

John Henry Newman's Apologia as a Journal of His Conversions

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INTRODUCTION

For twenty centuries, “conversion stories” have had tremendous appeal for both Christians and observers interested in Christianity. Mention the word “conversion” and what immediately comes to mind are people like Paul and Cornelius in the New Testament, people like Augustine and Francis in Christian history—people whose lives were headed in one direction, before their minds and hearts were changed, before their lives were redirected and transformed—not only in a uniquely personal way, but also in ways that have continued to enlighten and inspire the spiritual search of numerous people throughout the centuries.¹

Although a fundamental life-change is an essential component of all conversions, there is considerable variety in the “timing” of conversions. Christian history offers examples of converts like Saul, whose conversion was sudden and totally unexpected;² yet there are other people, whose “conversion” was years in coming, as in the case of Augustine, whose mother’s “prayers indeed and tears” were only answered after a protracted period of time.³

1. “Conversion” (from the Latin *convertere*, to turn around, to turn back) in a religious context commonly means a redirection or transformation of a person’s life—for example, a change from a life of sin to one of virtue, a change from one church to another, etc.

2. See Newman’s sermon, “St. Paul’s Conversion Viewed in Reference to His Office” (preached on 25 January 1831), *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 2:287–94.

3. See Newman’s sermon, “Intellect, the Instrument of Religious Training” (preached on St. Monica’s Feast, 4 May 1856), *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions* (Notre Dame: Gracewing, 2007), 1. Insofar as conversion can be considered a type of “informal inference,” a person examines and evaluates the arguments pro and contra; in this process, some people will find the arguments unconvincing and remain

Obviously, we would know little or nothing about such conversions had not these converts shared their experiences. The publication of such “conversion stories” is not surprising. Most converts want to share their conversion experiences: first of all, converts want, even need, to justify their conversion not only to themselves and their new co-religionists, but also to those who consider their conversion incredible or insincere; in this respect, “conversion stories” tend to fall somewhere between “a true confession” and “a profile in courage”—perhaps a bit of both. Given the highly personal nature of conversion stories, readers may justifiably have some hermeneutical suspicion about these accounts: Is this story really a record of what actually happened? Or is this story what the author remembers as happening? Or is this story what the author would like us to think happened? Conversion accounts seem to mix the factual, the memorable, and the apologetical.

Whatever their historical accuracy, conversion stories inevitably include—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly—an invitation to readers to follow the example of their authors. Readers today are still fascinated by the conversion narrative of Saul in Acts 9: How could a persecutor of Christians suddenly be transformed into a preacher of Christianity? Readers are similarly engaged by the account of Augustine’s conversion in his *Confessions*: Why did a pagan philosopher suddenly become a proponent of Christianity? For non-Christians, the conversions of Paul and Augustine pose the question: Should I become a Christian? For Christians, conversion stories prompt the question: Should I become a better Christian? Such questions are perennial: conversions are not limited to biblical and patristic times; conversions are an ongoing necessity for Christianity. Without conversions—both of non-Christians to Christianity and of Christians to a fuller practice of Christian spirituality—Christianity would wither, if not die.

Every list of nineteenth-century conversion stories almost invariably includes Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1845)—which has long been considered a classic of Victorian autobiography, and deservedly so, in spite of the fact that the book was written on short notice and under intense pressure. Unlike those authors who have had ample leisure to assemble materials and record their recollections for their autobiographies in the quiet of their study, Newman found himself unexpectedly drawn into a controversy that prompted him to write his life history in a matter of weeks. At the end of December

where they were—such was the case with Newman’s fellow Tractarians, Keble and Pusey, who remained members of the Church of England; other people will examine the arguments and—sometimes quickly, sometimes gradually—come to the decision to convert. For Newman’s description of “informal inference,” see his *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Chapter 8.2.

1863, he received by mail a copy of the January (1864) issue of *Macmillan's Magazine*, which contained a book review of James Anthony Froude's two-volume *History of England*. The reviewer, identified by the initials C. K., commented in passing:

"Truth, for its own sake, had never been a virtue with the Roman clergy. Father Newman informs us that it need not, and on the whole ought not to be; that cunning is the weapon which Heaven has given to the saints wherewith to withstand the brute male force of the wicked world which marries and is given in marriage. Whether his notion be doctrinally correct or not, it is at least historically so."⁴

Although Newman was reticent by nature and initially reluctant to engage in controversy, such a slur on both his personal integrity and the truthfulness of the Roman Catholic clergy prompted him to demand an apology. The editors of *Macmillan's* forwarded his request to the review author, Charles Kingsley (1819–1875), an Anglican clergyman and Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge (1860–1869)—perhaps best known to generations of youngsters as the author of *Westward Ho!* (1855). When a satisfactory apology from Kingsley was not forthcoming, Newman realized that the only way to refute these allegations was by providing a detailed history of his "religious opinions" during the years (1801–45) when he was a member of the Church of England. Literally working day and night, his *Apologia* appeared in "seven Parts, which were published in series on consecutive Thursdays, between April 21 and June 2," 1864.⁵

As a literary work, Newman's *Apologia* includes personal recollections of Oxford—which contrast sharply with the now-all-but-forgotten *Reminiscences* of his brother-in-law, Thomas Mozley (1806–1893).⁶ Instead of criticizing the Oxford Movement, however, Newman seized the opportunity to acknowledge his indebtedness to the Church of England in general and Oxford University in particular for both the educational opportunities and the spiritual enrichment that he had been accorded as an Anglican. He also expressed his gratitude to his former colleagues for their continuing friendship—which had obviously

4. John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. David J. Delaura (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 298; this edition is particularly useful because of its informative footnotes and interpretive essays (hereafter, *Apo*). Ironically, the author of the *History* reviewed by Kingsley was James Anthony Froude (1818–1894), a younger brother of Richard Hurrell Froude (1803–1836), who along with Newman was one of the original leaders of the Oxford Movement.

5. *Apo*, 4.

6. Thomas Mozley (1806–1893), *Reminiscences: Chiefly of Oriel College and the Oxford Movement*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1882).

been strained by his decision to become a Roman Catholic. In effect, while shooting arrows at Kingsley's accusations, Newman offered olive branches to his Anglican friends.

Newman's *Apologia* also has elements of an exposé—an art form that was highly enticing to Victorians who always wanted to know firsthand the “inside story”: Why would any well-educated Anglican clergyman do such an unconventional—indeed preposterous—thing as become a Roman Catholic? Although Newman answered this question in a low key through his *Apologia*, his defense—even defensiveness—of his conversion to Roman Catholicism had previously appeared in his first novel, *Loss and Gain* (1848), where he somewhat playfully lampooned Victorians for their tendency to be excessively tolerant of the most bizarre religious idiosyncrasies—Roman Catholicism excepted.⁷ Simultaneously, Newman's *Apologia* served as a counter-exposé to the sensationalistic anti-Catholic allegations of Maria Monk⁸ and Giovanni Giacinto Achilli,⁹ whose fabrications have fallen into the footnotes of history, while Newman's *Apologia*—readily available today both in paperback and on the Internet—continues to attract readers.

Seemingly for strategic reasons—as a rhetorical reply to Kingsley—Newman presented his *Apologia* as an autobiographical “history of my religious opinions”; in fact, his *Apologia* recorded not only the development of his theological views, but also chronicled his “spiritual journey” via a series of “conversions”—even though he seemingly had reservations about using this term.¹⁰ Nonetheless, readers of Newman's *Apologia*, especially those interested

7. Although Newman lampooned Victorian religious idiosyncrasies throughout *Loss and Gain*, his chapter, “Irvingites and Other Visitors,” is a particularly enjoyable example of his sense of humor. Newman, *Loss and Gain* (London: Longmans, Green, 1906), chs. 3–7.

8. Maria Monk (1816–1849) was the pseudonym of a Canadian woman whose *Awful Disclosures* (1836), subtitled, *The Hidden Secrets of a Nun's Life in a Convent Exposed*, were a fraudulent account of alleged immorality in Montreal convents.

9. Giovanni Giacinto Achilli (dates unknown), an Italian Dominican priest, who was defrocked for immorality, delivered a series of anti-Catholic lectures in England; after Newman accused Achilli of misconduct in *The Present Position of Catholics in England* (1851), Achilli sued him for libel; after a trial extending for nearly two years (1852–1853), Newman was found guilty of not proving all his allegations and was fined the then-not-insignificant sum of £100; in addition, he had to pay legal fees of £14,000, which were raised by worldwide subscription.

10. See Avery Dulles, “Newman: The Anatomy of a Conversion,” in *Newman and Conversion*, ed. Ian Ker (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 22. “Indeed it seemed problematic to Newman whether the term ‘conversion’ was appropriate to his own religious pilgrimage, since he had never undergone a violent change or reversal of views, such as was described in the writings of the Evangelicals.”

in his personal development—both theological and spiritual—have long tended to focus on the two “bookend conversions” to his autobiographical narrative. At one end was his teenage conversion that spanned several months in the autumn of 1816, as he was in the process of leaving his adolescent security at Ealing School for the yet-unknown challenges of Oxford University. At the other was his midlife conversion, the painful and problematic process in which he gradually disassociated himself from the Church of England and eventually decided to enter the Roman Catholic Church.

NEWMAN'S CONVERSIONS

At the beginning of his *Apologia*, Newman memorialized his so-called “first” conversion as “confirming me in my mistrust of the reality of material phenomena, and making me rest in the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator.”¹¹ In concluding his *Apologia*, he described his entrance into the Roman Catholic Church in similarly memorable terms: “From the time that I became a Catholic, of course, [I] have no further history of my religious opinions to narrate. . . . I have been in perfect peace and contentment; . . . it was like coming into port after a rough sea; and my happiness on that score remains to this day without interruptions.”¹²

Although unforgettable summaries of his state of mind at two pivotal periods in his spiritual journey, these two succinct statements have a deceptive side-effect: both statements focus on the end result, the terminus of what was really a drawn-out process in both conversions; his teenage conversion extended over several months; his midlife conversion was drawn out over a half-dozen years. Indeed, if there had not been a “process” in these two conversions, it seems rather unlikely—given Newman’s introspective personality and his illative epistemology—that either conversion would have taken place. Newman was not a person who made significant decisions swiftly; he examined and evaluated all the options available; he agonized about important decisions—reflecting at length about his options and then reconsidering his reflections—yet once he saw his course of action clearly, little or nothing could deter him.

11. *Apo*, 16.

12. *Apo*, 184. Although Newman claimed that his life as a Roman Catholic had been one of “perfect peace and contentment,” in fact, during the two decades after his entrance into the Roman Catholic Church, he experienced a succession of difficulties with ecclesiastical authorities, including his less-than-harmonious relationship with the Irish bishops, while he was rector of the Catholic University in Ireland; his denunciation to Rome over his publication “On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine”; etc.

To appreciate Newman's adolescent conversion, one should then look not only at its content—"myself and my Creator"—but also its context.¹³ In retrospect, Newman's first conversion emerged from at least three quite different antecedent components—which incongruously played both complementary and conflicting roles in his adolescent conversion. The first was the conventional Anglicanism of his respectable middle-class family, which "observed the Sabbath" by attending church, having Sunday dinner at home, and passing much of the day in restful and sometimes religious pursuits.¹⁴ The second was his adolescent flirtation with rationalism through reading Thomas Paine, David Hume, and Voltaire—whose allure he later recalled: "How dreadful but how plausible."¹⁵ The third was his admiration for—as well as his indoctrination by—an Anglican clergyman, Walter Mayers (1790–1828), his classics teacher at Ealing School—certainly his *alter pater*, indeed his *almus pater*, whose paternal concern seems to have been more influential over the youthful Newman than that of his own father. These three quite different, yet interlocking, components—Anglicanism, Reasonableness, Evangelicalism—were interwoven in both his adolescent conversion and his spirituality as a young man.

A comparable set of components—though necessarily quite different in nature—formed the context of his "Roman Catholic Conversion" three decades later. In contrast to his adolescent conversion—when future opportunities seemed limitless and energies endless—his midlife conversion risked sacrificing a secure and comfortable university career as well as the fellowship of close friends and a circle of devoted students for an unknown future and a community of strangers—presumably kindly and well meaning—but strangers nonetheless. Although Newman's midlife conversion has occasionally been described rather triumphalistically by some Roman Catholics as an abjuration of Anglicanism, in retrospect it seems to have been more what his fellow Tractarian, Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800–1882), ecumenically characterized as Newman's being "transplanted to another part of the vineyard."¹⁶ In fact, Newman carried the best of Anglican spirituality with him when he became a Roman Catholic: biblically based preaching and daily personal prayer.

13. *Apo*, 16.

14. In nineteenth-century England, Sunday devotions at home often included reading and discussing sermons and religious tracts. This practice provided a ready market for the eight volumes of Newman's *Parochial and Plain Sermons*.

15. *Apo*, 16.

16. Edward Pusey, *English Churchman* (1845), in *Annals of the Tractarian Movement, from 1842 to 1860*, ed. Edward George Kirwan Browne (London: Charles Dolman, 1863), 121–22.

Nonetheless, Newman's reception into the Roman Catholic Church in 1845—at least as far as externals were concerned—was anti-climactic; he was received without public fanfare by an itinerant Passionist missionary, Dominic Barberi (1792–1849) at Littlemore, a small village a couple miles south of Oxford.¹⁷ There was no Pauline-like theophany prompting Newman's entrance into the Roman Catholic Church, nor was there the urging of an Augustinian voice. Newman's remarkably routine reception as a Roman Catholic paralleled his "first conversion"—which also lacked any landmark event. Like his adolescent conversion—which occurred over a span of several months—Newman's conversion to Roman Catholicism took time—a lot of time, extending over a half-dozen years—beginning in 1839 with his reading of Wiseman's article about St. Augustine's repudiation of Donatism via the thought-provoking phrase *Securus judicat orbis terrarum* ("the world judges with assurance")¹⁸ and concluding with his "low key" entrance into the Roman Catholic Church in 1845.¹⁹

In fact, Newman's *Apologia* mentions a number of events between his reading of the Augustine article and his Littlemore reception that are equally if not more influential: his study of the Monophysite controversy; the creation of a joint Anglican-Protestant bishopric in Jerusalem;²⁰ his growing realization that his *Via Media* (his theory that Anglicanism was the "middle way" between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism) was a paper theory, not a reality; the popular rejection of *Tract 90*. While Newman's *Apologia* carefully chronicles the series of events that slowly diminished and eventually destroyed his faith in Anglicanism, readers may be puzzled about *how* and *why* such all-but-forgotten controversies of ecclesiastical history—like Donatism and Monophysitism, which generally aroused little interest either in mid-nineteenth-century England or today—could possibly facilitate his conversion.

The answer to *how* Newman managed to resuscitate the past was largely due to his literary power to describe historical events—which were customarily

17. See the "personal reminiscences" of Frederick Oakeley (1802–1880), a lifelong Anglican friend of Newman, in *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 32:507–9 (hereafter, *LD*).

18. *Apo*, 98.

19. *Apo*, 183.

20. In 1840, King Frederick William IV of Prussia proposed to the British government that a Protestant bishopric be established in Jerusalem to minister both to German Protestants and to members of the Church of England; the episcopal office initially alternated between Anglicans and Germans; see: R. W. Greaves, "The Jerusalem Bishopric, 1841," *The English Historical Review* 64, no. 252 (July 1949): 328–52.

presented in dry accounts—in such an imaginative way that the dynamics of these long-forgotten controversies once again appeared as really vital issues. For example, even if one does not understand the details of the Monophysite controversy, what reader of Newman’s *Apologia* fails to remember his dramatic statement: “I saw my face in that mirror and I was a Monophysite”?²¹ Even readers who cannot explain what a Monophysite is can easily recognize Newman’s candid confession of heresy; moreover, readers are nudged to ask themselves: Am I really a Christian? Or am I basically a heretic? In effect, Newman had the enviable talent of being able to describe ancient doctrinal controversies in such a way that people become vividly aware of how these past events really have importance today. In other words, Newman envisioned the past not as a notional set of persons, places, dates, and facts to be dutifully recorded in a dull ecclesiastical chronicle, but as an engaging narrative of real experiences: saints like Paul and Augustine, saints like Ambrose and Athanasius, were not simply theological writers of yesteryear, they are spiritual mentors for the present.

As to *why* Newman went to such pains to resurrect controversies of the past, he became convinced—particularly through his reading of the Fathers of the Church—that these usually forgotten and often-ignored controversies were essential for a true understanding of Christianity. Past controversies were not simply obscure occurrences for scholarly study on a notional level, but historical events that really had both theological importance and spiritual relevance—not only then but now. For Newman, the past was not simply a notional prelude to the present; the past has real importance for the present. Nonetheless, however vital and significant the doctrinal controversies of the past slowly took shape in his mind, he took his time in considering the past’s implications for the present. Conversion, for Newman, was a process both gradual and careful.

During the half-dozen years (1839–45) prior to his entry into the Roman Catholic Church, Newman gave a number of indications of the direction that he was heading. Perhaps the most public and poignant indicator of his pending conversion to Roman Catholicism was his final sermon as an Anglican on 25 September 1843: “The Parting of Friends.” At the conclusion of his sermon, “Newman took off his hood and threw it over the altar rails. No doubt he did this automatically, such being his custom whenever he was going to receive Holy Communion. But people knew that he had preached to them for the last time, and many of them interpreted this action as a sign that he was now renouncing all further right to address them as a minister of the Church

21. *Apo*, 96.

of England.”²² Newman's congregation at Littlemore seemingly foresaw his future more clearly than he did; it would be another two years before he finally decided to become a Roman Catholic. For the next two years, 1843–45, Newman became absorbed in a process of theological reflection that seemed at first sight extremely theoretical and essentially notional: Has Christian doctrine developed over the centuries since the time of the Apostles?

While such a question about the development of Christian doctrine was seemingly merely speculative, it was simultaneously both deeply personal and essentially spiritual: What Christian community offers *me* the best possibility of salvation? In tandem with this personal spiritual question was a practical ecclesiological one: Where do I find the Church of Jesus Christ today? Although his eventual answer to these questions was primarily personal, Newman organized his reflections in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) as a “hypothesis to explain a difficulty”—a theological proposal to resolve an ecclesiological problem—and this is the way most people read his *Essay* today. As a theological investigation, his *Essay* was remarkably intuitive—a seminal study of doctrinal development that appeared a decade and a half before Darwin's provocative work on biological evolution—*On the Origin of Species* (1859). Similarly, Newman's *Essay* was a noteworthy theological landmark—that has effectively changed the history of modern theology—especially the understanding of doctrinal history.²³

In spite of its obviously theological character, Newman's *Essay on Development* might also be described as a “hypothesis to explain a conversion”—he was writing not only to solve an ecclesiological conundrum, he was also writing to resolve a personal spiritual crisis. On the theological level, he attempted to validate his theological hypothesis by the application of seven “tests.”²⁴ His theological testing began with a lengthy and detailed discussion of “preservation of type”; however, his hypothesis-testing was truncated in his subsequent discussion of the remaining six tests, so that the total amount of space given the remaining six tests barely equaled the amount of space given to his investigation of the first test.²⁵ One, of course, might conjecture that Newman realized that a book of a thousand pages was unrealistic—such would

22. Louis Bouyer, *Cardinal Newman: His Life and Spirituality* (New York: P. Kennedy, 1958), 231.

23. For a comprehensive study of Newman's *Essay on Development*, see Gerard McCarren, “Tests” or “Notes”? A Critical Evaluation of the Criteria for Genuine Doctrinal Development in John Henry Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1998).

24. In the first edition of his *Essay on Development* (1845), Newman enumerated seven “tests” of development; in his extensively revised third edition (1878), he used the terminology “notes” instead of “tests.”

have been the result had he given the other six tests the same amount of space as he gave the treatment of the first test.

One might also conclude that the first test convinced him that his hypothesis of development—both doctrinal and ecclesiastical—was true. If the first test provided the answer he was seeking—not only ecclesiologically but also spiritually—were additional tests really necessary? Seemingly convinced by his first test, he corroborated his conclusion by simply adding summary outlines and succinct examples as proofs for the other six tests. Subsequently, however, theologians have been prone to look more at his conclusion—Newman’s purported “theory” of development—rather than the process of theological reflection that led him to the conviction that Christian doctrine has really developed. Yet, as Nicholas Lash has emphasized, Newman’s *Essay* “undoubtedly contains, in rudimentary form, the seeds of a number of such theories” of development.²⁶ Such an emphasis on Newman’s theological conclusions—as important as they are in themselves—runs the risk of ignoring his personal state of mind when he concluded his *Essay on Development*: his theological conclusion was the intellectual basis for his spiritual decision. In succinct terms, conversion involves both the head and the heart.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CONVERSION

In Newman’s *Apologia*, one can find descriptions of at least four conversions.²⁷ The first, as already mentioned, was his Evangelical conversion as a teenager, when Newman both moved beyond the conventional Anglicanism of his family and turned away from his adolescent admiration for the rationalism of Paine and Voltaire. Newman’s second conversion came as a young fellow of Oriel College in his twenties, when he came under the influence of the Oxford University Noetics: Richard Whately (1787–1863), later the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, and Edward Hawkins (1789–1882), who served for over fifty years as Provost of Oriel. Whately and Hawkins convinced Newman to abandon the anti-dogmatic stance of Evangelicalism in favor of a greater respect for the Church and Tradition.

25. In the third edition (1878) of Newman’s *Essay on Development*, the first “note” occupies 115 pages, while the other six notes are respectively treated (31, 27, 16, 18, 17, 7) in a total of 116 pages.

26. Nicholas Lash, *Newman on Development: The Search for an Explanation in History* (Shepherdstown, WV: Patmos, 1975), 56.

27. Dulles, “Newman: The Anatomy of a Conversion,” 24–33, listed three “conversions”: first: his Evangelical conversion as a teenager; second: his “transition” (28) to Anglo-Catholicism; third: his “submission” (33) to Roman Catholicism.

While gradually coming to acknowledge the importance of Tradition in the life of the Church, Newman was unwilling to accept the rationalistic views of the Noetics; as he later confessed in his *Apologia*: “The truth is, I was beginning to prefer intellectual excellence to moral; I was drifting in the direction of the Liberalism of the day.”²⁸ In tandem with Newman’s dalliance with Noeticism, another catalyst contributing to his waning Evangelicalism was his personal experience as curate of St. Clement’s, Oxford, where he discovered that his parishioners did not really fit into his neat Calvinistic categories of “predestined” and “reprobate.” In effect, his notional theology was tested and found wanting in the real world of his pastoral ministry;²⁹ in more general terms, spirituality is not only a matter of speculative theology, but necessarily relies on Christian experience.

Newman’s Noetic allegiance was then quite temporary. To the apparent disappointment of Whately and Hawkins, Newman soon embraced the High Church views of three other Oriel fellows—John Keble (1792–1866), Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800–1882), and Richard Hurrell Froude (1803–1836)—who, along with Newman, eventually became the leaders of the Oxford Movement. Under the influence of Froude, Keble, and Pusey, Newman experienced a third conversion that led him not only to abandon Noetic rationalism but also to discard some typical Evangelical positions—the sufficiency of Scripture, justification by faith alone, and the indefectibility of grace—in favor of more “catholic” positions: the necessity of Tradition, the mediator-role of the Church and its sacraments, as well as the duty of continual spiritual renewal.

For the first half-dozen years of the Oxford Movement (1833–39), Tractarian Catholicism provided Newman with a satisfactory middle ground—a *via media* between what he considered the dogmatic diminutions of continental Protestantism and the doctrinal exaggerations of Roman Catholicism. However, his advocacy of the catholicity of Anglicanism in *Tract 90* (1841) quickly came under attack. With the widespread repudiation of his Anglo-catholic views, he reluctantly realized that he needed to look elsewhere for the Church Catholic. After four more years of personal soul-searching and with the encouragement *in distans* of Charles William Russell (1812–1880), president of Maynooth College (Ireland), who “had, perhaps, more to do with my conversion than any one else,”³⁰ Newman arrived at the conclusion that the

28. *Apo*, 24.

29. See John Henry Newman, *Autobiographical Writings*, ed. with Introduction by Henry Tristram (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1957), 72–84 (hereafter, *AW*).

30. *Apo*, 153.

Church of the Apostles was to be found at Rome, rather than at Canterbury—a conclusion that was basic to his fourth conversion.³¹

Although Newman's *Apologia* carefully chronicles these four conversions, it does not provide a "theology of conversion." However, his *Apologia* does suggest several characteristics of his conversions that seem to be spiritually insightful and, to some extent, broadly applicable to the spiritual life of all Christians. First, Newman's conversions were a *gradual* process in contrast to the sudden conversion of St. Paul or the instantaneous command to Augustine. Newman's conversions seem more like occasional rest stops on an exploratory journey—when he paused to consider the paths available and eventually decided on a route to follow. After examining this path and that, he eventually arrived at a destination that was initially unforeseen, yet a destination that again was only provisional and so a staging place for continuing on the next phase of his journey.³² Similarly, while the spiritual life sometimes includes peak moments of special blessing, unexpected insight, and fervent devotion, more commonly the spiritual life involves frequent prayer, regular reception of the sacraments, and a continued effort to lead a Christian life—routine practices that *gradually* lead a Christian closer to God.

Second, Newman's conversions were *cumulative* insofar as some positions were abandoned—usually after a great deal of soul-searching—while others were enhanced and refined. For example, although Newman gradually relinquished the Evangelical emphasis on an individualistic relationship with Christ in favor of membership in a sacramental community, he never ceased to stress personal holiness and the importance of Scripture in general and the gospel in particular; thus, some decidedly Evangelical traits continued to play a dynamic role in Newman's Roman Catholic life. Similarly, while he eventually disowned Noetic rationalism, he was a lifelong defender of the reasonableness of faith. By way of a descriptive comparison, his conversions resemble a person, moving to a new home, who takes the valuable furniture along but leaves the

31. Many writers—emphasizing Newman's description of his entrance into the Roman Catholic Church as "coming into port after a rough sea"—have concluded their treatments of his conversions with his entrance into the Roman Catholic Church. In terms of church-membership, this was undoubtedly the case; however, insofar as conversion is a continual process, one can point to at least five options—and possible conversions—that Newman considered during the Roman Catholic half of his life: Italianate Catholicism (Faber); Liberal Catholicism (Acton); Ultramontane Catholicism (Manning); Historical Catholicism (Döllinger); Ecumenical Catholicism (Pusey), etc.

32. Sheridan Gilley, "Newman and the Convert Mind," in *Newman and Conversion*, ed. Ian Ker (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 12, has commented: "[I]n conversion, there is push as well as pull, as a man moves to a more desirable house partly out of dissatisfaction with his own."

outmoded and dysfunctional behind.³³ Similarly, the spiritual life of a Christian can be envisioned as a growth process in which a person's basic identity remains the same lifelong, while the person discards vices and habits that are counterproductive and develops virtues and qualities that with the passage of time enable the person to grow closer to God.

Third, Newman's conversions included some events that he viewed at least retrospectively as *defining moments*—though this was not the case in his adolescent conversion, it was so in his midlife conversion. Yet, one of the most intriguing but unanswerable aspects of every autobiography is the extent to which events are later seen in a different light than the author saw them at the time they occurred. While Paul could point to his Damascus Road experience as the changing point in his life, while Augustine could describe the reading-command as his life-changing moment, Newman could only vaguely recall the details of his “first conversion”—the results were engraved on his memory, but the process and its details were not. Accordingly, Newman may have retrojected his later views on the past, his memory may have forgotten some details and enhanced others, and so forth. Similarly, in regard to the spiritual life, one person may have a Pauline experience that clearly defines the moment of conversion. Another person may only later come to realize that some events that may have seemed commonplace or problematic at the time of their occurrence were really “turning points” that helped the person grow closer to God; still other people may grow spiritually without being able to pinpoint a specific moment of conversion.

Fourth, as Terrance Merrigan has pointed out, Newman's conversion story and its collateral apologetics have continued to have a *postmodern* appeal in the twenty-first century for at least three reasons:³⁴ (a) “the valuation of the human experience”: Newman's *Apologia*—unlike the conventional manuals of apologetics in the nineteenth century, which attempted to convert people by logical arguments—is an effective autobiographical apologetics that invited, and still invites, modern-day “spiritual seekers” to join him in his personal search for truth;³⁵ (b) “the demand to respect ‘otherness’”: unlike many other conversion stories in which a new convert repudiates and even condemns his previous religious affiliation, Newman went out of his way in his *Apologia* to show that “Catholics did not make us Catholics; Oxford made us Catholics”;³⁶ (c) “the

33. Gilley, “Newman and the Convert Mind,” 12.

34. See Terrance Merrigan, “The Anthropology of Conversion: Newman and the Contemporary Theology of Religions,” in *Newman and Conversion*, 127.

35. This theme is emphasized by Juan R. Vélez, *Passion for Truth: The Life of John Henry Newman* (Charlotte, NC: Tan Books, 2012), reviewed in *Newman Studies Journal* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 104–5.

recognition of the relative character of all cultural and religious traditions”: in this regard, Newman’s approach seems similar to that of Pope John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio*, who paid appropriate homage both to the unquenchable inquisitiveness of human reason and to the ultimate necessity of faith.³⁷ The enduring effectiveness of Newman’s appeal was eloquently described by the Scottish author and convert, Muriel Spark (1918–2006): “It was by way of Newman that I turned Roman Catholic. Not all the beheaded martyrs of Christendom, the ecstatic nuns of Europe, the five proofs of Aquinas, or the pamphlets of my Catholic acquaintances, provided anything like the answers that Newman did.”³⁸

Fifth, Newman’s conversions were *illative*. In his *Grammar of Assent*, he characterized the human process of decision making in real-life matters as “informal inference”—a process in which the mind selects, examines, and evaluates data in an essentially personal way in order to arrive at a decision. For Newman, such an epistemological process is “grammatically” operative not only in making everyday decisions, but also in spiritual decisions—especially in making an act of faith.

In effect, a prospective convert examines and evaluates the evidence available and eventually arrives at a decision—to change or not to change or to defer a decision. Similarly, the spiritual life is usually not a case of a person performing heroic deeds, but of faithfully fulfilling life’s daily tasks—both mundane and spiritual—with consistency and constancy. Just as conversion can result from a series of apparently unconnected events, so too the spiritual life is often a cumulative process of fulfilling the tasks of daily life. Like the spiritual life, conversion can be regarded as an inferential or illative process.³⁹

Finally, just as human decisions take varying amounts of time, so too faith-decisions—especially decisions as personally important as conversion. Newman’s midlife conversion is a case in point: he carefully examined and evaluated the evidence for Roman Catholicism and while he found some aspects of the Roman Catholic Church that were uncongenial and even questionable,

36. Newman to E. E. Estcourt, The Oratory, 2 June 1860, *LD*, 19:352. Edgar Edmund Estcourt (1816–1884), an Oxford graduate and Anglican clergyman, who became a Roman Catholic in 1845, was ordained a Roman Catholic priest and became a canon of St. Chad’s Cathedral, Birmingham.

37. An English translation of *Fides et Ratio*, which referenced Newman (§ 74), is available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html.

38. Cited by Gilley, “Newman and the Convert Mind,” 6.

39. For a discussion of the different types of inference at work in conversion, see John T. Ford, “John Henry Newman: Conversion as Inference,” *Newman Studies Journal*, 10, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 41–55.

he eventually came to be convinced, even compelled, by the cumulative merits of the evidence to become a Roman Catholic. Simultaneously, he realized that his two closest colleagues in the Oxford Movement—Keble and Pusey—had examined and evaluated the same evidence that he had, but were not convinced that there were any compelling reasons for them to follow his example and move from the Church of England to the Church of Rome. Conversion is similar to the process of constructing a mosaic. While each artist has access to the same assortment of tesserae, the mosaic that each artist eventually constructs may vary widely. The design of the mosaic is not determined by the tesserae, but by each artist, who puts each tessera into place according to a preconceived design; even though the process of positioning each tessera is basically the same, the perspective of each artist may produce quite different results. Similarly, Newman, Keble, and Pusey all had access to the same evidence for Roman Catholicism; however, they viewed that evidence quite differently and so made different decisions.

Conversion then involves a change in the way a person views the evidence—not because of the meaning the evidence has in itself, but because of the meaning the evidence has for the individual. For Paul, that new perspective was the result of a dramatic experience; for Augustine, that new perspective resulted from a peremptory command; for Newman, that change in view, humanly speaking, came as the end product of a lengthy process of reflecting and interacting with the historical data—with the Church of the past, as presented in the writings of Scripture, the Fathers, and the Anglican Divines, and with the Church of the present, as exemplified in the Church of England and the Church of Rome. In Newman's case, that process extended over a half-dozen years (1839–45)—much longer than is currently customary in the *Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults*—years that Newman spent in carefully weighing the evidence, before deciding to enter the Roman Catholic Church. The amount of time required for conversion is inherently personal: different people need different amounts of time. Accordingly, Newman, as a spiritual director for prospective converts, did not rush people into conversion: he realized that conversion involves a growth process that takes time.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The word *apologia*, which was used in ancient Greece to describe a defendant's speech at a trial and was adapted by early Christians to refer to the set of arguments they used to defend their belief, has a variety of interlocking

meanings that are reflected in Newman's *Apologia*: self-defense, apology, accounting, narrative, encomium.

First, Newman's *Apologia* was obviously a *self-defense*, which probably would not have been written had Kingsley not cavalierly chosen Newman as a target for his gratuitous anti-Catholic allegations. Ironically, had Kingsley appropriately apologized, it is unlikely that Newman would have written his *Apologia*—at least in its present form; his *Apologia* was then the result of a set of contingent circumstances. Yet contingency is a common characteristic of conversion stories: would Saul have become a Christian had he not journeyed to Damascus to persecute his future co-religionists? Or would Augustine have remained a pagan philosopher had he not obeyed the commanding voice? Similarly, the Christian life, like conversions, is frequently one of contingent circumstance: a convert responds to a divine call in a specific place and time.

Second, when English-speakers see the word *apologia*, they instinctively think of *apology*. Although such a translation is incorrect, there is a sense in which Newman's *Apologia* was an "apology." Scattered through the book are incidents where he was less than the gentleman that he could and should have been. To some degree, his *Apologia* was an apology for such shortcomings and was accepted as such, insofar as it renewed his friendship with people like Keble and Pusey whom he had not seen for years; nonetheless, his *Apologia* was not universally effective in bridge-building with some former Anglican friends like Whately and Hawkins. Conversion, like the spiritual life in general, always involves reconciliation—with God and with others; while a Christian can always count on the former, the latter may be elusive.

Third, Newman's *Apologia* was obviously an *accounting* or "summing up" of his life. Yet an autobiographer is like a photographer who wants to take the picture from the subject's proverbial "best side." Like every historian, an autobiographer picks the events that he wants to discuss and glosses over others. While his *Apologia* brought to light Newman's unique perspective on the inner dynamics of the Oxford Movement, there were some notable omissions that only surfaced posthumously—perhaps because the work was written in haste, but perhaps because some incidents were still too sensitive to share.⁴⁰ In any case, no Christian ever has a completely accurate spiritual self-image.

40. For example, in his *Apologia*, Newman mentioned briefly that in 1826, he "became one of the Tutors of my College" (*Apo*, 26) and that in 1832, he "was disengaged from College duties" (*Apo*, 38); however, he did not mention in his *Apologia* that the reason for relinquishing his tutorship was an extended disagreement with Edward Hawkins, the Provost of Oriel; Newman recorded the details of this disagreement in his *Autobiographical Writings*, 86–107.

Fourth, as a *narrative*, Newman's *Apologia* provided what he called a "history of my religious opinions." That history was three-dimensional; it encompassed his theological development, his pastoral ministry, and his spiritual journey. In his *Apologia*, these three dimensions are so adroitly intertwined that readers may easily focus on one and overlook the others. Yet these three dimensions—*theology*, *ministry*, *spirituality*—were not only melded together in Newman's life in an inseparable way, they are essential dimensions of the Christian life: *theology* is notional without really being grounded in *spirituality* and implemented through *ministry*; *ministry* is mere activity unless it has a theological foundation and spiritual motivation; *spirituality* is elusive without *theology* and implausible without *ministry*.

Fifth, Newman's *Apologia* is an *encomium*—an expression of appreciation—first of all to the people who assisted him during his Anglican years. Sometimes this appreciation was positive; Newman made clear how indebted he was to Anglicans like Froude, Keble, and Pusey, for his catholicism. Yet, at times, Newman's appreciation was problematic—such was the case with his treatment of the opponents of *Tract 90*, who unintentionally convinced him that the Church of England was not the catholic community he wanted. But most of all, Newman's *Apologia* is an extensive hymn of thanksgiving to God for the divine guidance that he had experienced throughout his life. A convert, perhaps more than most Christians, usually has a keen personal sense of Divine Providence operative in his or her life.

Last but not least, Newman's *Apologia* provides its readers with both an *awareness* and an *agenda* for the spiritual life of every Christian. As a conversion story, his *Apologia* should heighten the awareness of readers that they too are—or should be—living a conversion story. In this respect, some Christians record their spiritual experiences and insights in a journal or diary to share with their spiritual director or spiritual friends or as a legacy for their religious community. Yet whether written or not, every Christian needs to recognize that their conversions are recorded in the book of life.

In addition, Newman's *Apologia* furnishes an *agenda* for every Christian. *Pace* the Evangelicals, then and now, the spiritual life is not simply a matter of a one-time extraordinary conversion—though such a conversion may be necessary to bring a particular person to recognize Christ. Rather the spiritual life is a series of conversions—occasionally dramatic, but more commonly small crossroads—where a Christian redirects the course of her or his spiritual life. *Pace* the Noetics—few in Newman's day but numerous in ours—who want a rational explanation for the spiritual. An important lesson from his *Apologia*

is the need to recognize the working of Divine Providence in one's spiritual life. For Newman such a recognition is intuitively reasonable, though never rationally demonstrable. *Pace* the Catholics—both Tractarian and Roman—who overemphasize externals to the neglect of genuine sacramentality. Granted that a sacrament is an external sign of internal grace, externals—both liturgical and devotional—are necessary.⁴¹ Newman was duly conscientious—both as an Anglican and as a Roman Catholic—in observing liturgical rubrics and in practicing a variety of private devotions; however, his focus was not on the externals as such, but on the grace channeled through the sacramental system.

Finally, Newman's conversion experiences—which he so eloquently described in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*—provided a basic paradigm for both his epistemology of faith in his *Grammar of Assent* and his advice to directees and potential converts that is found throughout his *Letters*.⁴² Although Newman would not have disallowed unanticipated, instantaneous, overwhelming conversions—like those of Paul and Augustine—his personal experience was of conversions that were gradual, progressive, and eventually persuasive.⁴³ The spiritual journey that he described in his *Apologia* resonates well with his description of doctrinal change in his *Essay on Development*: “. . . here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”⁴⁴

41. See John Henry Newman, *Meditations and Devotions*, ed. Rev. W. P. Neville (London: Longmans, Green, 1894).

42. See Peter C. Wilcox, *John Henry Newman: Spiritual Director, 1845-1890* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013).

43. Although the conversions of Paul, Augustine, and many others seem instantaneous, conversions always have antecedents—even if these initially seem obstacles to conversion; for example, Paul, precisely because he was its fervent opponent, certainly knew much about Christianity; similarly, Newman in the process of attacking “Romanism,” learned much about Roman Catholicism. Conversion is not an abrupt transition from the completely unknown to the new, but a new and positive view of what was previously viewed in a negative way.

44. Newman, *Dev*, 40.