

After returning from the second annual Portsmouth Institute Conference, I wrote a piece which was posted on the St. Austin Review Ink Desk website. The St. Austin Review, named after St. Austin (St. Augustine) of Canterbury, is dedicated to the revival of Catholic Culture, and addresses itself to readers in both England and America. I wrote, "The Catholic culture that we seek to revive, the culture that once informed all of the West and that gave us Shakespeare, Dante, cathedrals and hospitals is something real. And not just real, but alive. ... It is a culture of health and life that spreads from the Body of Christ and His members; it is the soil for growth, the agri-culture of our souls ... It is what keeps us all happy, fed, and Christian. This is what we had at the Portsmouth Institute last week. This is Christian Culture."

The evidence for that, of course, was how good the wine was. As Hilaire Belloc famously said, "Wherever the Catholic sun does shine, there's love and laughter and good red wine," – just as it was at Cana. And the wine was certainly good at the 2010 Portsmouth Institute Conference!

As I say, the St. Austin Review, edited by Joseph Pearce, himself an English convert, is named after St. Austin of Canterbury. St. Austin was the original apostle to England, a Benedictine abbot sent to convert the English people to the Christian faith in the year 595 - an improbable mission, but one that bore much fruit.

And now, 1415 years later, we gathered in Portsmouth with a group of English Benedictines and some of the greatest scholars and artists of our day to speak of conversion and England yet again – this time, the conversion of the greatest English mind of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, John Henry Newman. We were treated to a wonderful sampling of speakers and performers who gave us a glimpse of the many aspects of this great man, this profound thinker and writer. We were treated to some of his poetry, his epistemology, his theology, his philosophy of education, and above all we learned of his impact upon the modern world, especially on post-Christian England, which is in an uproar over the upcoming beatification of this saintly man whose conversion in 1845 still hangs as a shadow over the Church of England and serves as a living rebuke and sign of contradiction to the abandonment of the Faith by Anglicans and secularists alike.

But Newman, great as he was, was not the Modern Apostle to England. He needed an apostle first to reach him. He was converted not only by his reading and study of the Church Fathers, but by a little-known man behind the scenes, who, like St. Austin, was an Italian priest sent on an improbable mission.

Dominic Barberi was born in 1792 in Viterbo, in the Papal States. Orphaned at an early age, not formally educated as a child, and less than precise in his early devotions, he nevertheless received numerous consolations and ecstasies from God. In 1814 it was revealed to him by means of an inner locution in prayer that he was to serve God as apostle to the English people. Twenty-seven years later, after much delay and long-suffering, he alighted on the shores of England, unable even to speak the language, a Passionist priest in borrowed and ragged attire (for it was deemed too dangerous to travel in clericals and habit), his heart aflame to convert the English people and to "lead lost sheep back into the one true fold".

“The Second Spring in England,” wrote Fr. J. Brodrick, S.J., “did not begin when Newman was converted nor when the Hierarchy was restored. It began on a bleak October day of 1841, when a little Italian priest in comical attire shuffled down a ship’s gangway at Folkestone.”

This little Italian priest in comic attire, Dominc Barberi (now Blessed Dominic Barberi), then spent the remaining years of his life giving his all to England. Suffering stonings, curses, privations, starvations, mockery and more, he and his Passionist brothers traveled barefoot to the industrial centers, preaching the passion of Jesus and bringing thousands into the Church.

John Henry Newman, meanwhile, though intellectually finding himself more and more reconciled with the Catholic Faith, was still in the process of digging in his heels. He resisted conversion to Rome, and even wrote to a friend, “If they [the Catholics] want to convert England, let them go barefooted into our manufacturing towns – let them preach to the people like St. Francis Xavier – let them be pelted and trampled on, and I will own that they do what we cannot. I will confess they are our betters far.”

Little did he know that even as he wrote this, Father Dominic and his friends were doing exactly that.

For Newman had been seeking in the Roman Catholic Church the four marks of the True Church: it had to be One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. She was obviously One through time and through space; she was clearly catholic or universal; and there was no doubt that her bishops were lineal descendants of the apostles. But was she holy?

Sadly, Newman saw no signs of holiness in the Catholics about him in his day. (And honestly, if we modern-day Catholics were known to him then, would he have seen any signs of holiness in us?) The witness of individual sanctity is a remarkable thing. Newman knew that witness only in the heroes of the early Church about whom he read, and in the fictional friar Fr. Ker mentioned at the conference, a character in a novel Newman read, a man who existed only on paper, but whose sanctity pierced like a “dart” into Newman’s heart, into his very soul.

But soon Newman was to see a sign of sanctity in the flesh. Our Faith is incarnational, and saints are not just make-believe characters in story books.

Dominic Barberi was invited to visit Littlemore, Newman’s retreat in 1844. And although the two men met and spoke very briefly, Newman later remarked, “When his form came in sight, I was moved to the depths in the strangest way. His very look had about it something holy.”

Barberi’s life, his silent witness, along with the correspondence he had been carrying on with Newman’s fellow Tractarian John Dobree Dalgairns, was the final witness that Newman needed. It was the last of the four marks he sought that convinced him that the Catholic Church was the true Church, and that the Church of England – alas - was not.

The second time Barberi and Newman met was October 9, 1845, a rainy night at Littlemore. Dominic, soaking wet, had been led to the fire to dry himself. The door opened, and there was John Henry Newman, throwing himself down before this little emotional barefoot Italian – who, in many ways was Newman’s opposite – begging him to hear his confession and receive him into the Catholic Church.

"What a spectacle it was for me to see Newman at my feet!" Barberi wrote. "All that I have suffered since I left Italy has been well compensated by this event. I hope the effects of such a conversion may be great."

The next day, Dominic said Mass for Newman on the only thing that was available. There being no altar, Dominic dressed the desk for Mass – the writing desk upon which Newman had written *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, the work that brought him intellectually into the Church, the work that still resounds theologically throughout the world. From that time, Newman would not write another thing on this desk – on what was no longer a desk, on what had become a holy altar of sacrifice.

You can see that very desk, that very altar, if you visit Littlemore in England. I had the privilege of doing just that in December of 2009, when we filmed *To Follow the Light – the Conversion of John Henry Newman* "on location" as it were, in Newman's bedroom at the very spot where this great moment took place. Hollywood actor Frank C. Turner plays Newman in this movie, and I play Blessed Dominic Barberi – a role I was blessed to reprise the following summer in Rhode Island, at – you guessed it – the second annual Portsmouth Institute Conference. I augmented the lectures, poetry, music and wine with drama.

For indeed Newman's conversion and Barberi's role in it was drama - a climactic moment of divine drama. As Passionist Alfred Wilson wrote, "No conversion since St. Augustine's has caused such worldwide repercussions both inside and outside the Catholic Church. None but the greatest of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church have so profoundly influenced religious thought as Newman, and his influence shows no sign of declining."

And what was true for Newman then is true for all of us now – the unimaginable importance of the witness of a life lived for Christ. Dominic Barberi provided that witness to Newman. But we are called to provide that witness to others. We too are called to preach to all nations and convert the hard-hearted. We too are called to be apostles, like St. Austin, like Blessed Dominic - especially in an age that has fallen away from Christ; to preach to lands that have become ugly and cruel in their rejection of Our Lord and Savior.

For when we do this, when we let God bring His grace of conversion to others through us, and when from our efforts and God's grace England or any land is Christian and fully Catholic once again, then we will see the flowering of culture, the fertility of families, the abundance of good art, music, literature and all the things that make us joyful and truly human. Until then we won't see it in the pseudo-culture that surrounds us, the bacterial culture of our day. We will see it only in precious happy enclaves.

And we'll know it when we're among it, for the drab water of our daily lives will be transformed into the good wine of Cana, if only for a weekend – if only at the conference.