

John Henry Newman & Dominic Barberi

Paul Francis Spencer CP

The drawing together of these two holy men will never leave our mind, which will continue to ponder with great hope and prolonged prayer the mysterious meaning of their meeting.

Pope Paul VI, speaking of John Henry Newman and
Dominic Barberi, 1963

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A relief of Newman kneeling before Blessed Dominic by Faith Tolkein (1995) in Blessed Dominic Barberi Church, Littlemore

We drove out of Oxford on a bright June morning, an Australian Passionist, a young English student (or half-English, as his mother was from Ireland) and myself. We were heading for John Henry Newman's chapel at Littlemore where we would celebrate the Eucharist. Father Gary and myself were not the first Passionists to make this short journey. Like others before us, we were following the trail of Blessed Dominic Barberi who had gone there at Newman's request in October 1845.

Newman was still an Anglican at this stage. He had withdrawn to Littlemore three years earlier when his attempt to reconcile the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles to Catholic Doctrine had been badly received by both Oxford University and the Church of England. During those painful years, he and his closest associates, who together had formed a small Christian community at Littlemore, had cut themselves off from any contact with Catholics. The one exception to this rule was Father Dominic Barberi.

Even before coming to England, Dominic had reached out in friendship to those he called the 'Professors of Oxford'. In a letter



passed to Newman by a friend, he had written: 'Let what is past be forgotten, so that we may look forward to the future more clearly. Come the day when we may all with one heart and one tongue glorify the Lord'. Contrasting it with the suspicion with which he was viewed by English Catholics, Newman warmed to the humanity of Dominic's spiritual ecumenism. So it was that, when he learned that Dominic would pass through Oxford on his way to the Passionists' Chapter in Belgium, he invited him to Littlemore.

Blessed Dominic's journey was made sitting on the roof of a stagecoach, and then the last three miles on foot. Torrential rain meant that when he arrived, he was soaked through. As he stood at an open fire trying to dry out, Newman entered the room, fell to his knees and asked to be received 'into the one true fold of the Redeemer'. Dominic would write afterwards to a friend: 'What a spectacle to

see Newman at my feet'. The next morning he would welcome John Henry Newman and two of his community, Frederick Bowles and Richard Stanton, into the Catholic Church – others from the group had already taken this step – and celebrate the Eucharist in the community's chapel, using Newman's writing desk as an altar.

This moment had been years in preparation. Long before, while meditating in a chapel in his native Italy, Dominic had realised that his vocation was to work for the unity of Christians in England 'and the neighbouring kingdoms', as the Passionist founder, Saint Paul of the Cross, had prayed. In a letter written to a friend the night Dominic arrived at Littlemore, Newman described him in these words:

He was a poor boy who (I believe) kept sheep near Rome and from his youth his thoughts have been most singularly and distinctly turned to the conversion of England.... After waiting near 30 years, suddenly his Superiors sent him to England, without any act of his own.

As well as keeping sheep, Dominic had also spent several years teaching philosophy and theology in Rome. His published and unpublished works cover many topics in ethics, spirituality, pastoral guidance, philosophy and dogmatic theology, but it was not his scholarship that would endear him to Newman. Writing many years later, Newman could say:

Father Dominic of the Mother of God was

a most striking missionary and preacher and he had a 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.

Newman's journey to the Catholic Church had been a painful one. On a visit to Rome twelve years earlier he had written: 'A union with Rome, while it is what it is, is impossible; it is a dream'. Later, in a letter to his curate, J.R. Bloxam, he had written these challenging words:

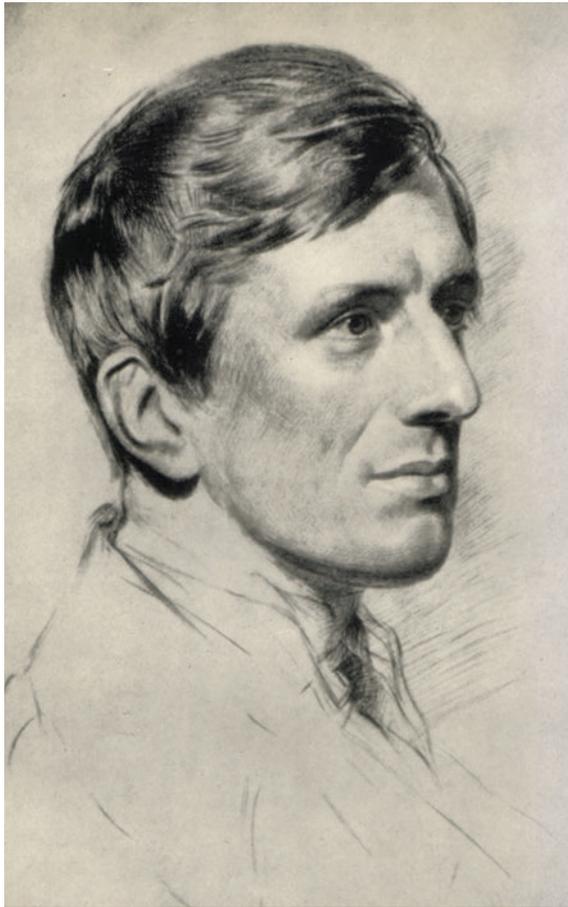
Rome must change first of all in her spirit. We must see more sanctity in her than we do at present. Alas! I see no marks of sanctity, or if any, they are chiefly confined to converts from us.... If they want to convert England, let them go barefooted into our manufacturing towns – let them preach to the people like St Francis Xavier – let them be pelted and trampled on, and I will own that they do what we cannot. I will confess that they are our betters far.

These prophetic words of Newman describe accurately the ministry and the trials that Dominic Barberi would know in the industrial towns of England in the 1840s. They underline for us the importance of Dominic's witness in relation to Newman's spiritual journey. Dominic's enthusiasm for preaching the Gospel to the poor, his willingness to suffer ridicule and beatings in the service of Christ, his holy simplicity and warm-hearted cheerfulness showed Newman a side of the Catholic Church that he had earlier searched for in vain: 'No wonder then I became his convert and penitent'. The 'kindly light' had led John Henry Newman on, and among the 'angel faces' had been the smiling face of Dominic Barberi.

And what was Dominic's opinion of Newman? We find it in a letter he wrote after his arrival in Belgium: 'He is reputed to be the most learned ecclesiastic in England. In my judgment, he is one of the most humble and lovable men I have met in my life'. Newman had searched for sanctity among the Catholics and had found it in Blessed Dominic; looking into Newman's heart, Dominic had seen humility and love to equal his own. What Pope Paul VI called 'the drawing together of these two holy



Blessed Dominic Barberi CP. Over 100 volumes of his writings on theology and philosophy are preserved at the Passionist Generalate, Sts John and Paul, Rome



John Henry Newman at around 43 years of age. A drawing by George Richmond (1844)

men' was to have a lasting effect on the life of the Church. Dominic's ecumenical outreach, which would be built on by his fellow Passionist Ignatius Spencer, was to open Catholics to the importance of praying for Christian Unity. Newman's fresh approach to theology, rooted in his love for the Fathers of the Church, would prepare the way for the renewal of the Second Vatican Council, during which Dominic was beatified. We may esteem learning, but the world is changed by loving hearts, and it is often the simple and unexpected things that

'The college', Littlemore. Newman moved here in 1842



most touch a person's life.

On that June morning, as Father Gary, Matthew and I were shown around Littlemore by the sisters of The Work, there were many reminders of Newman's presence and of his 'mysterious meeting' with Dominic in October 1845. However, it was not in the chapel nor in Newman's room, but in his library that I had my own moment of encounter with the spirit of the place. When the sisters pointed out the writing desk on which Dominic had celebrated the Eucharist for John Henry Newman and his companions, I was, to use Newman's phrase, 'most singularly affected' to see this simple wooden table which had played such a central role in Newman and Dominic's journey and which was now returned to its usual place.

Newman's Journey

Benedict Lodge CP, *Dominic Barberi* (CTS)

It is patently false to subscribe to the notion that John Henry Newman was received into the Catholic Church by Dominic Barberi, as just a happy coincidence of being in the right place at the right time. Dominic's intellectual ability had been shown when he refuted De Lamennais, at a time when intellectual Europe was paying him homage. His voluminous writings on philosophy and theology had established him as a profound thinker, and thus well able to understand the intellectual journey and difficulties of Newman. But crucially, Dominic was also a holy man.

John Henry Newman (1801–1890) was brought up in the Church of England as an Evangelical. In 1828 he became vicar of St Mary's, Oxford where he became intimately involved in the Oxford Movement. Over the following dozen years he published his sermons from St Mary's, and these had a profound influence on the religious life not only of Oxford, but of the whole country. The spirituality of the sermons was the result of a close study of the writings of the Fathers of the Early Church. Between 1833–1841 Newman wrote twenty-four Tracts, popular statements of his religious position. The central belief was that there was a *Via Media* or middle way. Essentially he said that the Church of England held an intermediate position, represented by the patristic tradition of the Early Church as against modern Roman Catholicism on the

one hand, and modern Protestantism on the other.

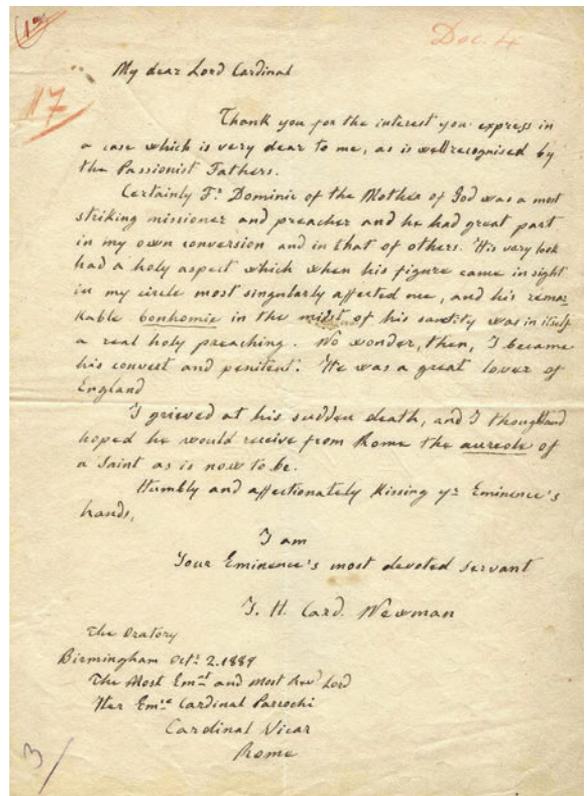
In the famous 'Tract 90' he advocated the interpretation of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England in a sense which agreed more or less with the Council of Trent. This provoked a huge row and Newman was silenced by the University. He began to have doubts about the claims of the Anglican Church, and in 1841 he gave up his position in Oxford and moved to the village of Littlemore. Here he established a semi-monastic community, and during the next few years lived in retirement with a few friends. He resigned the living of St Mary's in Littlemore in 1843.

> Letter from Cardinal Newman to Cardinal Parocchi of 1889 supporting the opening of Father Dominic's cause for beatification

Newman's Account of Blessed Dominic's Vocation

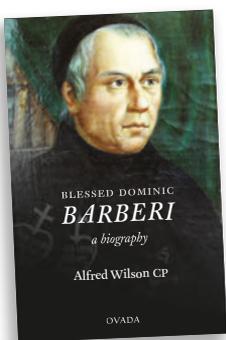
John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert*

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; nor did the prospect open when this youth found himself, first a 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 the process of time, instead of the dim north, England was graven 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 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.

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Dominic Barberi: a biography.

Alfred Wilson CP

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Known to the English-speaking world as the man who received John Henry Newman into the Catholic Church, Dominic Barberi was a mystic, a missionary and, in Newman's words, a 'shrewd and good and deep divine'. This biography, by Alfred Wilson, an English Passionist who worked for many years in Rome, gives us insight into many of the lesser known dimensions of Blessed Dominic's life and work: his founding of monasteries in Italy, Belgium and England; his role as a theologian facing controversies both within and outside the Catholic Church; his lifelong vocation to ecumenical dialogue, in a time before the churches knew what that was.

Readers of Wilson's Dominic Barberi will meet the person Newman met and, in doing so, will gain a deeper understanding of that holiness which drew him to 'the one true fold of the Redeemer'.

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