

Mary's Influence on Converts

The attraction of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the lives of five prominent converts to Catholicism.

By Br. John Samaha, SM



John Henry Newman
(1801-1890)

Among the religious and cultural factors that influence converts to enter into full communion with the Church, the Blessed Virgin Mary holds particular prominence. Yet she is not the possession of the Catholic Church solely, for many Protestant Churches are rediscovering the presence and role of Mary in life's pilgrimage of faith.

Before embracing Catholicism John Henry Newman, probably the most famous convert in the last two centuries, formulated an explanation of the development of doctrines in the Catholic Church, especially the Marian doctrines. He explained that the saving truths of revelation were not given by God in timeless and static expression, but dynamic and life-giving truths which continue to unfold and develop. In "An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine", Newman wrote: "grow is the only evidence of life." Ideas live in our minds and continually enlarge into fuller development. "In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

To believe in the ongoing prayer and care of Mary for the faithful is to find the Virgin Mother's assistance in time of transitions, of new beginnings, of wandering and searching. Sacred



Scripture shows us that Mary is the Virgin of Beginnings and Transitions (Annunciation, Cana, Pentecost), and the Virgin of Spiritual Searching (Presentation, Finding in the Temple, Cana, Calvary). It is quite natural then to experience her motherly presence in the struggles which accompany conversion, according to Father René Laurentin in "A year of Grace with Mary".

Conversions to Catholicism develop from a complex of various factors. They result from conviction and personal experience. But also at play are conditions and developments in the Church and society that often help or hinder conversions. An instance of the latter scenario is nineteenth century England in which that time's theological ferments and liberalism and the decision of the British government to suppress a number of Anglican bishoprics gave rise to the Oxford Movement, which questioned the Anglican Church's legitimacy. The consequence was a number of conversions by prominent intellectuals from 1840 to 1920, the most noteworthy being John Henry Newman. These converts were usually imbued with an understanding of the Virgin Mary and their devotion to her often preceded their entry into the Catholic Church.

Following his conversion in 1845, John Henry Newman (1801-1890) journeyed to Rome. Upon his return as a Catholic priest he wrote that he "went round by Loreto." As a pilgrim to the Holy House he wanted "to get the Blessed Virgin's blessing." Then he commented about Mary's presence in his life. "I have ever been in her shadow, if I may say it. My college was St. Mary's and my church; and when I went to Littlemore, there, by my own previous disposition, our Blessed Lady was waiting for me. Nor did she do nothing for me in that low habitation, of which I always think with pleasure."

As an Anglican, Newman thought that the Catholic Church's Marian doctrine and devotion was exaggerated. But in his study of the development of doctrine, he discovered that it was consistent with the early Church. "I was convinced by the Fathers," he explained. The early Fathers and ancient Christian writers viewed Mary as the New Eve. Newman came to understand Mary in patristic terms. He understood the Immaculate Conception was based on Mary's holiness, a concept present in the Fathers; and the Assumption was rooted in her dignity as Mother of God, another concept from the early Christian writers.

Although Newman had reservations about some teachings of the Catholic Church, while an Anglican, he nevertheless was devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In his "Apologia pro Vita Sua" he proclaimed, "In spite of my ingrained fears of Rome, and the decision of my reason and conscience against her usages, in spite of my affection for Oxford and Oriel, yet I had a secret longing love of Rome, the Mother of Christianity, and I had a true devotion to the Blessed Virgin, in whose college I lived, whose altar I served, and whose Immaculate Purity I had in one of my earliest printed sermons made much of."

Newman's reluctance concerning the Virgin Mary, his "great crux" regarding Catholicism were the "expressions of popular feelings toward the Blessed Virgin" and the intemperate statements of some Catholic authors concerning Mary. Later, when responding to Dr. Pusey's "Eirenicon", which contained numerous examples of exaggerated practices and devotions to Mary, Newman made a clear distinction between the Church's doctrines and officially sanctioned prayers and practices, and the many expressions of popular devotion, sometimes questionable in taste and in theology. "Belief is separate from devotion; belief is the same everywhere, whereas expressions of devotion differ from place to place." Newman also noted that cultural differences become manifest in expressions of devotion, indicating that there exists a legitimate "English style" in the expression of devotion. These distinctions between officially approved doctrine and devotion, and the many practices of popular devotion, which frequently reflect a cultural bias, have helped many along the journey of conversion.

Such was the experience of one famous convert and devotee of the Mother of the Redeemer.



Ronald A. Knox
(1888-1957)

Another noteworthy English convert swayed by Mary's maternal influence is Ronald A. Knox (1888-1957), a brilliant scholar and classicist. This Anglican clergyman, Ronald Arbuthnot Knox, embraced the Catholic Church in 1917, and was ordained a priest in 1919.

Widely hailed as "Rome's biggest catch after Newman", his *A Spiritual Aeneid*, ranks with Newman's *Apologia*, as a classic and impressive conversion story. His interest in Mary stems from his fascination with English heritage and his attraction to Anglo-Catholicism. Among his earliest remembrances of the Blessed Virgin were her image on his school's coat of arms and the prayers used in the chapel services.

"Thus although I did not ask for her prayers, I had a strong sense of the patronage of the Mother of God. Her name was part of our title; her lilies figure on our coat of arms; the blue of her robe you could see daily on the blazers of the Eight and the caps of the Eleven. And perhaps, after all, in the wide sympathies of her compassionate heart there is a special place for her children at Eton. I only know that it was the easiest thing in the world, on any of her feasts, to arrange for the singing at college prayers of that rather sentimental *Ancient and Modern Hymn* which begins, 'Shall we not love thee, Mother dear.'"

Although his father opposed his enthusiasm for Anglo-Catholicism, young Knox spent one college vacation period with a group of Anglican Benedictine who "went over to Rome en masse." It was his fond hope as an Anglican that one day England would reclaim its Marian heritage: "England will once again become the dowry of Mary, and the Church of England will once again be builded on the rock she was hewn from, and find a place, although it be a place of penitence and tears, in the eternal purposes of God." In a sermon he delivered in 1913, he alluded to Mary's interest in what was once her country: "Mary... has not forgotten her children just because they have run away from their school master, and unlearned their lessons, and are trying to find their way home again, humbled and terrified in the darkness." When ordained a deacon in the Anglican Church he wrote, "I took a private vow, which I always kept, never to preach without making some reference to our Mary Lady, by way of satisfaction for the neglect of other preachers."

The Anglican Church's silence concerning Mary troubled Knox. Even before his conversion he wrote:

"I can not resist making an appeal to all those who are attached to 'old-fashioned' views of the person of our Saviour, to reflect whether such views are afforded

a proper devotional safeguard, so long as praises of, or prayers to, the Mother of God are either energetically repudiated or thrust away into a corner. Ever since the Nestorian controversy, the divine mystery of the Theotokos has been regarded with special honor, in protest against incomplete theories of the Incarnation."

Once he left the Anglican Church and his post at Shrewsbury, he was aware of "the loneliness of a soul forced by conscientious motives to detach itself from loved surroundings and familiar friends and launch out into the deep." At that time he recalled a line from Virgil's *Aeneid*, "Land showed no longer, all about was sky and sea." He took the Latin words for sea and sky, *maria* and *caelum*, to represent Mary and heaven. And he thought, "Perhaps I was not so lonely after all."



G.K. Chesterton
(1874-1937)

One more English convert of Marian significance is G.K. Chesterton (1874-1937). Gilbert Keith Chesterton, a distinguished essayist, poet, novelist and outstanding apologist, was raised in a family that did not share the typical Protestant antipathy toward the Virgin Mary. "Our Lady was respected, though of course not invoked."

When a youngster he turned into a poem for Mary the blasphemous lines of Algernon Swinburne's poem to the pagan queen of death: "But I turn to her still, having seen she shall surely abide in the end. Goddess and maiden and queen, be near me now and befriend." A poem of his youth, *The Nativity of Botticelli*, attests to his understanding of Mary's role in the Incarnation.

In a letter to Chesterton written in 1907, Hilaire Belloc suggested that he search for a "first certitude" on which everything else depends. Belloc told Chesterton they agreed on two points: the Incarnation and Mary. Belloc explained:

"...in looking up to our dear Lady, the blessed Mother of God, I recommend to you that you suggest to her a comprehension for yourself, of what indeed is the permanent home of the soul. If it is here you will see it; if it is there you will see it. She never fails us. She has never failed in my demand. If you say 'I want this' as in your case to know one way or the other, she will give it you, as she will give health or necessary money or success in pure love. She is our Blessed Mother."

His early writings such as *Orthodoxy* (1908) and *Ballad of the white Horse* (1911) led others to anticipate his entry into the Catholic Church in 1922. This final step was the result of a promise made at a Marian shrine in Italy.

Chesterton wrote in 1934 that Mary represented the "collective unity of Catholic life" about which Protestants had such strange notions.

"Now I can scarcely remember a time when the image of Our Lady did not stand up in my mind quite definitely at the mention of the thought of all these things. I was quite distant from these things; and then doubtful about these things; and then disputing with the world for them, and with myself against them for that is the condition before conversion. But when the figure was distant, or was dark and mysterious, or was scandal to my contemporaries, or was a challenge to myself, I never doubted that this figure was the figure of the faith; that she embodied, as a complete human being still only human, all that this Thing had to say to humanity. The instant I remembered the Catholic Church, I remembered her; when I tried to forget the Catholic Church, I tried to forget her."

When writing about Chaucer he commented that devotion to Mary, "far from being a temporary malady from which one needed to be cured," was "generally chronic (and in some cases I have known quite incurable)." Chesterton's Marian writings are found mainly in his poetry where he refers to the "seed of dogma and from that seed alone that all the flowers of art and poetry and devotion spring."

One of GKC's poems in *The Queen of Seven Swords* expressed his notion of the "wholeness" which underlies all expressions of devotion.

"In all thy thousand images we salute thee, claim and acclaim on all thy thousand thrones hewn out of multi-colored rocks and risen stained with the stored-up sunsets in all tones—If in all tone and shades this shade I feel, come from the black cathedrals of Castille claiming these flat black stones of Catalonia, to thy most merciful face of night I kneel."

This is the legacy of several prominent converts to the ongoing Marian movement.



Dorothy Day
(1897-1980)

Prominent among 20th century American converts are Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, both of whom were close to Our Lady.

Although baptized an Episcopalian, Dorothy Day might be characterized as an Evangelical Protestant because of her

involvement in the "social gospel" movement. She was a talented journalist who espoused radical causes, wrote for socialist newspapers, and staunch in her support of labor unions and of pacifism.

Her earliest contacts with Mary came through a rosary and a small statue. While anticipating the birth of her daughter through a common law marriage, Dorothy Day began taking instructions so that her daughter could be baptized in the Catholic Church. "I began to think, to weigh things," she explained, "and it was at this moment that I began consciously to pray more." She developed the habits of praying often, of carrying a rosary, and addressing the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary which had been given her. Deeply concerned about her daughter, Dorothy wrote that she "turned her over to the Blessed Mother."

"What kind of a mother am I going to be? I keep thinking to myself what kind of Catholic home is she going to have with only me? I'm a failure as a homemaker, I'm untidy, inconsistent, undisciplined, temperamental, and I have to pray every day for final perseverance. It is only in these last few years that it has occurred to me why my daughter never called me 'mother'. The Blessed Virgin Mary is Mother of my child. No harm can ever come to her with such a mother."

With Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker Movement, which strove to establish solidarity with the working classes through a generous and convincing witness of hospitality for the homeless and of the works of mercy. She promoted the traditional devotions in all her communities. She prayed the rosary "on the picket lines, in prisons, in sickness and in health." For her the rosary was not only a devotion to Mary but also a way of identifying with the poor who had lost hope. "Who could have given me Our Lord but the Virgin Mary. It was easy to pray to her, repetitious though it may seem. Saying the rosary as I did so often, I felt that I was praying with the people of God, who held on to the physical act of the rosary as to a lifeline."

The life and spirit of St. Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower, fascinated Dorothy Day, "perhaps because she was so much like the rest of us in her ordinariness". In fact, she authored a small book about St. Therese to offer hope to those who felt their lives were meaningless. She regarded Therese as Therese regarded Mary, for Therese abhorred writings and sermons that described "Mary's life as totally different from ours." Dorothy believed that Therese "speaks to our condition." Her approach, like that of St. Therese and the Blessed Virgin Mary, was to ask prayerfully at the beginning of each day, "What would you have me do?"

For Dorothy Day, Mary and Joseph shared in the plight and insecurity of the poor. During the Great Depression she wrote, "What security did the Blessed Virgin herself have as she fled in the night with the Baby in her arms to go into a strange country? She probably wondered whether St. Joseph would be able to obtain work in a foreign land, how they would get along, and

anticipated the loneliness of being without friends, her cousin, St. Elizabeth, her kinfolk." At another time, she recalled "St. Bonaventure says Our Lady worked in Egypt to earn the family's daily bread because St. Joseph could not earn enough. It was all part of the humiliation of poverty for St. Joseph." The Holy Family definitely shared the lot of the poor.



Thomas Merton
(1915-1968)

The conversion of Thomas Merton led to a prolific writing apostolate and was widely followed and celebrated. His parents were artists with little religious interest. Educated in France and England, his interest in religious questions grew out of his study of literature and philosophy. In 1938 he entered the Catholic Church, and later became a Trappist at the Gethsemane monastery in Kentucky. His talented pen produced voluminous writings in a personal style on topics pertaining to monastic spirituality, mysticism, racial justice and peace.

Merton's references to the Virgin Mary are personal and deep, a response to a mystical attraction. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is the autobiographical account of his early life and conversion. One passage concerns his departure from England to a new life in New York City. He describes his experience of Mary's guidance at this turning point in his life.

"Lady, when on that night I left the Island that was once your England, your love went with me, although I could not know it... I was not sure where I was going, and I could not see what I would do when I got to New York. But you saw further and clearer than I, and you opened the seas before my ship, whose track led me across the waters to a place I had never dreamed of, and which even then you were preparing for me to be my rescue and my shelter and my home. And when I thought that there was no God and no love and no mercy, you were leading me all the while in the midst of His love and His mercy, and taking me, without my knowing anything about it, to the house that would hide me in the secret of His Face. Glorious Mother of God, shall I ever gain distrust you?"

At crucial points in his life, he actively sought the presence of Mary and her direction. When discerning his vocation to the priesthood, he embarked on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Charity of Cobre in Cuba.

"There you, *Caridad del Cobre*. It is you that I have come to see; you will ask Christ to make me his priest, and I will give you my heart, Lady; and if you will obtain for me this priesthood, I will remember you at my first Mass in such a way that the Mass will be for

you and offered through you in gratitude to the Holy Trinity, Who has used your love to win me this grace.”

Bewildered in the struggle to decide about becoming a Trappist, he turned naturally to the Mother of Jesus as any child would turn to his mother. “I give this whole Advent, every minute, to the Blessed Virgin, begging her to help me and bring me to her house at Gethsemane to be her loving child and servant, a child of God in silence and labor and sacrifice and obscurity.” After receiving the diaconate he wrote, “Our Lady has taken possession of my heart. Maybe, after all, she is the big grace of the diaconate.”

For Thomas Merton, Mary is always gently persuading from within. “Mary does not rule us from without, but from within. She does change us by changing the world around us, but she changes the world around us by first changing our own inner lives.”



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-- VOCATIONS AND PRAYER
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pages 17-21