
From the Provincial Archives



Fr. Laurence Fox OMI

[Explanatory Note]

This personal document¹ tells how Fr. Lawrence Fox, previously a Quaker, entered the Catholic Church in 1843. It also more briefly relates his Oblate vocation.

It tells of a period when religion was very high on the social agenda. Catholics in England had been 'emancipated' from the penal laws in 1829. The Anglican Tractarian movement was in full swing. A significant number of Anglicans, priests and laity, were becoming Catholics, including John Henry Newman in October 1845 who was to speak of a 'second Spring' of the Catholic Church in Britain and attract the interest of St. Eugene to establish there an Oblate mission.

Lawrence begins and ends his story in the West of England – Devon and Cornwall, where the Quakers had then and still have a strong presence. But its main narrative takes us to the London of Charles Dickens, with whom - Lawrence remarks - he was 'on visiting terms'².

Lawrence's memoir transports us to this world of high religious feelings and strong forms of piety: Quaker, Catholic and Protestant. We get an intimate view of Catholic lay people and clerics. There are vestiges of the role played by the Catholic laity in the penal days, especially the Catholic aristocracy. Lawrence does not show us the poor of London. Instead we see the emergence of a strong Catholic 'middle class', exemplified by the Fox's and Cox's and the famous Ward family. Catholic lay people have a lofty view of priests and priesthood and are demonstrative in their veneration of bishops. At the same time we are given a vivid account of the irrational fear in which priests were held by many non-Catholics. We learn something of the clerical life-style of the time. We also taste the anti-catholic prejudice that was still rife in London notwithstanding 'Catholic Emancipation'. We have glimpses of the *émigrés* priests coming from France in the 1840's as evidence of the lively topicality of religion there too.

Above all, though, it is a personal story in which Lawrence acknowledges with gratitude that, under God and Mary, he owed the grace of his conversion into the Catholic Church entirely to the witness of a Catholic cousin and his wife and children.

He does not present himself as one driven initially by some inner spiritual hunger. He comes from a happy home with settled beliefs. How explain his ready response to the new grace offered him in his contact with his cousin's family? This is what he wants to explain.

It was a warm and fervent household, - a busy doctor's practice in Moorfields in central London, close to St. Mary's which was then the Catholic pro-cathedral in London³. The Fox household attracted into its orbit a wide range of relations, friends and clergy, all of whom intrigued Lawrence, as readers will see.

¹ The memoir is a handwritten text held in the General Archive of the Oblates in Rome. The text in the provincial archive is a typed copy of the original. We have inserted within square brackets in the body of the text references to the pages of the typed text: 'page 2, 3' etc. We have inserted sub-headings: 'Quaker background' etc, and some footnotes. MH, editor.

² Perhaps contact came through Dickens' purchase of a cottage for his parents in Alphington, Exeter, Devon in 1839, though his parents' stay there was very brief. Dickens' trip to North America took place 2 January to 29 June 1842, but otherwise he was resident in 1 Devonshire Terrace, in central London around the time of the events spoken of in our text. Dickens had no Catholic leanings.

³ Opened in 1820.

He says he is “thoroughly edified” by that family. He speaks of his attraction to a picture of Our Lady of Dolours, a present to the doctor which is hanging in one of the rooms. He mentions with gratitude the family’s prayers for him, and being asked to wear the Miraculous Medal. He records the stresses he felt , and various encounters that roused him to react instantly in defence of Catholics when ignorant assaults were made on them and their creed. He describes how by reading Catholic literature for the first time he is gradually convinced that the Catholic Church is the true church of Christ, as argued by Wiseman. But he is not yet consciously looking for a new church. He is an admirer from a distance and wants to keep his distance from the Catholic Church.

But crucially his father – after receiving information that his son was well on the way to becoming a Catholic - exerts pressure on him to sever his links with his cousins and their Church. This pressure dumbfounds Lawrence. He did not see himself as being on the road to the Catholic Church, yet his father was making this demand on him. He did not reply immediately to his father, and when his father wrote him a second and even stronger letter, it acts as a catalyst: he feels instantly that at all costs this severance from his Catholic cousin must not happen, it would be against his conscience, indeed, *and he must become a Catholic*. His decision brings him peace of mind, joy. And this despite the fact, as he makes clear, that he is still very much in the dark about Catholic doctrine. He had in fact quite easily come to accept the general Catholic ‘Rule of Faith’, after which the ‘details’ did not matter so much to him. (We must remember at the same time that he brought with him from his upbringing some knowledge of Scripture.)

That, then is Lawrence’s explanation as to how he came to enter the Catholic Church.

It was a real ‘metanoia’, a transformation. The Church he had learnt all his life to despise was now the centre of his life. The force and enduring quality of the transformation reveal the work of the Holy Spirit, which has opened his heart to the Gospel in a new way. There was more to his decision than an intellectual judgement about where lay the ‘One True Church’. Without his knowing it, - though others could see it - he had fallen in love with this Catholic Church and its Lord and his Mother. Surely we can say he saw this beauty in his cousin’s family life! The Holy Spirit had opened his heart to the Gospel of the ‘Family Fox’. And under his Father’s pressure he is compelled to decide for or against his love. That is why he *must* become a Catholic – and without delay!

Under God and Mary, he owed the grace of his conversion into the Catholic Church entirely to the witness of a Catholic cousin and his wife and children.

All this is food for thought, - about conversion and society and family: about religious differences in family, about tolerance and intolerance, but especially about the power of grace in family, of why a Catholic family can rightly be called a ‘little church’. Lawrence says that all conversions are different. His own shows us that conversion does not always come from ‘Angst’. It was a conversion worked by the attraction of spiritual beauty!

After his conversion, and some years of practice as a doctor, Lawrence came into contact with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who had lately opened their first mission in Penzance. He briefly records his priestly calling and entry into the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Thus incidentally he gives us a glimpse of the beginnings of the Oblate mission and family in Britain.

Father Fox became an outstanding Oblate missionary priest. An outline of his life can be found in the Oblate ‘Historical Dictionary’⁴. An account of how his role as chaplain of the South Dublin Union came up for debate in the English Parliament has been written by Fr Paul Byrne omi⁵. His experience as manager of Ireland’s chief reformatory school⁶ for boys is reflected in the reports he wrote as manager for the British government of the day and printed by the school’s printer. His accompaniment of St Eugene on his visit to London, Liverpool, Leeds and Dublin in 1857 can be seen in the *Codices Historici* of the Inchicore House of Retreat and Sicklinghall.⁷

⁴ See *Historical Dictionary of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate*, Rome 2010, Vol. II, s.t.:Fox, Lawrence Prideaux. This is available on the Oblate website.

⁵ Fr Byrne’s article appeared in *Across the Century*, a collection celebrating the centenary of the Oblate mission in Inchicore and it also is available on-line.

⁶ St. Kevin’s, Glencree, 1867-1873. Some of his annual reports are held in the Provincial Archive in Dublin. These reports were made to the British Government at that time, and are no doubt somewhere to be found in their archives. It would be deeply appreciated if they could be located.

⁷ Cf. Hughes and Coughlan, (Eds.), “Oh! When will be return again?” in *Vie Oblate Life*, August 2000, pp. 281-291.

History of My Conversion

By Father Lawrence Prideaux Fox omi (1820 – 1905)

[introduction]

I have been often asked to give a detailed account of the circumstances which led to my conversion from Protestantism to the Catholic Church. Various reasons prompted me to postpone what I foresaw I should some day or another if I lived long enough, have to accomplish, in obedience to the oft-repeated wishes of my friends. Amongst those I may state a profound repugnance to write so much about myself, as I should necessarily have to allude to certain members of my family, and to their relations with myself, I naturally hesitated to put in writing anything which might be offensive to them, or in any way tend to dissipate or even injure their friendly and brotherly sentiments which so happily exist between the surviving members of my family and myself. But it seems to me, that now, at my advanced age, when Almighty God deigns to bestow sufficient health and strength on me that in spite of many infirmities incidental to one who is more than an octogenarian, I have no longer satisfactory excuses to plead opposition to the repeated and emphatic solicitations of my friends.⁸

[Quaker background]

The old saying that many roads lead to Rome, and the equally familiar assertion that no two conversions are alike, are fully exemplified in my own experience; for I cannot claim to be a convert from any branch of the Anglican establishment, High, Low, or Broad; nor was I brought up in any of what are commonly considered as Non-Conformist sects among the Dissenters. In fact, I was reared as a member of the ‘Society of Friends’, who are usually styled ‘Quakers’. For many generations my father’s family who were from Cornwall, and my mother’s from Devonshire, had been faithful members of this sect; and naturally I grew up to man’s estate without ever entertaining the slightest doubt that their’s was the true exponent of the teachings and doctrines of Jesus Christ and His Apostles, and the most conformed to the practice of the early Christians.

It may be necessary here to state, that independently of peculiarities as to the dress and [page 2] speech, the Friends believe that each one is inspired individually by the Holy Ghost, and that consequently their religious belief is essentially spiritual. In their meetings for public worship they are presided over by Ministers, Elders and Overseers. These are selected at their Yearly, Quarterly or Monthly Meetings; and when duly chosen are seated in gradation facing the body of worshippers at large. In many cases, none of the above-mentioned dignitaries, not even the most popular Minister or Preacher, are ever salaried. Women as well as men are amongst those who are accepted as Ministers. The sexes are kept totally distinct in their religious meetings. Men do not doff their hats until they are seated in their several places, and then only to suit their own convenience. I have seen a female preacher take off her bonnet when she became warm or excited, but I may say that this is altogether exceptional. It need scarcely be noticed that in my early experience, I found that the female preachers were far in the majority over their brethren, and much more long winded. The meetings for public worship were often held in complete silence from the beginning to the end of the hour and a half during which they lasted; and I may remark here that I and the other young people who were present found this prolonged silence most irksome, as we had never been taught how to pray or to meditate, and had no book of any kind with which to wile away the tediousness or

⁸ The writer was spending his last days in retirement in the Oblate community in Tewkesbury, USA.

monotony of the silent service. It was a great relief to us when anyone, man or woman would stand up to address the assembly. The Society of Friends have a profound reverence for the Holy Scriptures, but each member believes himself able to find the true meaning of the text, inasmuch as he professes to be guided by the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit. It was remarked by an eminent convert from Quakerism, Frederic Lucas, Editor of the "Tablet" newspaper, and Member of Parliament for Co. Meath, that no sect in Protestantism approached so near to the Catholic Belief, as that which he renounced when he became a member of the one true Church. But in spite of this radical similarity, or rather it may be said in con- [Page 3] sequence of it, the 'Friend' allowed himself to launch forth into many peculiarities, and even extravagancies; guided, as he believed himself to be, by his own personal and individual inspirations. For him, therefore, it was not so much what Jesus Christ taught, nor His Apostles in His Name, but what he himself believed as a pious and consistent Quaker. Thus when a venerable lady who used frequently to edify the meeting with a little homily of her own, was reminded by a Protestant friend of hers that St. Paul did not approve of women preachers, she immediately responded, "Ah! That's where St. Paul and I do not agree."

The Friends are eminently charitable, philanthropic, and moral. With few exceptions they remain in business all their lives, and when reproached as they often have been with having too great a hankering after riches, their reply is that no one has a right to be idle, and that they do not fail to bestow of their superfluity to those that are in need. If any member of the Society should become bankrupt, his case is thoroughly investigated, and if it be found that his failure in business resulted from no fault on his part, he is reinstated in his business as soon as his affairs are settled, or is at least assisted to start in some other line.

Those who transgress any moral law flagrantly are expelled from the Society. Formerly the Friends were easily known by their dress, the men wearing coats which might be styled clerical without collars, and of a drab or grey colour, with broad brimmed hats, and the women patronized coal-scuttle bonnets and a simple shawl over their shoulders. In course of time these peculiarities have almost entirely disappeared, with the exception of a few who went by the name of "plain Friends." Two or three more singularities may be mentioned before I leave this part of my subject. The members of the Society never spoke of Sunday or Monday, etc., but of First Day and Second Day, etc., nor of January or February but of First Month or Second Month, etc. They never addressed anyone as Sir or Mrs. But by their Christian names, and if they had to speak of a titled individual, they would say, for example, John, commonly called Lord Rolls, or what name soever he or she might bear. In speaking to anyone whether belonging to their own family or not, it was always thee or thou was used and never you, unless the plural number was required. In their houses no pictures nor framed engravings were ever seen on the walls, nor instruments of [Page 4] music of any description.

Such is a brief recital of the tenets, principles and manner of living of the estimable Society in which I was brought up until I had well-nigh obtained the age of 22 years⁹. I had never entered a Catholic Church but one; nor did I remain more than a quarter of an hour there on that solitary occasion, as I became overpowered by the heat and the smell of the incense, and had to leave before I actually fainted outside the sacred building. I had never become acquainted with a single Catholic, except our French tutor, who knew so little of his religion, and practised it so indifferently, that he apostatized in order that he might get married to one of his pupils. I had never read or even seen any Catholic

⁹ He was born 22 August 1820 in Kingsbridge, Devon, UK.

book, pamphlet or tract of any description; and was therefore reared in utter ignorance of the tenets, and practices of our holy Religion. How then did the grace of God reach me? How did I become a Catholic? This is what I am now about to relate in obedience to the oft-repeated entreaties of my friends, and may I also hope, for the edification of some amongst my readers.

[His departure for London and meeting with his Catholic cousins- 1842]

Soon after I had reached the age of maturity¹⁰, I left the happy home in which I had been reared, in the city of Exeter, Devonshire, England to settle in London. My father had taken apartments for me in the West End¹¹, where I was to practise in my branch of the medical profession¹², and to do my best to attain success. It was hard work for a young man who knew nobody in that great city to obtain any patients. But I had brought with me upwards of 120 letters of introduction with which my kind friends and relatives had furnished me; and every afternoon I used to tramp from one street to another and from one square to another until I came to my last letter. I had left this letter to the last, hoping, in fact, that I should never need to deliver it. And why this reluctance? It was directed to Dr. Charles James Fox, and had been given to me by a cousin of mine who was acquainted with the Doctor and had consulted him professionally. In handing this letter to me, my cousin said to me, ‘If you do not stand in need of assistance from this good Doctor, I recommend you not to deliver it, because though he is eminent in his profession, he is a Roman Catholic; and we all know, that like the Pharisees of old, [Page 5] they think more of making proselytes to their idolatrous creed, than they do of anything else on earth.’ But having no other alternative, I went one day to call on the Doctor, and to present him with my letter of introduction. I had several miles to go, for whereas I lived in the West End, he resided in the heart of the city where the bulk of his large practice lay. I found the hall of his house, and the waiting room crowded with expectant patients, for I had timed my visit to the hour in which I knew that physicians received their gratis patients, between nine and ten o’clock A. M. So I sent in my card. I had not to wait many minutes before he kindly came to me. He saluted me in the most friendly manner; told me that he heard I was in town; and after calling to my notice how busy he was at that time, he begged me to fix an early evening in which I could dine with himself and Mrs. Fox, who was also anxious to make the acquaintance of their cousin. In short, I was so impressed with the cordiality of my reception, that I told him I would be with them at 6 o’clock on the following day.

This was my first introduction to the saintly family to whom under God and our Immaculate Mother, I owe the marvellous grace of my conversion to the one true Faith. On the following day therefore I was introduced to Mrs. Fox, whom I afterwards learned to recognize as the most holy married woman it has ever been my good fortune to meet with. There were also present a middle-aged lady, an unmarried sister of the Doctors, and two children who were old enough to take their places at the dinner table. After dinner these were joined by a troupe of youngsters who came down from the nursery above. I mention all of these, as each one was to have a part in my future conversion. Later on in the evening, a gentleman entered the drawing room, who I found to be a resident visitor in the house, and who was introduced to me as Mr. Hall. I afterwards discovered that he was a Priest; but such was my ignorant horror of the Catholic Priesthood that I was subsequently glad that I was not aware of it at that time, as I most certainly should have kept as far as possible from him. In those days the Roman collar was unknown nor was there usually any distinction between the dress of a

¹⁰ Late summer or autumn, 1842.

¹¹ Later he tells us of “Dolman’s the Catholic bookseller in Bond Street *near which I lived...*”

¹² Dentistry.

clergyman or a lay. How different it is at the present day, when every Methodist and Baptist Minister, [Page 6] with but few exceptions, and even the Jewish Rabbi feels himself bound to imitate the Catholic Priest as far as he dares to do so!

I spent a delightful evening with my new friends, which was the precursor of many others which were to follow during the next few months. Not a word was said on religious subjects, and yet I saw and heard enough to be thoroughly edified with my newly acquired acquaintances.

[The 'Mater Dolorosa']

Not long after my first visit, when I had become a weekly guest, I was regarding some beautiful and valuable oil paintings which adorned the walls of the drawing room, and another large room connected with it, when my attention became fixed upon one which I thought very beautiful, but did not in the least understand. Mrs. Fox on noticing this said to me, "I see you taking great notice of that picture." "Yes" I responded, "But although I admire it very much, I have no idea who is represented nor what it means." This being equivalent to asking for an explanation, Mrs. Fox said, "That painting represents the Blessed Virgin Mary as the Mater Dolorosa, or Mother of Sorrows. It is a valuable picture and was painted by one of the old masters. It was presented to the Doctor by one of his grateful patients." Such was the simple but striking event whereby my eyes were first opened to the truths of our holy Religion, to be followed by others equally simple during the same evening. I may here remark that that picture was willed to me by Mrs. Fox before her death, and is now preserved in the oratory of our residence at Tower Hill, London as she firmly believed that I was converted through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin. In reference to this picture of the Mater Dolorosa, I may add that since my reception into the Church of Christ, I have always had a special devotion to the Seven Dolours of our Blessed Lady, and I have been encouraged to practise this devotion by a statement which is thus related in the "Catholic News." In the chronicles of the life of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, it is recorded that after the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin into Heaven, the beloved disciple, St. John desired once more to see her. His prayer was heard and granted. In vision, our Blessed Mother appeared to him, accompanied [Page 7] by her Divine Son. In that apparition, as if Mary's soul travelled back, so to say over that life of sorrow which she had passed for sixty years, that evangelist heard her entreat her Divine Son to bestow special graces on those who in life should be devoted to her dolours. In answer to it, Saint Elizabeth tells us that He promised four marvellous graces. The first was, that those who before death earnestly invoked the help of His Blessed Mother under the title of Her Sorrows, should obtain true penitence for their sins. In the second grace He promised that those who cherished this devotion, should be protected by his love in their own sorrows, and especially in the Sorrow of death. In the third, that in recompense for their sympathy for His Blessed Mother in her grief, He would impress on their souls the remembrance of His own Passion, and bestow on them a corresponding glory in Heaven. And lastly, that in His divine compassion He would confide such devout clients of His Blessed Mother's sorrow to her own special keeping, to dispose of them as her mother's love for her adopted children would suggest, and moreover that He would enrich them from the treasury of His love with all the graces she should ask for them.

[Another cousin, a medical student]

There was another visitor with us that evening, a young mutual cousin, who was a medical student. We spent such a happy evening that we took no notice of the passing time, so that when we arrived at the Royal Exchange the last omnibus had started for the West End, and we had to walk some miles before reaching our respective homes. But before leaving the Doctor's house, Mrs Fox

remarked that I seemed to be fond of pictures, and she, therefore, produced a packet of little ones that she had purchased in Paris the previous year, for they were rare in England at that time, and explained their subjects to me one by one. To the greater part of these explanations I was an indifferent because I was an ignorant listener, but there were two which made a deep and lasting impression on me. These were the constant and unfailing repetition of the word 'Blessed' when applied to the Virgin, and the reverent bowing of heads, even by the youngest children who were present, at the adorable name of Jesus. It is much to be regretted that this pious Catholic practice seems almost to have ceased both in Canada and in the United States. I knew, [Page 8] at least, one Protestant who attributed his conversion to the ancient token of reverence to the Holy Name. As I and my companion were trudging towards our respective quarters, my thoughts were fully occupied in recalling all that had been said and done during that memorable evening. In going up Holborn Hill which in those days was steep and long, I meditated on all that had transpired but more on the use of the word "Blessed", and the bowing at the sacred Name. I had always flattered myself as having an intimate acquaintance with the written Word of God, for it may be called the only pious book which Quakers possess, as they make no use of any book of devotion not even of a Prayer Book. Whilst thus pondering over what had passed a short time previous, I suddenly remembered two texts of Scripture which are as follows: "For behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed" Luke 1:48, and "that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow of those that are in Heaven, on earth and under the earth, etc." Phil. 2:10. So I hurried forward, and on regaining my companions, I said: "I see these Catholics are far more acquainted with the Bible than we have given them credit for" and I quoted the words above named. The poor fellow seemed surprised that I was only then enlightened. He was far more advanced than I in the knowledge of Catholic doctrine, and admitted to me a little later on that he had had serious thoughts of becoming a Catholic; but the world kept him back. When I happened to meet him some years afterwards he told me that I had done the right thing but that he himself had not had the courage to take such a step. He lived to become a successful practitioner, but he never became united with any sect, for as he himself told me, "If the truth is to be found anywhere, it is in the Catholic Church but I have not the courage to sacrifice all my worldly interests by following out my convictions."

[Another cousin who became a convert and Mercy Sister]

But the grace of God which was rejected by him was not to be lost. One of his sisters came up from Falmouth to spend a few months in London and whilst visiting the same cousins to whom under God I owe my own conversion, she asked Mrs. Fox one Sunday on her return from Mass what Feast they had been keeping, and was told that it was the Feast of St. Rose of Lima, the proto-Saint of America. She then read for her the beautiful prayer for the day as [Page 9] translated in the English Missal. It was enough: the grace of God took instant possession of her heart and soul. Within a brief space of time, after being duly instructed by a Catholic Priest, she was received into the Church, and was baptized; for like myself she had been a member of the Society of Friends, and had never received the healing waters of Baptism. Thus was the saying of our Blessed Lord verified. Her brother lived and died outside the one true Fold, but she entered within its borders and after many trials died a happy and holy death. "This one shall be taken, but the other shall be left." Her relatives would not receive her back in their home for fear of contamination by the younger members of the family, and after spending a few months as a governess in a good Catholic family, she received the additional grace of a vocation to the Religious life, and became a novice in the House of Mercy at Bermondsey. At the close of her novitiate her Divine Spouse took her to Himself in Heaven. The prayer to St. Rose whose name she took in Religion, and which wrought such a transformation in her life, is as follows:

"O Almighty God from whom cometh down every good and perfect gift, and who didst cause the dew of thy grace to fall early from Heaven upon this Blessed Rose, making the same to blossom in the Indies as a flower, whose loveliness was virginity and long-suffering, grant unto thy servants, who do run after the smell of her perfume, worthily themselves to become a sweet savour to Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, and God, World without end.
Amen."

[Conversion story of the father of his London cousins]

Before proceeding to describe the different steps in my conversion, I feel bound to relate how the family with which I became so intimately connected by respect, by love, and by gratitude, had themselves become members of the Catholic Church.

The father of Doctor Fox, who bore the same name as my own friend, was also a physician in London, and was appointed as such to King George Third.

Though reared as a member of the Society of Friends he became, like too many others of his profession, a thorough unbeliever in all religions, and an ardent admirer of Voltaire and Rousseau.

- On retiring from practice, broken down with hard work and infirmities, he went back to his native town Falmouth in Cornwall. His health was soon completely restored, and it seemed as if he were destined to enjoy the ample fruits of his labours for many years, when he was suddenly stricken with an inexplicable, but as his medical attendants unanimously [Page 10] averred an incurable disease. During the night which everyone believed would be his last on earth, whilst in an apparently comatose state, he was favoured with a vision. Our Lord appeared to him as if standing at the foot of his bed, and reproached him bitterly for his unbelief. The dying man inquired what he was to do, and Our Lord replied: "Only believe and thou shall be saved." "But Lord! What am I to believe, where there are so many jarring sects, some believing one thing, and others another?" "Go back to London" replied our Lord, and make inquiries for thyself, and I will be with thee and will help thee. And as a proof of who I am, and of the extent of my powers, I hereby restore thee to thy wonted health." Our Lord then left him, and awakening from his unconscious sleep he found himself so well and strong, that dismissing his two nurses, he got up and dressed himself, and made immediate preparations for his long journey to London which, in those days would be of at least a week's duration. When the two doctors arrived from Falmouth, two miles distant, an hour later, instead of finding that their patient had passed through the gates of death as they fully expected, they were amazed to learn that he had so far recovered as to be by that time already on the road to the great metropolis; and one of them, who was a good Christian immediately said, "It is a miracle, it is a miracle."
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- In course of time Doctor Fox arrived in town, and without delay commenced his search for the Truth. His long residence in London and his eminence as a physician there had brought him into contact with the more eminent members of every sect. He consulted each one of them in rotation but day after day passed by, and he could not satisfy himself that his incessant labours had been rewarded. At last, not knowing to whom else to apply, but determined not to give up in his search, he spoke to an old friend of his, to whom he had already revealed the object of his journey to London, and telling him of his disappointments hitherto, his friend said: "Why do you not seek an interview with Branston?" "What, said the Doctor, do you mean our former friend, Branston the Barrister? Has he started some new Religion?" "No, replied the other, he became a

Roman Catholic, and is now their Bishop here in London.”¹³ “Well, said the Doctor, I promised Our Lord that I would search everywhere; and I will go and see [page 11] him tomorrow.” And so he did. The good bishop received him most kindly. Doctor Fox expressed his great surprise at finding that Doctor Bramston had embraced such an old-fashioned creed as that of the Catholics; and after relating what had happened to himself, and how disappointed he had been in failing to receive satisfaction from any of those whom he had already consulted, he added: “But I promised Our Lord that I would search everywhere for the truth, and now, as a last resource, I come to you. Do what you can for me as an old friend, but if you will bear patiently with me, I must tell you plainly that I shall fight every inch of the ground before I give in.” And so they commenced their peaceful strife. They were like two athletes in combat, though the Doctor felt that the Bishop was gaining at every step. But he must be firmly convinced on every point, or not at all. And thus they continued arguing until the night, stopping only for the dinner hour. But night itself did not interfere with the Bishop’s zeal, nor the Doctor’s perseverance. After the good Bishop’s Mass in the morning, at which the Doctor assisted, more than half believing in all that he witnessed, the struggle renewed, and lasted until evening, the Bishop denying himself to all visitors, because, as he afterwards said, he saw that there was a soul to be saved. The victory was over during the second night. The Doctor then threw himself on his knees before his saintly antagonist, saying, “My Lord, I have nothing more to urge against you and your creed. I submit, because I firmly believe in every word that you have told me. Therefore, let me be baptized.” They then laid down to take a few hours’ much-needed rest. But in the morning, before offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the Bishop baptised the new convert, having already prepared him for his first Holy Communion.

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- The Doctor lost no time in returning to his distant home, for he had an important work to attend to without delay. But what a transformation had taken place in him since he left that home a month ago. He had then risen from what everyone believed was to be for him the bed of death, but now he was in robust health. He was then an obstinate unbeliever, an infidel, but now he rejoiced in the plenitude of the Catholic belief. But he had reparation to make for the past, and it must be done at once, or it would be too late. He was a widower, but he had children who were all being educated [page 12] in Protestant institutions. He firmly believed that he himself had been saved by the Grace of God, but they were in imminent danger of being reared in some sect which was alien to the capital Church of God, if not still more. These children were four, a boy, and three girls. The boy became that good Doctor, whom I have had to mention so often in this history. He was removed at once to a Catholic College. The girls were placed in Convent schools in France. The eldest of them, though she submitted to be baptised like the rest, absolutely refused to become a Catholic, and, as often happens in such cases, she remained until the close of her life a wide bigot, and an ardent hater of everything Catholic. As an instance of this intense hatred, when I met her at the Doctor’s house a few months later, when I was unwittingly preparing to become a Catholic myself, of which she was not aware, I will relate the following fact. She and her husband, Sir Philip Steeman, who was a civil servant of the East India Company, and who had been lately knighted by the British Government were spending a few days with her brother Doctor Fox. I happened to be there during the entire day, and we were all seated at luncheon with the children, for it was their dinner hour and each member of the family down to the youngest said the usual grace before meals, accompanying the words with the sign of the

¹³ James Bramston 1763-1836. He became Coadjutor Vicar Apostolic of the London District in February 1823 and succeeded Bishop Poynter as Vicar Apostolic in 1827.

Cross. A little boy of four years old sat next to Lady Steeman and when she saw the child thus blessing himself, being apparently unable to control herself, she slapped his hands violently, at the same time saying, "What are you figuring away like that for? Why do you not take your dinner?" And then turning to her sister-in-law, she said: "Why do you let them make such fools of themselves?" I can only add that the display of such wide bigotry on her part had such an effect on me, that before leaving the table, I made the sign of the Cross boldly on myself, though at that time I was quite ignorant of the words with which it should be accompanied. I need not say that she regarded me with speechless amazement, for she was ignorant at that time that I was, though unconsciously to myself, on the highway to Rome.

[His growing interest in Catholicism fostered by social contacts in the family]

- Thus a few months passed happily away. My visits to this excellent family became more and more frequent, and more prolonged, for I sometimes managed to go to them at an early hour and spend the remainder of the day with them. I now and [page 13] then ventured to ask questions searching for information on minor topics; but not on the principal articles of the Creed, for I did not then know what they were. Of course, I always received satisfactory answers. But if Doctor and Mrs Fox did not enlarge on religious subjects, I could not say the same of those whom I frequently met at their house. There was scarcely a day on which I visited them I did not meet one or more, and sometimes many of the Priests who were all so well acquainted with them, that their residence was often called the Priest's House. All of them were aware that I was not yet a Catholic, and no doubt many of them thought it to be a duty incumbent on them to enlighten me. I was delighted with them. They were all so intelligent and yet so humble. I never heard an uncharitable word uttered by any amongst them, nor, of course, a word of double-meaning. They were men of all ages, and of every rank amongst the clergy, but they seemed to unbend themselves under that roof, and one of the features about them that pleased me most was that they were so jolly: they seemed to me to be like a lot of big boys just let out of school. And yet they were all Priests, of whom at first I had had such a horror. And who were they individually?
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- First of all there was the Mr. Hall whom I have spoken of above. I soon began to like and esteem him, and by the time that I discovered that he was a Priest, I was no longer afraid of him. What first opened my eyes in discovering his condition was the simple fact that whenever he was present at a meal, he was always asked to say grace. He had been appointed Vicar General in one of our Colonial Dioceses, and was waiting to accompany his Bishop thither.
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- During my stay in London about that time, and for the few months which elapsed before I had made up my mind to correspond to the grace of God and become a Catholic, as well as at some of my subsequent visits, I thus had the privilege of meeting Dr. Wiseman¹⁴, and the Bishop of London, Doctor Griffiths¹⁵, also Dr Cox, President of Old Hall College¹⁶, Canon Oakley, Dr Doyle¹⁷

¹⁴ 1802-1865. In 1840 Wiseman was nominated coadjutor to Bishop Walsh of the Central District, and president of Oscott College. In July 1847 he was named pro-vicar Apostolic of the London District and in 1849 succeeded Dr. Walsh as vicar Apostolic of the London District. In 1850 he became cardinal Archbishop of Westminster.

¹⁵ 1791-1847. Coadjutor to Vicar Apostolic of the London District 1833, Vicar Apostolic 1836.

¹⁶ The seminary of the London District.

of Southwark, who went by soubriquet of Father Thomas, Dr Gilbert, Father Ryan and countless others. Amongst eminent laymen whom I first met in their house was Doctor Ward¹⁸, who used to be called “Ideal Ward”, from the book by which that learned man became famous. Let me say a few words of some of the above-mentioned distinguished men, for whereas some amongst them helped me directly in working out my [Page 14] salvation by word and by example, others again strengthened me in my convictions after I had taken the final step. The Reverend Doctor Cox the President of Old Hall Green College¹⁹, which boasts of being the special off-shoot of Douay after its suppression by the French Revolution, was a particular friend of my cousins. On my first visit to London after my reception into the Church he invited me to visit Old Hall, and asked me would I like to stop with the Wards, who then occupied the entrance Lodge of the College. I spent a week with them. Before their conversion they had been quite wealthy, but had renounced everything to embrace the Faith. They were now in most indigent circumstances and Mr Ward was glad to accept an insignificant professorship in the College, and Mrs Ward took charge of the Lodge. They were so poor that they could afford to keep no servant, and it was edifying to see Mrs Ward, who was a most refined lady of high birth, putting on an apron to do all the work of their little house. I shall have to return to the Wards when alluding to another of my newly acquired friends. Canon Oakley was a very learned man, and a convert also. He was passionately fond of music and used to allow himself to be so led away in his extempore raptures, that he frequently fell back from his music stool on to the floor behind him. I used to stand behind him, in order to avert such catastrophies. The mere fact of meeting such holy and learned men as these together with Father Faber²⁰, Fathers Dalgairns, Bridgett and Plunkett, could not but prove of immense and lasting benefit to one like me who had not received a College education, who had never mixed with the world, in any of its social, political, or religious aspects, and yet was crammed with ignorant bigotry on all that was connected with Priests and priesthood.

[Father Thomas Doyle of Southwark]

- A few words more on some of these good Priests, and then I shall proceed to the recital of certain incidents which more immediately led to my conversion. “Father Thomas”, or to give him his real name the Reverend Doctor Doyle was probably the best known Priest in all England during the forties. It was he who collected the large funds which were necessary for the erection of the magnificent cathedral of Saint George in Southwark. Every week there was a humerous and eloquently pleading letter, signed by the well-known name of “Father Thomas”, in the pages of the “Tablet” newspaper; and no leading cartoon in “Punch” was ever sought with more vivid eagerness than were these regular contributions from his pen. And so well did he succeed, that Daniel O’Connell with his successful Rent Role declared that “Father Thomas was a much better beggar than himself”. The stately metropolitan church of Saint George’s still exists a lasting

¹⁷ Chaplain to St. George’s Chapel 1820, provost and administrator of St George’s Cathedral from its solemn opening 4 July 1848 until his death 6 June 1879.

¹⁸ William George Ward: 1812-1882. His book “The Ideal of a Christian Church” was published in 1844. He was received into the Catholic Church in September 1845. He retired to Old Hall Green, near Ware in 1846 and was a professor in St. Edmund’s College 1852-8. He eventually retired to the Isle of Wight. From 1863-1878 he edited the *Dublin Review*. (Catholic Encyclopedia and Encyclopedia Britannica data).

¹⁹ St. Edmund’s College.

²⁰ Frederick William Faber 1814-1863. One of the Oxford Movement converts. Celebrated hymn writer and associate of Newman. Founder of the London Oratory in 1849 in William IV Street, where St Eugene de Mazenod said Mass when visiting London in June 1850 and staying at the nearby Sablonière Hotel in Leicester Square.

monument of the indefatigable zeal of the Priest, and to the unequalled skill of the great architect Pugin, but each of them as well as most of those who contributed to the success of their labours have all passed away to their eternal rewards. But Father Thomas did not confine his interests to the completion of his church which he had erected on the identical spot where the celebrated Lord George Gordon riots culminated in the destruction of so much Catholic property; he was also deeply interested in the Ward family whom I have already mentioned. It appears that a remote ancestor of Mr Ward had left a valuable landed property in the isle of Wight to be inherited by a lineal male heir after a certain number of generations. By this will - the fixed number of generations having passed away – if Mr Ward should have a son he was to become this heir, and the property was now of enormous value through compound interest, and the vastly increased value of its land for building purposes. He was a married man, as we have already seen, but had no children. At last there came daughters, but no son. Then it was that Father Thomas took up the case and wrote letters to all the Priests whose names he could discover, and by Mr Ward's authority promised large sums of money to every Priest who would say six Masses for his intention, in the event of a favourable answer to his prayer. In course of time the long expected son was born, and was followed by others, as if to make the succession more secure. One of these has taken the place of his father as a leader in all that is most Catholic and most learned, and another is one of the most prominent Priests in England, and is equally distinguished in every way.

[Father Ryan]

- The last of these good Priests whom I have met at the house of my cousins, before I had the remotest idea that I should ever become a Catholic, still less a Priest, whom I need to refer to here was the Rev.Fr Ryan. He was a zealous young Clergyman, who had the misfortune [Page 16] a few years later on, to be afflicted with total blindness. His sole consolation after that was to be permitted to say the Mass of the Blessed Virgin (which he learned by memory) every morning. He was debarred from performing every other exercise of his sacred ministry, for which he appeared to be so well fitted by his zeal, his talents, and his piety. The reader will see later on why I have here recalled the name of Fr Ryan, as he became an influential instrument in my conversion at a critical moment.

[Mrs Cox]

- I have omitted to state that Mrs Fox was not a convert. She was of French descent, her father being a Colonel Guion, an emigrant who became so intimate a friend of the elder Dr Fox, that before his death he selected him as the guardian of his daughter, and it was by this means that she became acquainted with the younger Doctor Fox and eventually married him. But because she was French and from Brittany too, I frequently met French Abbés at her house. I cannot say that they were in the least instrumental to my subsequent conversion. In fact, I rather disliked them; for although, no doubt, they were thoroughly good and zealous pastors of souls, yet they were given to understand that they must appear in England under the most extraordinary disguises, or they would be publicly insulted, should they be recognized as Priests. I remember one of them thus making his appearance at dinner dressed as a jockey, with corduroy breeches and an enormous horse-shoe pin in his blue neck tie. And yet this good man was a learned Professor in a celebrated College in Rennes, and of such rigid principles that he was regarded as being at least a Gallican and almost a Jansenist.

[He attends Mass with his cousins]

- But Almighty God elected me, although all unworthy, to become a Catholic; and how was it to become about? Towards the close of the year 1842, being then past my 22nd birthday, I had an uncontrollable desire to be present at Mass and to see for myself what it was that had such an attraction for my excellent cousins. So I asked them to allow me to go to the High Mass with them on the following Sunday. At first they hesitated; and then Mrs Fox quietly said: "What would your parents think of it if you did so?" I replied, "Surely I am old enough to judge for myself. I am a man. I am 22 years old. Nor did my father [Page 17] object when I went with my sister to assist at Mass two or three years ago at Easter." So it was then settled that I should accompany them on the following Sunday. I arrived in good time to go with them to Saint Mary's Moorfields, near which church they lived, and which was then the pro-cathedral of the diocese, and to their surprise as well as my own, we found that the Bishop of the London District (for this was before the establishment of the Hierarchy) Dr Griffiths, was already seated on his throne. I watched his every movement as also those of his ministers, for everything was novel to me. I paid but little attention to the sermon, nor could I ever recall what was the preacher's subject. I was entirely wrapped up in the actions of the Bishop, the sacred Ministers of the Mass and their numerous attendants. The service was long, the congregation very large, and the music exceptionally grand; for in those days the principal operatic singers gave their aid on every Sunday whether in that Church or in the Spanish Chapel in the West End. It was a capital advertisement for them in the Opera House or Theatre. Soon after that date this objectionable practice was justly abolished, whether to the detriment of the managers or not, I am unable to state. I have seen Royal Dukes and others stand up with their backs to the Altar and make use of their binoculars to scrutinize the faces of the celebrated singers as they performed their portion of the musical service. When Mass was over we returned to the Doctor's house, and were all soon seated at lunch. I expected to be asked how I had liked what I had witnessed, nor was I long kept in suspense. Mrs Fox said to me: "Well, how did you like it all?" While I was reluctant to give offence, I was determined to speak the truth, and hide none of my real sentiments. So I replied, "Not at all; there were too many forms and ceremonies. I had given up my preconceived ideas that you Catholics were idolaters; but I now fear there is some truth in it; for if you do not worship statues and pictures, and other images, as I see you do not, they certainly worshipped the Bishop during the Mass, and that many times; otherwise, what was the meaning of all the bowing and scraping to him which they performed, even to incensing him." I told her that I was disappointed, and she was evidently disappointed also. But there was no time for further comment or explanation, for at that moment, the servant opened the door, and announced in a loud voice, "The Bishop." [Page 18] My first impulse was to hide myself, but I could see no place of concealment, so I stood in the background and watched them whilst they all knelt down in turn before him, and kissing his ring, each one in turn received his benediction, which he imparted with the sign of the Cross, repeating some words which I did not hear nor understand. As soon as they were all on their feet again, Mrs. Fox approaching me, said: "Allow me, my Lord, to introduce to you a young cousin of ours. He is not a Catholic, and, therefore, he did not kneel to crave your blessing, as we have all done." The Bishop, a handsome and venerable man, with one of the sweetest expressions I have ever seen on a human face, came towards me and while shaking hands with me, I ventured to say, as if proud to show my knowledge of Scripture, "I should have no objection to ask for your blessing, for we are told in the Bible that the fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." The Bishop retreated about a yard from me whilst still keeping his eyes fixed upon me, and then said in a solemn tone of voice: "Young man, you will

be a Catholic yet “; which words he repeated twice. I had just time to say, “No never”, when he turned to Mrs. Fox and said, “I am going to Rome next Wednesday, and just looked in now to ask you if you have any commission for me to undertake for you there. I am likely to be absent for the next three or four months, for I have important business to transact with the Holy Father, which may detain me longer than I anticipate. If your young friend here should become a Catholic before I leave Rome, write to me, and let me know.” I rather impertinently said on the spur of the moment, “If Mrs Fox does not write to you until then, I fear it will be a long time before you hear from her.” After again shaking hands all around, and with me amongst the rest, he imparted a general benediction to all present, and though I did not kneel down as all of them did, I felt impelled to bow my head profoundly during the solemn ceremony. Before the allotted time of the saintly Bishop’s detention in Rome expired, Mrs. Fox did write to him, and told him that I was about to be received into the Church. He then procured a valuable set of Rosary Beads, and had them specially blessed and indulged for me by the Holy [Page 19] Father, Gregory XVI. I still possess those beads and make use of them every day. I called on him about a year subsequent to this on one of my frequent visits to London; and after congratulating me on my conversion he laughingly said to me: “Now, do you not think I am a great prophet? There was something about you that seemed to convince me that you would become a Catholic yet, in spite of your firm denial of such a contingency; and I was not at all surprised when Mrs Fox wrote to me to that effect”.

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- Before taking leave of this episode in my career, I would remark that I would never recommend a Catholic to take a Protestant friend to a High Mass on his first visit to one of our Churches. The ceremonies are too confusing, too overwhelming to be understood by one who is in utter ignorance of their signification. A simple Low Mass is much to be preferred, but even better than that I would select the solemn Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and perhaps, best of all, the beautiful and impressive devotion of the Way of the Cross, or Stations. In a few words you can explain to your friend the radical meaning of the devotion, whilst there is need of descanting at great length on the various and more or less complicated ceremonies of a grand High Mass.
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- Although the Sunday on which the events I have mentioned took place must ever be regarded as a memorable day for me, yet I may safely say I was apparently no nearer to my conversion at its close than I had been at its commencement. But I cannot but regard what had happened on that day as a first step towards the attainment of the unexpected grace which Almighty God had in store for me.

[January 1843. He searches deeper, books...]

- For from that day I very frequently accompanied my cousins to their Sunday’s Mass, and Evening Vespers. My excuse for doing so was that I liked the music, and that I should learn the meaning of all that I saw. Moreover, I summoned up courage to ask pertinent questions on various subjects, not only from Mrs Fox, but also from two of the good Priests already mentioned, the Rev. Mess. Hall and Ryan. One day Mr Hall asked me if I had ever read Frederick Lucas’ *“Reasons for becoming a Roman Catholic, or a Letter to the Members of the Society of Friends.”*²¹ I told him I had never heard of it. On the same day [Page 20] Mr Ryan mentioned Dr Wiseman’s celebrated

²¹ 3rd edition 1839.

work on various articles of our Creed²², and I determined to purchase these two books as soon as possible. Hitherto, I possessed no Catholic book of any kind; but having taken notice of Dolman's the Catholic bookseller in Bond Street near which I lived, on the following day I visited his shop and telling him I was not a Catholic, but wished to purchase some books which would enlighten me, he, seeing what I was²³, asked me if I had read Frederick Lucas' book and that of Dr Wiseman. I immediately replied that I had not, but would like to have them. I thought in my own mind either that the Catholics had very few books of their own, or that these two would prove of especial value to me, as they soon proved to be. Before I left Mr Dolman's establishment I had quite a little Catholic library of my own. It embraced the two books already named, together with a Catholic Bible, a Directory by which I could acquire more knowledge of the Feasts of the Church, and Milner's "End of Religious Controversy"; this last mentioned book being mentioned to me by Mr Dolman himself. He found out who I was by my asking him to send my purchases to my lodgings, and he slipped in one of Butler's Catechisms. I wished to keep all this secret, but on the following day Mr Ryan had occasion to visit Dolman's shop and there the secret was let out. For several days I never went near to my cousins, and they naturally wondered at my absence. But I was not idle. I first read Lucas' "*Reasons for becoming a Roman Catholic*". It impressed me considerably but it did not convert me. I was much interested in it, however, more especially as I was acquainted with his family, though I never met himself. Then I took up Dr Wiseman's book: "*Lectures on Catholic Subjects*". This learned man was subsequently better known as Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster. I read and re-read several of the chapters, but the one that wrought a complete change in my preconceived ideas was the chapter or lecture on the Catholic Church as the Rule of Faith. It was so clear, so reasonable that I was fully convinced that the Catholic Church was the only true Church. I did not seem to wish to read any more, or to know any more. I had no one to advise me, no one to consult. I had no idea at that time of ever [Page 21] becoming a Catholic. I merely saw that the Catholic Church was the true Church, but I did not realise that she was the only one that possessed this truth. At last, I called again on my cousins, and explained the cause of my absence. They were pleased, of course, at hearing in what way I had been changed; but they prudently refrained from any comment. No doubt they thought it better that grace, unaided by human interference, which at that time I might have resented, should take its own course. They said but little, but they prayed much, as Mrs Fox afterwards informed me. She also asked me would I have any objection to wear a little medal around my neck. She said there was a little prayer connected with it, but that she herself would say that prayer for me. I accepted the medal, and have worn it ever since. This was the well-known Miraculous Medal the devotion to which was revealed to a devout Sister of Charity of St Vincent De Paul, Sister Catherine Labouré a few years before I thus received it. Of course I was in utter ignorance at that time of all pious customs so common amongst Catholics, and which have been proved by them to be instrumental in their advancement in piety, but I became gradually enlightened as time passed by and my soul became illuminated by faith.

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- These events took place in the month of January 1843. I was thoroughly convinced that the Catholic Church was the true Church, but I was utterly ignorant of her doctrines, I knew but little

²² Wiseman wrote a number of articles/tracts in response to the Anglican 'Tracts for the Times'. They were issued by the Catholic Institute of Great Britain in 1838 as Tracts 15-20. In 1836 Wiseman had preached a series of Lenten lectures at St. Mary's, Moorfields on the 'Principal Doctrines and Practices of the Catholic Church'.

²³ Suggests he dressed Quaker fashion.

of her Creed. Sometimes the thought would as if intrude into my mind, and I would say to myself, "Shall I remain as I am? Must I go further? I go to Mass on Sundays, and assist at Vespers, and Benediction. I even say a few prayers morning and evening, which I never used to do. I am a strict teetotaller and never go to any places of amusement. I do not spend much time in novel reading, but I enjoy the novels of Sir Walter Scott, and the works of Charles Dickens with whom I am well acquainted, and on visiting terms. Must I do more? Cannot I remain as I am?"

[February 1843 – opposition]

- But in the first week in February I was aroused from this false and dangerous lethargy. A young man whom I had known in Exeter, a Scotch Presbyterian, had settled in London not far from where I myself resided. He was married, and engaged in business. Before my intimacy with my Catholic cousins I had often spent a quiet evening with him, talking about old times and our mutual acquaintances but as soon as [Page 22] he heard that I had become intimate with such dangerous people as Roman Catholics, or, as he called them Romanists, he launched forth into such violent invectives against them and their superstitions that I became disgusted with him, and had gradually ceased to visit him. But one day I received a note from him in which he told me that a young lady whose friends we both of us knew and who had just left school, was spending a few days with them before returning to her home in Exeter, and that perhaps I might like to come over and see her. So I went, and my visit became the crisis of my life. He asked me if I still visited my friends in the City, and on my informing him in the affirmative he expressed his utmost astonishment at my thus facing such a danger, and more than on any previous occasion, he poured forth such a volley of abuse against Catholics, accusing them of idolatry, lying, and superstitious practices, that I became aroused in their defence. I was no Catholic, nor did I at that time think that I should ever become one. But I was thoroughly convinced that those with whom I had become acquainted were no idolaters, were no votaries of superstitious practices, and that they detested lying and deceit of every shape, far more than did any of the sanctimonious followers of John Knox. So I stood up boldly in their defence, especially on the one of idolatry and no doubt, in my ignorance, made use of many statements for which in after years I might well be ashamed.
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- However, before taking leave of him, he reminded me that I had promised to accompany him to hear a sermon from his minister, the Rev. Dr Cummings, who was regarded as the greatest firebrand against Popery in all London, and went by the name of Cummings the Prophet. He was a clever man and an eloquent preacher, but he was the laughing stock of his Protestant brethren, as his prophecies which he frequently published, were seldom if ever verified. So, as I saw that he was considerably ruffled at all I had said, I threw out a sop of consolation to him by telling him I would accompany him on the following Sunday Evening to Doctor Cumming's meeting house. Accordingly, on Sunday evening I went with this gentleman and his wife and their visitor to listen to their [Page 23] prophetic orator. I afterwards discovered this gentleman had given timely notice to the Scottish Divine that he was bringing with him an unfortunate young man who was in imminent danger of being entrapped by the Papists. I listened patiently to the most vapid discourse that the lips of man could utter against Popery and all its devices and snares. It had the effect in which outrageous calumnies usually result. I was thoroughly disgusted; I was indignant. But there was one statement which he made, which riveted my attention. He said that the Rev. Mr. Sibthorp whose recent conversion had made some stir in Birmingham, and who had been lately ordained to the Priesthood had seen the error

of his ways, and was about to return to the ranks of the Anglican clergy. So before I went to bed I wrote to Mr. Sibthorp, and after informing him of what had been stated by Dr Cummings, who had also added that the reason of his approaching apostasy was the exaggerated devotion to, and even idolatry of the Blessed Virgin, I asked him to let me know if there was any truth in this statement. In the course of a few days I received a reply from Mr Sibthorp, in which he informed me that there was not a word of truth in Dr Cumming's revelation; but that on the contrary he was engaged to preach on devotion to the Blessed Virgin in the Cathedral on the following Sunday. I regret to have to add that soon afterwards he did actually apostatize, and remained for a few years a stranger to the Church; but the grace of God still sought him out, and he became once more a faithful but penitent Priest until his death.

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- But I must return to the events more immediately connected with my actual conversion. A day or so after my first and last visit to Dr Cumming's chapel, I received a letter from my father, in which he stated that the young lady from Exeter whom I had met the previous week had written to her relatives to say that if I had not already become a Catholic I was about to do so immediately. My good father begged me to discontinue my visits to Dr and Mrs Fox, and to write back to him without delay, and tell him that I had no intention to commit such an act of madness. I was stunned. Firm as was my belief already that the Catholic Rule of Faith was the only true one, I had no intention of ever embracing it. I thought I could admire it from a [Page 24] distance, and even defend it when necessary, but become a Catholic myself, never.
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- But I was miserable, because my conscience was reproaching me, and I determined to stifle it. I had some near relatives who lived at St. John's Wood, at whose house I had often spent most pleasant evenings, for they were fond of music. Next door to them lived Madame Grise; we often went in to her, and she often came to us, bringing Signor Mario with her. They were regarded as the greatest operatic singers of the day. So I went to see these Protestants cousins of mine that same afternoon and being determined that my conscience should never induce me to embrace that Religion which I was certain was the true one, I reminded them that I had never heard an Opera sung, they asked Madame Grise for tickets for me. She sent me tickets enough for the whole week. I was enchanted, of course; but throughout each day and even during each night I was far from happy. Every evening I went alone to the Opera and on Saturday and to the Matinee as well. But thanks be to God, Sunday arrived, and brought with it a day of rest and reflection. On Monday morning I received a second letter from my father, in which he stated that my week's silence in replying to his first letter had confirmed his worst suspicions, and that he and my poor mother were most anxious about me. He implored me to write to him at once, and trust that my good sense coupled with my early training would at once disabuse me from entertaining the remotest intention of ever embracing so false, so superstitious, so antiquated, and so idolatrous a creed as that of the Roman Catholics.

[His conversion]

- What was I to do? I was alone. I had never consulted any Priest, or received any actual instruction from one of them. But the Opera was then and there renounced forever. I had found amusement but no true peace there. I must write my father without delay: so in spite of his prohibition which I did not feel justified in obeying, I went into the City that evening, and taking the two letters of my father with me I opened my mind to my true friend, Mrs Fox and asked her to give me her advice. She was deeply interested in my case, but remained silent for a minute or

two, and then asked me what I intended [Page 25] to do. Without a moment's hesitation I replied, "I must become a Catholic at once. What else can I do?" She then burst into tears, but as soon as she could recover her voice she quietly said, "Thanks be to God; it is the Blessed Virgin who has wrought this conversion for you. I foresaw that she would triumph." After a while when the Doctor returned home from some late professional calls, we all discussed the subject together, and it was decided that I should remain at their house that night. They recommended me to take counsel from some Priest, and asked me would I select one from amongst those whom I had already met. I immediately named the Rev. Mr Ryan at which they were much pleased, as they had great confidence in his zeal and judgment. So Mrs Fox wrote a letter for me to Mr Ryan, not that I needed an introduction to him, but as a kind of preparation to the all important subject on which I was determined to seek for his advice.

[His family's opposition and his response]

- After assisting at Mass on the following morning, I took my departure for Lincoln's Inn Fields, where Father Ryan was stationed at that time. He was taking breakfast after saying a late Mass, but he would not keep me waiting. I then told him my tale and explained the circumstances which led me to ask for his advice. In my father's second letter, he wrote that if I had not already taken the fatal step which would inevitably ruin my future career, he would still endeavour to regard me as a son, and render me some assistance towards establishing me in my business elsewhere, provided I would promise not to become a Catholic for the next six months, but that he would not support me in my expensive apartments in London beyond the year for which they had been engaged. I explained all this to Father Ryan who then asked me what I intended to do. I told him that I had made up my mind to become a Catholic, but that I was not willing to wait for six months, because I had never been baptized. Father Ryan advised me to the contrary, saying that it was most important that I should thus convince my parents that my conversion was not a sudden whim nor one that I was likely to regret, nor to hesitate in repudiating after life through false pride.
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- So I took his advice, as soon as the good Priest told me that should I die before the close of the six months without being baptized with water, I should still be baptized by desire. [Page 26] and I returned home at once to my lodgings. I immediately wrote to my father saying that I would agree to his terms, and that I would postpone my much –desired baptism for six months. This happened on the 15th of February, and on returning from posting my letter, I resorted to my directory and to my great delight, and I must add, my heartfelt gratitude, I found that the six months would expire on the 15th of August, the glorious festival of the Assumption of the Immaculate Mother of God into Heaven.
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- I must here make a statement as to the non-reception of any Sacrament by the members of the Society of Friends. Their Creed is that everything is spiritual. Being Dissenters from the established Churches of England or Scotland they believed that there are two Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, but they profess to received them spiritually and not sacramentally. I never heard any allusion made to the remainder of the Sacraments.
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- After my second letter from my Father, I had to remain in London for almost two months, until the period of my engagement with the proprietor of the house where I lodged should have expired; and during that time I was pestered with callers who I never saw or even heard of

before, whose object was to argue with me on the Faith of Catholics, which they deemed to be so dangerous and soul-destroying. One forenoon, a lady visitor was announced, who was quite a celebrity among the female preachers of the Friends. After a few preliminary words she told me that her most intimate acquaintance was the Abbess of a Convent in another part of London, and that she had just come from seeing her when she called on me. She had told the Reverend Mother that her object in visiting me was to try to prevent me from becoming a Catholic; but previous to making such an attempt she had received Holy Communion on the day before. I was stunned when I heard this. I feared that she had gone to a Catholic Church, and received the Blessed Sacrament there from a Catholic Priest, who would have taken her for a Catholic. She knew by the alarm which was manifested on my face what my thoughts were; and she immediately added: "But not as you received that Sacrament. I received it spiritually.

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- During the two months of my continued residence in London, I often visited my good Catholic cousins, and learned as much as I could from them with regard to Catholic [Page 27] practices and beliefs, but I never seemed to have to ask questions of a Priest. In fact, I was still more or less afraid of them. I discovered that there was a Catholic Church not far from where I resided, and I used to go there every morning for Mass, not so much, probably, from devotion as to acquire a more intimate acquaintance with the ceremonies, and thus be enabled to feel more at home with them when I accompanied my cousins to St. Mary's Moorfield on Sunday. During my spare time I studied all the Catholic books I could obtain and purchased some which I thought might be useful to me for further reference or enlightenments. Among those of which I thus became the possessor was Heeman's "Controversial Catechism", Milner's "End of Religious Controversy,"²⁴ and "Butler's Lives of the Saints." I received so many invitations to Sunday dinner from the wealthier Friends who lived in great houses in the suburbs of London, that had there been seven Sundays in the week instead of but one, I could not have accepted the half of them; but, in fact, I accepted none of them, for I was well aware that their ulterior object was not to have me for their dinner, but to prevent me from attending to Mass and Vespers on those days.
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- After a short time my poor mother with great courage undertook the long journey from Exeter to London to spend a fortnight with me, and thus to use her indubitable influence with me, to throw obstacles in my road towards the goal I was determined to reach in the Holy Catholic Church. But Almighty God preserved me from all their snares how well-intentioned soever they might be. I ardently longed for the day when I should be resting safely on the bosom of our holy mother Church as a baptized Christian. During this period of suspense, no doubt I should have derived much consolation and acquired invaluable instruction if I could have overcome my incessant fear of coming in close contact with the Priests, those infallible guides to all who are in trouble. As an example of this inexplicable fear, I must relate the following incident. One morning I was ready to start for my daily Mass as usual, when a terrific thunder storm burst over the metropolis of England. The rain came down in torrents, the vivid flashes of lightening were accompanied by the loudest peals of thunder I ever remember to have heard. The tower and spire of St Martin's le Grand as I afterwards learned were levelled with the ground, but I [Page 28] was not to be deterred from my contemplated assistance at the Mass. So I laid away my umbrella, which would have been utterly useless, and put on a Mackintosh coat which came down to my feet, and thus braved the storm. When I reached the Church, I found myself to be its

²⁴ Milner died in 1826. In 1838 the Catholic Institute of Great Britain issued his book as Tract 4, 5 & 6: "Letters on the Rule of Faith or The Method of Finding Out the True Religion. From 'The End of Religious Controversy'."

sole occupant; but the candles were already lighted on the altar. In the course of a few minutes, the Priest who was completely vested for Mass, came from the Sacristy into the Sanctuary, and looked down over the Church. He saw me, but he hesitated in coming towards me, as he did not know me, and returned into the Sacristy. I then realized that his altar boy had not been able to face the storm, and that he had no one to serve his Mass. Again after a while, the Priest came forth and scrutinized the empty church. I felt assured that he would not come and ask me to help him. I was completely overcome with fear. I had not been afraid of the storm, but I was afraid of him. He opened the gate of the altar rails, and was evidently coming towards me. What should I do? Should I get up and run away? No; it was too late. I, therefore, determined to reply to what I knew would be his request, and to say, "No, I cannot, I am not a Catholic; nor do I know how to serve your Mass." Probably I should have spoken thus both rudely and abruptly; for I was terribly frightened. But, fortunately for me, and perhaps for him also, just at the moment that he was about to enter the long pew at the other end of which I was seated, an elderly gentleman whom I had seen there, on several previous occasions at Mass, came in at the door of entrance, and the Priest, who was well acquainted with him, for he lived at a few doors' distance only, made a polite bow to me and immediately obtained the assistance of the newcomer. I left the Church as soon as possible after the Mass was over, but I do not think my morning visit on that occasion did me any good. Some years subsequently, after I had become a Priest and a Missionary, I was engaged with two of our Fathers in preaching a Mission there. The good Priest was still connected with that Church. I recognized him the moment I saw him, for the memory of my uncontrollable fright had left such an indelible impression on me that I could never forget him. We had many a good laugh together, after I had [Page 29] related the above circumstances.

[Mid-May 1843 - His return to Devonshire, residence in Torquay]

- Meanwhile the time arrived when it would be necessary for me to leave my London abode, and to find a home elsewhere. My poor father finding that I was as determined as ever to change my religious confession at the time he had proposed and yet determined that he would not cast me off entirely, looked around to see where I could make a new start for life, and fixed upon a beautiful place on my own native coast of Devonshire, a celebrated health resort called Torquay. I had often been there, for it was only a few miles from Exeter; and although it was a comparatively small town in those days to what it now is, I regarded it as a special favour to be permitted to take up my residence in what I regarded as the most beautiful spot in all England. I afterwards learned from my father himself that he was influenced by other motives than these in deciding on promoting my settling there. The Mission was supported by a highly respectable and wealthy old family, the Cary's of Tor Abbey; a family that had never lost the faith since the disastrous days of the so-called Reformation.²⁵ But the head of the family had died lately, and his widow at that period was a Protestant. The only Catholic place of worship was the old Refectory of the Monks in that portion of the Tor Abbey which had escaped destruction; but it was a full mile from Torquay. The Chapel was always to be maintained, and the Chaplain was to be paid for his services, for Mr. Cary's children, who were still very young, were to be brought up as Catholics. But there was not a solitary Catholic family of what the world regards as respectable within a radius of many miles, and my father therefore knew that with the exception of such Catholic families as would resort to Torquay in the winter season in search of health and warmth, I should be deprived of all chance of making visiting acquaintanceship. But the worst

²⁵ The Cary's came into possession of Tor or Torre Abbey in 1662. It was originally a Premonstratensian Abbey. Henry George Cary died September 2, 1840.

remains to be told. Only a few months before that date, the public was shocked by a disgraceful clerical scandal, which seemed as if it would ruin the prospect of the spread of our holy Religion for many years to come. My father admitted to me that it was his belief and [Page 30] hope that all this combination of circumstances could not but have the effect of deterring me from embracing a Creed which was evidently for the time being, at least, under a cloud. In the first place the fact of their being no family in the neighbourhood with whom I could hold social relations, such as drinking a cup of tea quietly in the evening, for example, made me feel myself to be a sort of leader among the Catholics, and stimulated me to show a good example in every way. I therefore made a point of walking to the devotional old Chapel every morning to assist at Mass, braving every kind of weather for the purpose. I left London about the middle of May, after bidding affectionate adieu to my dear Catholic cousins, to whom I was so deeply indebted. Having written to the resident Pastor of Torquay, the Rev. Father McDonnell, a learned and holy man who had the reputation of being a strict disciplinarian, and informed him that I was about to become a member of his flock, he informed me that he was about to take a continental trip for his health, and would be absent at the time of my arrival, but that his place would be supplied during that time by a good old French Abbé, and emigrant Priest, to whom he then sent me a letter of introduction.

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- So the day after my arrival in Torquay I made the acquaintance of the venerable man, but was greatly disappointed to find that he did not know a word of English, and as my acquaintance with colloquial French was very limited I was disappointed in obtaining the instructions which I so much needed. As proof of my lamentable ignorance at that time, I remember that in a letter which I wrote, to one of my uncles, in answer to a voluminous one which I had received from him, in which among other things, he reproached me for pretending to believe that there could be seven Sacraments. I replied that he was quite ignorant of what Catholics believed, for there were only two Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, as professed by Anglicans, to which sect he himself belonged. I had taken the precaution before leaving London of sending in my resignation to the Society of Friends, and as there were none of these excellent people then living in Torquay, I was freed at least from their sending any of their body to endeavour to prevent me from becoming a Catholic. [Page 31] But to counterbalance the absence of this annoyance, I had to submit to another, which was perhaps still more provoking. I received shoals of letters from all parts of England, from some persons whom I knew at least by name, and from others whom I had never heard of. Many of them were from anonymous correspondents, whilst others had no name or signature at all. In those days the postage for letters was exceedingly high, but for books it was almost prohibitive. In spite of that I was pestered with a variety of books, some of which were most abusive and objectionable. On one occasion I received a book parcel by mail, the postage for which was sixteen shillings, which would have been reduced to one half if it had been prepaid. On opening my parcel, after paying the sum demanded of course, I found the zealous but selfish anonymous donor had sent me a Protestant Bible, believing, no doubt, that ignorance of the inspired Word of God was the cause of my straying away from the truth.

[His preparation for Baptism]

- In due time, Father McDonnell returned to his post, and I lost no time in informing him of my ardent desire to receive the Sacrament of Baptism on the fifteenth of August, about six weeks from that day. He told me there would be no difficulty in the way; and I then ventured to ask him

a question about Plenary indulgences, as he had announced one that might be gained on the previous day. He expressed himself to be much shocked at my lamentable ignorance, to use his own words; and though he condescended to give me some little explanation on the subject, yet he frightened me so much, that I never ventured to ask him a question on any other point, but had to content myself with seeking all the further information which I so much needed, in the books which I already possessed, or in others which I gradually added to my little library. I need not remind the reader that Catholic Books of the description I required, in the English language were rare indeed in those days. During this period of prolonged suspense I was ardently longing for the day on which I should receive Baptism. I was far from being in good health, and I wrought myself into a highly nervous state.

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- But the vigil of the happy day on which all my anxieties were to come to an end at last arrived, and I went to visit Father McDonnell, in order to get my final instructions for the morrow's ordeal. He had hitherto told me that it would not be necessary for me to [Page 32] make my confession, as I had not yet received Baptism, which is the first of the Sacraments, and the door by means of which the others can alone be administered. But to my great surprise on this occasion he told me to kneel, and helped me to reveal all the sins I could then remember in my past life. When I felt that I had nearly arrived at the conclusion of my list of sins, he abruptly said: "You may get up now; it was not necessary. I merely wanted to try your humility." Those adults, who like myself have had to make their first confession to a Priest will agree with me, that it is by no means an easy task to perform, and that there is often more confusion than contrition on such an occasion. How important, therefore, is it not that children should be prepared from the dawn of reason, to receive the Sacrament of Penance worthily. I was so convinced that I omitted some sins which I should have confessed if I had been in the least prepared beforehand, that in the morning of my arrival at Tor Abbey, I pressed Father McDonnell to let me kneel down and tell him a few more unrevealed sins which were a burden to my conscience. He at first refused to allow me to do so, but finally acquiesced in granting my request and to give me as I believed conditional absolution.

[His baptism 15 August 1843]

- I had spent a sleepless night, and I drove to Tor Abbey with a splitting headache. Father McDonnell had warned me not to take a drink of water in the morning, as I was to receive my First Communion at Mass immediately following my Baptism. Only for that caution I should certainly have refreshed myself; for I was not aware until then that a little water would destroy the fast. I had carefully avoided telling anyone in Torquay of what I was to receive on that day, and I had imagined that it was a profound secret; but to my great disappointment I found the little Chapel was overcrowded with visitors; and the numerous chairs had been borrowed from the House for their accomodation. But what gave me the greatest amazement was the sight of two handsome easy chairs with prie dieus in front of them, outside the Sanctuary rails. Just before the commencement of the Mass, a lady, magnificently dressed in her wedding robes with a beautiful veil covering her face and trailing on the floor behind her, was ushered up to one of the chairs, and I was led to the other. I was stunned, and quite incapable [Page 33] of resistance to anything that should be done with me. I felt so ill that even the thought that I should die before it should be all over with me entered my mind; and Father McDonnell had forewarned me on the previous day that the ceremonies would be long and fatiguing as in all cases of adult Baptism. I said to myself I shall have received the Sacraments of Baptism, Penance, and Holy

Eucharist, and feel as if I were to receive that of Extreme Unction before all is over; but surely they are not going to administer that of Matrimony also. I was afterwards told that I was not the only one present on the occasion, who thought as I did, the majority of whom were Protestants. The mystery was solved in the short address which Father McDonnell delivered before the Baptism. The lady was a Mrs. Wallace, hitherto a Protestant, who had been married lately to a Captain Wallace, a Catholic. She was to receive conditional Baptism only, but wore her bridal dress on this solemn occasion. Fr McDonnell was a strict observer of all the ceremonies of the Church, and he performed them when he conferred the Sacrament of Baptism, to the minutest details. When the time arrived I had to follow him down to the door of the porch which was wide open and from whence I was visible to the entire congregation, who all turned round to watch the proceedings. In those days, it was a fashion with young men who aspired to dressing well, to wear shirts of white linen, which were fastened with a button or stud behind the neck, the front being decorated with more or less expensive lace. When Father McDonnell had to anoint my breast, he said to me, "Open your shirt", and I answered in a low voice, "I cannot; it is fastened behind, and there is no opening in front." He immediately responded in a louder key, "You must. Open your shirt at once." So without a moment's delay, I took my pocket knife and slit down the Honiton lace shirt front, so that he might proceed with his ceremonies. I was afterwards told by some of those who were present, that this act of mine was attributable to an excess of zeal on my part, and that I would not even take the trouble of [Page 34] unbuttoning the shirt.

[Aftermath]

- The Baptism was over. The Holy Communion was received, and the Mass was finished at last. I was thankful, most thankful that my patient perseverance had been thus rewarded. From the depths of my heart I could cry out, "Thanks be to God". I allowed the congregation to disperse and after making my Act of Thanksgiving as well as I was able, and expressing my gratitude to Father McDonnell for all that he had done for me, I returned quietly to my lodging. But although the soul had been brought to life, the poor body was almost dead, and that afternoon I had to send for both the Priest and the Doctor, for I was so ill that I really feared that I was about to die, and that my projected life of sacrifice was already at a close. But it was not to be. After a couple of days I was sufficiently restored to health to be enabled to resume my ordinary duties and to call upon the few good Catholics who, as I was well aware had been frequently praying for me, and to thank them for the good service they had rendered to me. The members of my own family soon heard of my having taken the final step towards my becoming a child of the Church, as a member of the one true Fold of Jesus Christ. But beyond one more letter from my father in which he expressed his own and my mother's deep regret at the great mistake I had made in becoming a member of the Catholic Church adding that he hoped he would live long enough to see me repenting of the error of my ways, and returning once more to what I had for the present forsaken, he ceased to trouble me any more, either by argument or expostulation for the ensuing five years, when I was called upon to make another change in my life, on which I may give a brief recital before I close this history of my conversion.

[He begins to think of priesthood]

- At the close of the first year of my residence at Torquay, I gave up my lodgings and took a small but comfortable house in which I had two spare bedrooms. Having become intimately

acquainted with the Jesuit Fathers at Ugbrook, Lord Clifford's seat²⁶, which was midway between where I lived and my father's home at Exeter, and the resident Priest at Totnes, who was also Chaplain to the Cary's of Folloton House²⁷, I often had the privilege of their being guests under my roof, and as they sometimes remained with me during [Page 35] several days, I learned much from them about the religion I had embraced of which I had hitherto been ignorant, and each day I had reason to be more and more thankful for the way in which I had been guided out of darkness into light. Another advantage of this change in my position was that I was able to invite my younger brothers, of whom I had four, to remain with me from time to time for several days, and although I had to promise my father that I would not speak to them on matters of Religion, yet the fact of their being thus allowed to visit me proved that the family breach caused by my becoming a Catholic was at least temporarily healed. The good Priest who had received me into the Church did not remain much longer at Torquay after my conversion; and during the four years and six months of my subsequent residence there, there were no fewer than three Pastors who filled his place. The first of these was an eccentric poor man, who came to us straight from a private lunatic asylum. He disappeared on one occasion for a fortnight, and as it was known that he had a suicidal tendency, we were greatly alarmed lest some catastrophe had happened. He was succeeded by a learned and holy man, who had spent most of his sacerdotal life in Rome. He had been private secretary to the Duke of Melfort and Perth, who was also a Priest, and had published a book entitled "Reminiscences of Rome". Unfortunately for us, he did not remain long with us but joined the Fathers of Charity, who were generally called at that time, Rosminians, after their saintly Founder. The last of Father McDonnell's successors during my residence in Torquay was a young secular Priest, who had been ordained to assist the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in their Mission at Penzance in Cornwall.

[He consults clergy contacts on his vocation - 1848]

- During all this time I had had a longing desire to become a Priest, and especially that I might thus be able to communicate the graces which I myself had received to other souls. Some of the good Priests whom I knew discouraged and others encouraged me. The Jesuits wanted me to join their Society whereas the Pastor of Folloton recommended me to become a secular Priest. The second of those who succeeded Father McDonnell gave me no encouragement in any way, nor did the young Priest who succeeded him for awhile, until at last he recommended me to [36]an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, for whose Congregation he had himself been ordained. I then consulted a dear old Priest, a learned and holy man, the Rev. Dr. Oliver of Exeter. He warmly encouraged me to follow out my vocation to become a Priest but declined giving me any definite advice as to whether I should become a Religious or a Secular. About this time the Rev. Dr. Newman was received into the Church by a Passionist Father, the Rev. Father Dominic of the Mother of God, who died some years later in the odour of Sanctity. After due consideration I determined to write to him, and lay my case before him. This I did without too much delay, for I was becoming very anxious on the subject. I received a kind and beautiful letter from Father Dominic, which I preserve to this day as a precious treasure. In my letter I had stated certain obstacles which seemed to bar my pathway to the sacerdotal state, such as want of health, insufficient means, and an almost total forgetfulness of the Latin language, which I had never studied since I left school. Father Dominic declined giving me specific advice as to the Secular or

²⁶ Ugbrooke House, Chudleigh, Devon. It featured in the Domesday Book.

²⁷ Totnes, Devon.

Religious state as he was not acquainted with me personally, but to the general question of my sacerdotal vocation, he wrote to me that all the obstacles I had mentioned to him would soon disappear, as, in fact shortly came to pass, and he concluded his paternal advice with these emphatic words: "Go! In the name of God, go!"

[He decides to try the Oblates. Family reactions]

- Almighty God Himself was to settle the remaining doubt for me. The young Priest at Torquay, Rev. Mr. Power²⁸, wrote to his friend, Father Daly²⁹, the Superior of the Oblates of Mary at Penzance, with whom he had himself lived during a year after his ordination, and telling him of my determination to become a Priest, and of my indecision as regarded the actual state which I should embrace, invited him to come to Torquay, so that he might become acquainted with me and persuade me to become an Oblate. Father Daly accepted the invitation, and during his week's stay in Torquay so far helped me to come to a decision, that I arranged to go without delay to Penzance [Page 37] and to see and judge for myself what the Oblates of Mary Immaculate were like in one of their own houses. I spent a fortnight with these good Fathers, and all doubts in my mind were completely resolved, and I was to enter into their Novitiate as soon as possible.
- My first step after returning to Torquay was to inform my Father of the decision at which I had arrived, and of what my future life was to be, but I little anticipated the storm which I aroused thereby. The temporary breach and friendly relations between myself and my father and mother appeared to be entirely healed. They must have found that my change of religion had not resulted in deterioration of character, or destruction of family affection. But this was altogether a different matter. To give up my business, just as it began to appear that it would be flourishing, to sacrifice all my worldly prospects, to become a Priest, and as they were accustomed to call it, a monk, was too much for my poor parents. A day or two before that on which I would be on the road to my future Novitiate, I wrote to say that I should be passing through Exeter, and wished to know whether I might call on them to take leave of them, as I then fully expected to have to go to France, and would probably be absent for some years. By return of post, I received a reply from my Father with an emphatic "No! We do not wish ever to see you again, as you have disgraced yourself so much." Hoping they would relent even at the last moment before I left Exeter I walked up and down two or three times in front of my Father's house, only to see every blind pulled down rapidly, so that I should neither see nor be seen.

[Novitiate and ordination: 1848-1853]

- It turned out that my Novitiate was spent in England after all. Having been born on the Octave of the Feast of the Assumption of our Blessed Lady, and baptized on that beautiful feast twenty three years later on, I was more than pleased to receive the habit on the eve of the Assumption in the year 1848 and to be admitted to make my perpetual vows on that festival after a year's

²⁸ An Irish priest who came into contact with the Oblates at the seminary in Youghal, Ireland, where Father Casimir Aubert OMI taught for a short period. See Oblate Writings 1, Vol. 3, page 7, footnote 3, and page 13.

²⁹ 1814-1894. The first Oblate sent in 1841 to the British Isles. At the end of 1842 he met a secular priest Fr William Young in Dublin. Fr Young had founded a mission in Penzance and solicited the help of the Oblates. See Historical Dictionary of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Rome 2010, Vol. II, s.t.: Daly, William Joseph.

Novitiate. I may here add that I said my first Mass in Abbotsford, Sir Walter Scott's beautiful house in Scotland on the Feast of the Assumption in the year 1853.

[Reconciliation with his parents and their deaths]

- For upwards of two years [Page 38] after I left Devonshire, every letter I wrote to my Father or Mother was returned unread, and, of course, unanswered. I had then a serious illness, and on becoming convalescent, I ventured once more to write to my mother, and told her of my state. She then wrote to invite me to come and stay with them for awhile saying that a change to my native air would probably restore me to perfect health. I therefore spent three weeks with them. My mother, of course, was most kind and affectionate; but my Father could not yet bring himself to forgive me. He never would remain alone with me for a moment, and when he wished to speak to me in the presence of others, he never looked at me. I mention these trivial affairs to show that I was to be no exception to what all converts to the true Faith have to endure more or less. I am happy to be able to say that many years later, when on my way to Autun in the South of France to take part in a Retreat which was conducted there for all the Superiors of our Houses in Great Britain and France, hearing that my poor Father was in a dying state, and that there was no hope of his recovery, I broke my journey to take a last look at him. He received me most gratefully and affectionately. He told me that he sincerely regretted his harshness towards me, and hoped that we might meet again in Heaven. I left my directions with my mother, and was not surprised to receive the tidings that he had passed away during my Retreat in Autun. I was privileged to be enabled to pay a similar sad visit to my poor Mother a few days before her demise. In conclusion, I am happy to be able to state that for many years I have been on the most affectionate terms with all my brothers and their respective families. We are widely separated one from another, but this does not interfere with our holding the most friendly correspondence by letters. I need not state that I have never for a single moment regretted the most important steps which I took in obedience to the calls of grace; first, my becoming a member of the Catholic Church, and secondly, my correspondence with the vocation to be enrolled among the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. And I hereby return my undying gratitude to Almighty God for these and all the other graces so superabundantly ...
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