

Newman's life can best be described as a drama, which is an appropriate template for the analysis of Newman's life, a titanic struggle almost from beginning to end in the pursuit of truth, I offer the following dramatic overview of Newman's life as a means of appreciating what he encountered and endured in his spiritual journey, creating for us a legacy of inestimable value. By understanding the context of these events in Newman's life, we gain a better understanding of the grounds on which his legacy was built. This account is especially intended as a short biographical sketch for those who are new to Newman or unfamiliar with his life and work, and who will be better prepared for what follows.

## NEWMAN: A DRAMATIC LIFE

### Act I, Scene 1:

#### The Personalist Core: A Happy Family Home Life, and Its Shattering:

#### The First Jolt, Ensuing Conversion, and A Saving Relationship

Newman's autobiography tells of his early home life as one of a happy, bible-reading family,<sup>1</sup> but suddenly rent asunder when Newman's beloved father, a banker, loses his business when Newman was but fifteen, throwing the family into chaos as it split up and moved from house to house during the ensuing financial turmoil. In the midst of this crisis, Newman experienced his next two major life-shaping events. He had his first religious conversion, characterized by the phrase of a passing don who observed the young Newman in spiritual contemplation: "Numquam minus solus, quam cum solus"<sup>2</sup> – Never less alone than when alone.

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<sup>1</sup> R.D. Middleton. Newman at Oxford, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 4; Apologia pro Vita Sua, (Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864), republished by Henry Frowde / Oxford University Press, London, 1913, including with both the 1864 and 1865 editions as well as the Kingsley article and the Kingsley – Newman correspondence), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Apologia, 118. Edward Copleston to Newman.

At this time he was a student at the Ealing school, to which he had been sent at the age of seven.<sup>3</sup> Here he began his first important extra-familial relationship with his tutor, the evangelical Rev. Walter Mayers, characterized by their deep affection for one another. Newman reserved high praise for Mayers, writing many years later that his tutor “was the human means of the beginning of this divine faith in me.”<sup>4</sup> But the winds of change were blowing in young Newman’s life as the scene shifts abruptly when Newman matriculated to the heady halls of Trinity College at Oxford University.

## Scene 2:

### The Havens of Evangelicalism and Liberalism:

#### Oxford, the Ministry, and Tragedy Strikes Again: The Second Jolt.

Newman shipped off to Trinity College of Oxford later that same year on December 14, 1816, and he wrote that in retrospect he was too young to do so.<sup>5</sup> But he eventually won a scholarship, very helpful to his financially strapped family. However, in November, 1820, during his exams for which he had overread and about which he was in great anxiety, he suffered his first of two nervous breakdowns. He was also growing increasingly more fervent in the evangelical temperament which he imbibed from Rev. Mayers, with whom he continued a correspondence. But his strident evangelical views led to a withering rebuke from his father in early 1822, which greatly affected Newman. Soon thereafter, under pressure from his father that

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<sup>3</sup> John Henry Newman, Autobiographical Writings, ed. Henry Tristram, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1957), 12. “I went to school when 7 years old at Ealing near London, at the Rev<sup>d</sup> George Nicholas’s LL D of Wadham College England.” Memorandum for M<sup>r</sup> Henry J. Morgan Quebec Canada Oct 26/63.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-9.

<sup>5</sup> Autobiographical Writings. Autobiographical Memior I, June 13, 1874. “He had come to Oxford too soon . . . against the advice of his Schoolmaster . . . He writes to his father in the first term oif lectures . . . ‘I now see the disadvantage of going so soon to Oxford, and before I have the great addition of time of two or three years more first.’ . . . (H) had not that experience for shaping for himself his course of reading or that maturity of mind for digesting it, which a longer time would have given him.” 39 – 40.

he get on with choosing a vocation, Newman decided to enter the ministry. He accepted a position as parish curate at the age of 23, was ordained a deacon in 1824 and priest in 1825,<sup>6</sup> but tragedy struck soon after his appointment as curate when his dear father died, arguably the greatest loss of his life, and about which he wrote fifty years later in 1874, at the age of 73: “He returned to London, and after a few years his anxieties brought him to an end. For his sake who loved and wearied himself for us all, with such unrequited affection, I wish all this forgotten.” As a loving father, the elder Newman always fretted about his son’s intellectual development, writing a note to him in 1806 when young Newman was but five years old, “You must learn something new every day, or you will no longer be called a clever boy.”<sup>7</sup> The effects of their deeply affectionate relationship lasted a lifetime, and is arguably the ground of the personalist element underlying Newman’s later theology.

Newman threw himself into his parish ministry with characteristic passion, and his experiences significantly changed his evangelical thinking, a principle of which was that people were either saved or damned, a harsh “black and white” judgmental temperament. He visited every single home in his parish, and after he personally met many people “in the flesh” who were struggling with their faith, some on their death beds, he rejected this evangelical “black or white” principle of judgment, having experienced for himself that it was unreal. These highly personal “real” experiences with his parishioners significantly altered his evangelical belief, and so this abstract principle fell away under the onslaught of actual personal experiences.

During this time, Newman had also become pleasantly ensconced at Oxford, earning a Fellowship to Oriel College, the leading academic center of the university, a major moment in

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<sup>6</sup> Autobiographical Writings, 11.

<sup>7</sup> J. H. Newman, Letters and Diaries, vol. I, ed. Ian Ker and Thomas Gornall, S.J., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 28.

his life, as he described it in his journal in the third person: “As for Mr. Newman he ever felt this twelfth of April, 1822 to be the turning point of his life, and of all days most memorable.”<sup>8</sup> Here he fell under the sway of the leading lights of the liberal school for several years, particularly Richard Whately and Edward Hawkins, drawn in once again by his affectionate relationships with them. This school emphasized the power of reason and logic as the primary method of ascertaining truth, superseding other methods. In 1826, Newman is appointed to the prestigious position of Tutor of Oriel. As a protégé of the liberal school, Newman’s stock was on the rise.

But in the fall of 1827, Newman was jolted out of this direction when he suffered his second nervous breakdown while serving as an examiner in the schools, so paralyzing him that he was forced to take a leave of absence. But his trauma was not yet done. Just two months later a second family tragedy strikes – the sudden death of his younger sister Mary, who was only nineteen, to whom he was very close. Mary died on January 5, 1828, after abruptly retiring ill in the midst of a family holiday dinner the previous evening. As his personal experiences with his parishioners had done, his sister’s death wrenched him once again out of the abstract world of Oxford academia to that of the real personal world. For the second time in less than four years, the death of a beloved family member pitched Newman into deep spiritual reflection, another “real” experience opposed to the abstractions of the liberal school. And as he had rejected evangelicalism as unreal, for the same reason he began to reject the excessive rationalistic method of liberalism. As he recalled, he “was beginning to prefer intellectual excellence to moral; I was drifting in the direction of the Liberalism of the day. I was rudely awakened from my dream at the end of 1827 by two great blows – illness and bereavement.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> J. H. Newman, “Autobiographical Memoir II,” Autobiographical Writings, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Apologia, 116 - 117.

So Newman's 20s were both an exciting time but also one filled with great tragedy. He experienced much success, from Oxford student to Oxford Fellow, from parish curate where he delivered his first sermons, to Tutor of Oriel College. Then in 1828 he was also appointed curate of St. Mary the Virgin, the University Church of Oxford, with the accompanying role of University preacher during which time he delivered his renowned Oxford University Sermons. But the period was also chastened by great personal losses. The winds of change, which blew so steadily during his 20s, were blowing with increasing intensity as he entered his 30s, winds which would blow his life onto an entirely new path.

### Scene 3:

Dismissal from Oxford, a book on the personal roots of heresy, and  
a sea change in the Mediterranean towards the Church

“Exoriare, Aliquis!” : Arise, Avenger!

These winds were blowing him into a direct collision with his former mentor, Edward Hawkins, now Provost of Oriel. As Tutor of Oriel, Newman developed a very personalist pedagogy characterized by concern for the spiritual welfare of his students. When Hawkins discovered this, he ordered Newman to conform to the impersonal, lecture-and-leave formal pedagogy demanded by the university. Newman refused, and after a drawn-out dispute, Hawkins relieved him of his duties in 1832. His relationship with his beloved Oxford for more than a decade was over – for good. He was literally “let out to sea” by the winds of change, the effect of which was a turning point in his life, and those winds now filled the sails of a ship taking him on a life-changing voyage.

Newman turned his Tutorial loss into gain. After he was dismissed from his Tutor's position, he completed his first book, The Arians of the Fourth Century,<sup>10</sup> an historical study of the heretical mind notably grounded in an abuse of the affections. Then Newman accepted an offer to join his good friend Richard Hurrell Froude, who was setting sail to the Mediterranean for health reasons, a trip that exposed Newman to Catholicism in Rome, which mightily impressed him. (A personalist note on the affections of friendship: Froude and Newman had been Tutor-mates at Oxford, and Froude left with Newman. They were fast and dear friends, and Newman imbibed a great deal about the credibility of Roman Catholicism from Froude. Newman was devastated by Froude's untimely death in 1836 from his life-long illness, and Newman remembered him fondly and affectionately for the rest of his days.) Newman separated from the group after their "Roman holiday" to tour Sicily on his own, where he suffered a life-threatening illness and a related spiritual crisis, both of which he interpreted as divine punishment for his obstinacy towards Edward Hawkins during the Tutor controversy, reflecting Newman's consternation over the damage to their relationship. While recovering, the winds of change blew anew, and now propelled him towards home. An inspiration overcame him, resulting in a commitment to a movement that had been brewing for years – reform of what he and others perceived as the weak and bumbling Anglican church. With the slogan on his lips, "Exoriare,

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<sup>10</sup> J. H. Newman, The Arians of the Fourth Century, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1908). Newman linked the development of the heretical mind to its foundation in willfulness and a destructive affective disposition that shape the intellect. An "unchristian temper" pervaded the region prior to the Arian controversy characterized by "a love of singularity, the spirit of insubordination and separatism, and the gloomy spiritual pride which . . . history evidences"(16) Paul of Samosata of the Antiochene Church embodied that temperament "with a rapacity, an arrogance . . . extraordinary profaneness, and a profligacy . . . a supercilious spirit" with a resultant theology "concerning the Person of Christ . . . certainly derogatory of the of the doctrine of His absolute divinity and eternal existence."(4-5).

aliquis!” – “Arise, Avenger!” the birth of the Tractarian movement was immanent, into which the exhilarated Newman threw himself with characteristic zeal.

## Act II

From Church to Church: bitter infighting and the trauma of conversion

Scene 1: The Great Reform Attempt.

From 1833 until 1841, Newman and his fellow reformers were in the vanguard of fighting for change in the Anglican Church, publishing their reform ideas in a series of documents called the Tracts for the Times. Newman quickly became the leading voice of the movement, authoring 28 and possibly one other of the 90 Tracts, excoriating the corruptions of the Roman Church and the pope, and promoting the Anglican communion as the middle way between the corruptions of Rome and the excessive individualism of Protestantism, a case he made in his 1837 Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church.<sup>11</sup> (He would later recast this ecclesiastical stand in the Preface to the Third Edition in 1877 when it was republished as The Via Media of the Anglican Church,<sup>12</sup> with humbling admissions of error.) The following year, 1838, he authored a major study of faith, Lectures on Justification,<sup>13</sup> which he considered in later years to be as accurate as it was in 1838. But in 1839, during the heat of the church battle, a colleague called his attention to an Augustinian principle of ecclesiology – “*securus judicat orbis terrarum* . . . the deliberate judgment, in which the whole church at length rests and acquiesces, is an infallible prescription and a final sentence against such portions of it as protest and secede.”

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<sup>11</sup> J. H. Newman, Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church viewed relatively to Romanism and Popular Protestantism, Second edition, (London: J.G. & F. Rivington, 1838).

<sup>12</sup> J. H. Newman, The Via Media of the Anglican Church, vol. I and II, (London: Basil, Montagu, and Pickering, 1877).

<sup>13</sup> J. H. Newman, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1840)

<sup>14</sup> The demons of doubt crept into his mind, and they raised their voices with increasing ferocity. This “ghost” reappeared in 1841 to haunt Newman until his studies of church history led him to the shocking realization that the Anglican communion was in fact analogous to an early schismatic church, and that the Roman communion appeared to be the true heir to the apostolic church. The realization was traumatic, and his very fate as an Anglican hung in the balance. Could he, Anglicanism’s major trumpeter who had long rebuked the church of Rome, be wrong? He realized a fatal flaw in his research – that he had accepted uncritically the views of the Anglican divines without actually examining the evidence. During this period of great emotional distress, Newman undertook an historical study of the 39 Articles of Anglicanism, its institutional creed, in an attempt to salvage his life-long beliefs. He concluded that the Anglican divines had in fact been wrong – and so therefore was he in believing them. The Articles were in fact highly catholic, an argument he then presented in his Tract XC, hoping that this would lead to some form of institutional reform, and meant by Newman as a teaching resource for both hierarchy and laity. It exemplified his skill in identifying the various strands of this complex and highly charged subject. But it was to no avail. It was rejected by both the Anglican and Oxford hierarchies. This public humiliation, along with the Anglican assent to a multid denominational bishopric in Jerusalem and the return of the “ghost” of 1839 echoing in his head in 1841 – the historically grounded, philosophically sound ecclesiological principle he learned from Augustine – *securus judicat orbis terrarum*, the universal church judges securely – caused Newman to confess to feeling that “From the end of 1841, I was on my death-bed, as regards my membership with the Anglican Church.”<sup>15</sup> The die was cast, and the genie could not be put back

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<sup>14</sup> Apologia, 211-212.

<sup>15</sup> Apologia, 245.

in the bottle. The backlash against Tract XC sealed the matter: it was censured, and the local bishop ordered an end to the Tracts altogether. No reform. No change. Under this withering attack, Newman withdrew into a dark period of seclusion and reflection. The overpowering winds of change were blowing Newman out to sea once again, and now entering his 40s, he knew where not they were taking him.

## Scene 2

What to do? Whither to go? Withdrawal and conversion.

In great consternation, Newman withdrew to a small enclave just outside Oxford, known as Littlemore, “a hamlet of some 300 souls under the care of the Vicar of St. Mary’s,”<sup>16</sup> to reflect on all that had happened and what his path might be going forward. In the midst of his turmoil, an Irish Roman Catholic priest, Fr. Charles Russell, later to become President of Maynooth College, just outside of Dublin, wrote to Newman. He had read Newman’s critiques of Roman Catholicism, and he offered to correct certain inaccuracies. Russell’s mild, gentle manner greatly appealed to Newman, and this personal engagement once again was a critical catalyst – it eventually led to Newman’s Retraction Statement regarding errors Newman had made regarding Catholicism. It also caused him to the study of Catholic devotional material supplied by Russell. Among the most important of these were the spiritual devotions of St. Alphonsus Liguori and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Newman made two retreats in 1843, from April 8 -14, and again from December 19 – 23,<sup>17</sup> based on the Spiritual Exercises. These experiences culminated in Newman’s last and great Oxford University Sermon XV on The

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<sup>16</sup> J. H. Newman, Sermons, 1824 – 1843, ed. Placid Murray, OSB, “Newman’s Sermon’s 1825 – 1843: vol.I, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Autobiographical Writings, 221 – 233.

Theory of Development in Doctrine,<sup>18</sup> followed by his formal treatise on the subject, the Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine<sup>19</sup> in 1845. This work unified the intellectual strands of the previous ten years, which assisted him in subduing his tenaciously stubborn will in converting to Rome. His intellect had already been converted since 1843 when he knew that the Roman communion was the true successor of the apostolic church, but his reluctant will was the final domino to fall in his search for the true church. On October 9, 1845, while at Littlemore, Newman was received into the Roman Catholic Church by Passionist Father Dominic Barberi, facilitated by his friendship with Fr. Russell, about whom Newman wrote that “he had, perhaps, more to do with my conversion than anyone else.”<sup>20</sup> The drama of the first half of Newman’s life came to a satisfying, or perhaps relieving, even happy, close, or as he described these winds of change, “It was like coming into port after a rough sea; and my happiness on that score remains without interruption to this day.”<sup>21</sup> The tumultuous winds of change, representing the direction of the Holy Spirit which guides all truth seekers, had brought him safely to shore once again. But new battles lay on the horizon.

### Act III

#### The Multiple Dramas of the Catholic Years

##### Scene 1: Libel, Dublin and Teaching Truth, and Charges of Heresy.

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<sup>18</sup> J. H. Newman, Oxford University Sermons, (London: Rivingtons, 1880).

<sup>19</sup> J. H. Newman, An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, (New York: D. Appleton, 1845).

<sup>20</sup> Apologia, 287.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 373..

Newman was ordained a Catholic priest on May 30, 1847, and as he settled into the beginning of his Catholic period, he may have hoped that after years of controversy, a period of peace might ensue. He was highly mistaken, as his 50s proved to be even more painful due to three events.

In 1852, Newman was charged with criminal libel by a defrocked Roman Catholic priest, Giacinto Achilli, who had been removed from the priesthood for repeated sexual misconduct, and who was on an anti-Catholic barnstorming tour of England speaking against the Church. Newman publicly rebuked him and cited the record of Achilli's debauched behavior. With judicial irregularities used against him and widespread evidence of anti-Catholic bias in the proceedings, Newman was convicted but punished with only a slap on the wrists – a legal defeat but a moral victory. But the event deeply disturbed Newman, which he once described as the worst period of his life.

In the midst of the Achilli affair, Newman took up yet another major challenge, the invitation in 1851 to establish the Catholic University of Ireland, a task he took on formally with appointment as Rector from 1854 to 1858, and Newman, ever the educator, hurled himself into it with his usual gusto. Although the initiative was marred by bureaucratic conflicts and eventually failed, with Newman resigning as Rector in 1858 to return to the Birmingham Oratory, the experience led Newman to compose a series of lectures eventually published as The Idea of a University,<sup>22</sup> in which he applied his aesthetic vision – that of the “whole” of the subject before him - to higher education: specifically, he held that a University education must include all

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<sup>22</sup> J. H. Newman, The Idea of a University, ((Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907).

disciplines, including theology, or it fails the very test of the meaning of a university. It is recognized to this day as a classic on the philosophy of liberal education.

Soon after he returned from Ireland, another trial beset Newman. He was asked to assume the editorship of the periodical The Rambler, and in 1859 he published his reflections on a particular case that had garnered public attention: what parties should be involved in decisions about the education of Catholic children. Newman published his thoughts in The Rambler in an article titled On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine, making the case for including all of the faithful – not solely the hierarchy but also the laity and their priests - in matters affecting them. The article created such a controversy that a bishop reported Newman to Rome as a suspected heretic. Newman was eventually cleared of the charge, closing out his 50s having endured the drama of yet three more major trials.

## Scene 2

Another attack: the defense of his life.

Back at the Birmingham Oratory, Newman concentrated his educational efforts in establishing the Oratory school: “In the beginning of 1859, upon my relinquishment of my Irish engagement . . . I began a school . . . with such modifications as Catholic discipline requires, which has up to this day met with much success and great encouragement for the future.”<sup>23</sup> Newman penned this dispatch just before another bomb was hurled at him just three months later, and he once again found himself the leading player in another high public drama. This ill wind blew his way in the January, 1864 issue of Macmillan’s Magazine, wherein he was viciously attacked in print by Charles Kingsley, an Oxford don, who accused Newman of having

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<sup>23</sup> Autobiographical Writings, Ibid.

played fast and loose with the truth about his odyssey from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism.

<sup>24</sup> With the honor and integrity of his life at stake, Newman successfully rebutted Kingsley's charge with his autobiographic account of his conversion journey in the Apologia pro Vita Sua, a work which, in the opinion of many, rivals that of Augustine's Confessions.<sup>25</sup>

### Scene 3

The mind's ascent to truth.

In 1870, at the age of 69, Newman published his last great work, An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent,<sup>26</sup> his great treatise on epistemology, the nature of the human mind, and the mind's capacity to assent to truth, a study that he confided was in the making for some twenty years.<sup>27</sup> It is a work of supreme aesthetic genius, aesthetic in the sense of being grounded in a holistic vision of how the mind works on its path to harmonizing truth, goodness, beauty, and love, and thus, ultimately, to encountering God.

### Scene 4

Salve for a lifetime of pain seeking truth: elevation to the cardinalate

In 1879, Pope Leo XIII, sweeping aside objections, as previously noted - "Oh, it was not easy!" he reportedly said - named Newman a cardinal. Consistent with his life of personalism, Newman, author of numerous intellectual classics, chose as his cardinal's motto "Cor ad cor loquitur," heart speaks to heart. Echoing my drama motif to describe Newman's life, a source at the time referred to Newman's elevation as "the dramatic completeness of Cardinal Newman's life."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>25</sup> Avery Dulles, Newman, (New York: Continuum, 2002), 11.

<sup>26</sup> J.H. Newman, An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent, (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903).

<sup>27</sup> J.H. Newman, An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent, ed. Nicholas Lash, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 7: Lash comments in his Introduction: "Newman's journal entry for October 30, 1870 lists nineteen "distinct separate beginnings" between June 1846 and the summer of 1866."

<sup>28</sup> Autobiographical Writings, 4.

## Scene 5

### Requiescat in pace

Newman, now vindicated after a long life under attack by Anglicans and Catholics alike, lives out his final years at Birmingham, in the company of the young students of his Oratory school. He died peacefully on August 11, 1890.