic lectures and sermons to draw the people away from Dominic and the Catholics.

We can say that the difficulties and trials which Dominic and the Passionist missionaries experienced in England (and in Belgium) was a time of ‘pruning’ by which they were being renewed in their life and mission to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus Crucified and point others to look at the Cross and meditate on the Passion of Jesus where they too will be renewed in God’s love and mercy.

The ultimate characteristic and effectiveness of every ‘missionary of Christ’ is not their capabilities or achievements - but their **witness of authentic holiness**. We have already seen this clearly in the personal and pastoral life of Dominic Barberi. Despite being a highly intellectual and capable man, Dominic is reputed to have been a humble person, blessed with a sense of humour, kindness and simplicity (“*A child in the simplicity of his heart*” – Cardinal Wiseman). In the words of Newman:

*“He was an intelligent and astute man, yet spontaneous and simple like a child; and he is especially kind in his dealings with the faithful of our communion. I wish that all people had as much charity as I know that there is in him.”*

The Anglican priest, theologian and poet, John Henry Newman (“...*the most learned ecclesiastic in England*” – Barberi), after years of prayer, fasting and study in his search for the truth came to see clearly that the Roman Catholic Church was the same as the Church of the Apostles and the early



Christians. But having this intellectual insight was not sufficient for Newman to take the step of requesting full communion in the Catholic Church. While he could make sense of the Church being “one, catholic (universal) and apostolic” (as is proclaimed in the Creed), he could not see signs of how the Church was “holy”. He needed to see and experience concrete acts of holiness and sanctity in the members of the Catholic Church. He found this lived witness of authentic holiness in the person of the Catholic priest, Fr. Dominic Barberi. Recognising Dominic’s spiritual stature, Newman shares his sincere feelings: *“When his form (Dominic’s) came in sight, I was moved to the depths in the strangest way. His very look had about it something holy.”*

Further, the example of this humble Passionist (and his companions) enduring ridicule for his poor English, being stoned in the streets and yet persevering to bring Christ to the people in England in spite of the danger, is what impressed Newman. Earlier he had written:

*“If they [Catholic religious] want to convert England let them go barefooted into our manufacturing towns - let them preach to the people like St. Francis Xavier - let them be pelted and trampled on - and I will admit that they can do what we cannot...What a day it will be when God will make arise among their Communion saintly men such as Bernard and the Borromeo’s... The English will never be favorably inclined to a party of conspirators and instigators; only faith and sanctity are irresistible.”*

It was because of this courageous missionary witness which he saw personally, that Newman chose Dominic as the Catholic priest to receive him into the Church. And so, it was in October 1845, when Dominic was traveling through Oxford on his way to Belgium, that Newman requested through one of his pupils that Dominic be invited to stop by his home in Littlemore as a guest. *“He does not know of my intentions,”* he wrote, *“but I shall ask of him admission into the one true fold of the Redeemer.”*

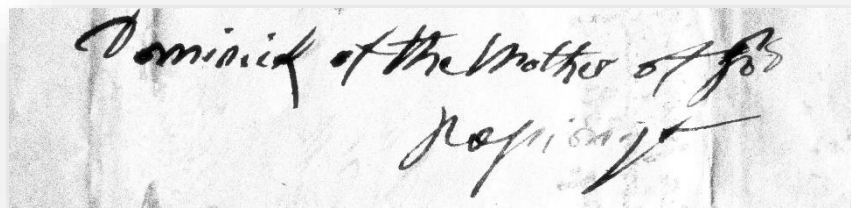
What transpired next was the act by which these two holy figures are best remembered. Dominic drying himself in front of the fire in Newman’s home since he was soaking wet from the travel by stagecoach in heavy rain, and Newman entering the room, dropping to his knees before Dominic without



hesitation and asking to be received into the Church after making a long general confession lasting several hours. What a culmination in the story of the Divine call to mission and the human adventure of struggle, cooperation and response in the realization of God's mysterious plan.

We can only imagine the tremendous joy, relief and future hope for the Church's and the Congregation's mission as was expressed in Dominic Barberi's words:

*"What a spectacle it was for me to see Newman at my feet! All that I have suffered since I left Italy has been well compensated by this event. I hope the effects of such a conversion may be great."*



Newman's testimony written to Cardinal Parocchi (Vicar of Rome) for the cause of Dominic Barberi's beatification sums up the crux of what is required for the fruitfulness of every mission:

*"My dear Lord Cardinal, thank you for the interest you express in a case which is very dear to me, as is well recognised by the Passionist Fathers. Certainly Fr. Dominic of the Mother of God was a most striking missionary and preacher and he had great part in my own conversion and in that of others. His very look had a holy aspect which when his figure came in sight in my circle most singularly affected me, and his remarkable 'bonhomie' in the midst of his sanctity was in itself a real holy preaching. No wonder, then, I became his convert and penitent. He was a great lover of England. I grieved at his sudden death, and I thought and hoped he would receive from Rome the 'aureola' of a Saint as is now to be."*

My hope is that these reflections on Dominic Barberi's personal, religious, spiritual, apostolic and missionary life will give us renewed enthusiasm in our living of Passionist Apostolic Community. Dominic has much more to inspire us (as he did Newman and others) than simply his reputation of receiving Newman into the Catholic Church – as significant as that event is for the whole Church in celebrating the canonization of John Henry Newman. Rather, I hope that Blessed Dominic's example and witness can be "*a source of inspiration to the entire Congregation and challenge each member to play his part zealously in the apostolic endeavours demanded by our times.*" (Const. 62)

Dominic Barberi is little-known and appreciated, even within our Congregation. Yet, without his missionary zeal, his apostolic spirit and his persistent conviction, the Founder's vision and hopes for the Congregation may never have been realized. As the pioneering Passionist missionary outside of Italy (together with his companions), Dominic's efforts in Belgium and England became the initial steps in the planting and the spread of the Passionist charism in 63 countries and cultures of the world today.

In our times the missionary nature of the Church through its evangelizing activity in new forms, and in response to the "signs of the times", is being proposed to us as a focus and vision, especially in the pontificate of Pope Francis. Dominic Barberi was also attentive to the missionary dimension of the Congregation issuing from the vision of St Paul of the Cross, and which we also received from our most recent General Chapter. I believe that Dominic's 'missionary outlook' can assist us greatly as we engage in the 'Calls to Action' arising from the 47<sup>th</sup> General Chapter and in preparation for commemorating the Ter-centenary of the Congregation's foundation in 2020 with the theme: ***Renewing our Mission – Gratitude, Prophecy, Hope.***

Dominic's 'missionary outlook' helps us to keep the right balance and perspective in our mission with regard to prayer, community life and apostolate. As I stated in my report to the General Chapter: "*...Renewing our Mission is primarily about renewing ourselves*" (personal conversion), through our call to a life in community - but always in the missionary dimension. "*Our Mission is integrally connected with our life in Community ... as two sides of the same coin. Our life is our Mission (by witness), our Mission is our life (by action).*"

While Dominic's call was to the mission of evangelization in foreign lands (with all the particular challenges this entails), each one of us is called to have a 'missionary outlook' in our apostolates wherever we are – in the same manner as Dominic, and also as Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio (prior to his election as Pope Francis) laid out as his vision for the future Church in an address to the cardinals gathered in Rome for the papal conclave in April 2013:

*"The church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents and of all misery."*

Dominic also reminds us clearly that the mission is God's initiative, not ours. As such, it calls for a deep listening which must be discerned (personally and communally) in prayer before giving our response. However, as we have seen in Dominic's life, prayerful discernment is a struggle and can take time because it involves other people in community, and so it requires perseverance and patience. Also, prayerful discernment must necessarily lead to action...and, sometimes, this involves taking risks because there is not always a clarity and certainty as we would like to have. Following God's call and living the Gospel is risky! But, as we see in Dominic's life, there is always the promise of God's presence: *"I will be with you"* (Ex.3:12) when we respond with trust and courage in obedience to God's will: *"Let what you have said be done to me."* (Lk.1:38)

Of course, as we well know, it is much easier to stay with the 'soft option', i.e. to just keep going on and doing what we have always done without responding to the "signs of the times" and causing too much disturbance; or to hold on to our 'comforts' in the security and familiarity of what we know, e.g. the people like us and support us, our long history in a place etc; or to allow our buildings and plants to dictate our mission and keep us trapped, rather than letting them go and freeing us to be at the service of our mission. This 'soft option' risks our becoming self-referential, sterile and safe, instead

of reaching out, being creative in the Spirit and generating new life. Again, as expressed in Pope Francis' vision in *Evangelii Gaudium* #49 so directly:

*"I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."*

Dominic's experience shows us that those in the service of God's mission cannot become complacent like "build tents" (Mt.17:4) and create 'comfort-zones'. Rather, they are to descend from the heights of power and possession and be free to "go to a place that God will show" (cf. Gen.12:1). "Leaving their boats behind" (Mt.4:22; Lk.5:11) they are called to risk in faith, trust in God, act with courage, and depend on Providence and the good will of others.



*But it is to believe and to wish that the combination of these two holy figures, the Blessed Father Dominic and the Cardinal John Henry Newman, will leave its mark upon our spirit, that We will continue to think of the mysterious sense of their meeting with great hope and with prolonged prayer.*

*(Discourse of Pope Paul VI on Blessed Dominic of the Mother of God, Passionist, on the occasion of his solemn beatification - 27 October 1963)*

Fr. Joachim Rego, C.P.  
Superior General

Ss. Giovanni e Paolo Retreat, Rome  
Memorial of Blessed Dominic Barberi  
26 August 2019