

# Blessed Dominic Barberi and the Conversion of John Henry Cardinal Newman

BY THE PASSIONIST NUNS OF WHITESVILLE, KENTUCKY

Many readers are no doubt familiar with the writings of John Henry Cardinal Newman, the former Anglican theologian and Oxford professor who became a Catholic in 1845. Providentially this September, Pope Benedict XVI will beatify John Henry Cardinal Newman, raising him to the honors of the altar.

What makes Newman's beatification particularly significant is that a Passionist priest, Blessed Dominic of the Mother of God, had a profound influence on Newman and was the one privileged to receive him into the Catholic Church.

Newman himself had said of the Catholics: "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 can do what we cannot."

## The Shepherd of the Second Spring

God answered by sending Bl. Dominic Barberi, who has been called "the shepherd of the second spring". This humble yet brilliant man, came barefooted. He preached to the poor, he was pelted and trampled upon. He was called "the stuttering Papist," "Friar Demonio," and other abusive names. Even children shouted obscenities at him, pelting him with rocks, or pulling at his habit when he walked by.

Dominic wrote at the time: "My God, for what distress and sorrow You have reserved me! I spent so many years before coming to this Island preparing myself at all times for suffering. And now it seems to me that if I had ever foreseen all that awaited me, I should never have had the courage to step aboard ship!"

## The Voice of God

Dominic's conviction that he was called to England began early in life as we learn from his diary: "Toward the end of [1813]...I was on my knees before God...praying and beseeching Him to provide for the necessities of



His Church, when I heard an interior voice (which only those who hear can understand) in actual words which did not leave a shadow of doubt as to its being from God. The voice told me I was destined to announce the truths of the Gospel and to bring stray sheep back to the way of salvation.... As I felt I could not doubt that the communication came from God, I could not doubt for an instant that it would be fulfilled."

The next year, he again wrote in his diary: "One day [in 1814]...I went for a few minutes into the church to pray before the altar of the Blessed Virgin, and while I was on my knees, the thought occurred to me—how was the prophecy of last year to be fulfilled? Was I to go as a lay Brother to preach, and to whom was I to go?... While I was thus racking my brains, I understood...that I was not to remain a lay Brother, but was to study, and that...I was to labor...in the northwest of Europe and especially in England..."

## A Mission from God

Thus convinced that he had received a mission from God to evangelize England, Dominic began a long crusade of prayer for England. He begged others also to pray. The Passionist superior general sent him forth at last in 1841. Dominic first established the Congregation of the Passion in Belgium and, from there, in England. He was to labor there only about eight years before his death.

The crowning of his years of prayer, labor and suffering came when on October 9, 1845, he received John Henry Newman and others into the Catholic Church. Dominic was to live only four more years. On Friday, August 27, 1849, he suffered a heart attack en route to another Passionist monastery. Fearing cholera, the passengers of his train demanded that he be put off at once. Through the compassion of a physician he was helped into the train station as his excruciating pain increased.



Throughout the ordeal, Dominic kept whispering, “Thy will be done!” At 3 p.m. that Friday afternoon, Dominic breathed his last. He was 58 years of age.

## Great Lover of England

Later, Newman wrote of Blessed Dominic: “Father Dominic was a marvelous missionary and preacher, filled with zeal. He had a great part in my own conversion and that of others. His very look had about it something holy. When his form came within sight, I was moved to the depths in the strangest way. The gaiety and affability of his manner in the midst of all his sanctity was in itself a holy sermon. No wonder then that I became his convert and his penitent. He was Bl. Dominic of the Mother of God, C.P., great lover of England.”<sup>1</sup>

To view a dramatization of the life of Bl. Dominic online, go to: [http://thepassionists.org/whats\\_new/2010/05/17/an-interview-with-blessed-dominic-barberi](http://thepassionists.org/whats_new/2010/05/17/an-interview-with-blessed-dominic-barberi).

## Great Lover of the “One Truth of Christ”

The Superior General of the Passionist Congregation published a letter in anticipation of the beatification of John Henry Newman in September, highlighting the involvement of the Passionists, especially Bl. Dominic Barberi (1792-1849) who received Newman into the Catholic Church in October 1845.

In his letter, Father D’Egidio noted: “Our congregation has had a great role to play in his conversion. Above all, Newman was struck by the prayer of St. Paul of the Cross for England. Humanly, he could not explain this inspiration; rather he believed that it was something supernatural. He knew that St. Paul of the Cross had predicted that his sons would arrive in England. The friendship between George Spencer, who would become Fr. Ignatius of St. Paul, and who was tireless in promoting a crusade of prayer for England, further encouraged Newman toward union with the Church of Rome.”

Bl. Dominic Barberi, who at an early age experienced a personal calling to preach the Catholic faith

in England, finally arrived in the country in 1841 and worked there until his death in 1849.

Such love for England was expressed in Blessed Dominic’s striking 1841 “Letter to the Professors of the University of Oxford,” in which he welcomed joyfully the Catholic spirit in Anglicanism heralded by Newman’s “Oxford Movement”, but powerfully argued that communion with the See of Rome was the true destiny for contemporary Anglo-Catholics. He wrote: “If all churches should revere the Roman Church, the Anglican should do so more especially, because that is the only mother she can lay claim to.” In an important sense anticipating modern ecumenical practice, as Father D’Egidio pointed out, “Dominic writes without any ‘disrespect or animosity,’ but always with simplicity, calmness, and a love for his hearers and for the one truth of Christ.”

