

## Article

# Ecumenism of a Convert: John Henry Newman's Desire for Unity and His View of Other Christian Communities

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## Abstract

Although St. John Henry Newman lived before the official birth of the ecumenical movement, he already carried, even as an Anglican, a deep desire for the unity of the Church, which he promoted through prayer and dialogue. After his conversion, he defended the authenticity of the Catholic Church but also recognized the work of God's grace in other Christian communities. Based on his teaching on freedom of conscience, he did not press others to convert but instead called for better education and a more sincere life according to the Gospel. This article presents Newman's legacy and the relevance of his ideas for contemporary ecumenism, not only within the Catholic Church.

**Keywords:** John Henry Newman; ecumenism; Ecclesiology; Anglican Church; Catholic Church



Academic Editors: Carl-Mario Sultana and José María Salvador-González

Received: 28 August 2025

Revised: 26 September 2025

Accepted: 13 October 2025

Published: 15 October 2025

**Citation:** Hrabovecký, Pavol, and Ján Kotlarčík. 2025. Ecumenism of a Convert: John Henry Newman's Desire for Unity and His View of Other Christian Communities.

*Religions* 16: 1314. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16101314>

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## 1. Introduction

John Henry Newman lived before the birth of the modern ecumenical movement and describing him as an ecumenist in its modern sense would be anachronistic. Above all, he was a convert who found the Catholic Church as the unique bearer of the truth and was devoted to defending it. This may explain why a systematic study of Newman's contribution to ecumenism remains absent and some researchers describe him as "anti-ecumenical" (Griffin 1982). This study shows that the new Doctor of the Church throughout his life persistently nurtured a deep desire for Christian unity, expressing both a sincere interest in other Christian communities, especially in the Anglican Church, and genuine delight in the evidence of God's grace operating in their midst (Dulles 2002, p. 127; 1990, p. 717).

As Newman did not publish any particular treatise on ecumenism, this study summarizes his reflections on other Christian communities, scattered throughout his work, and analyzes them with particular attention to their contribution to the later development of ecumenical dialogue. Moreover, the paper explores how Newman's legacy helps bridge different traditions and continues to shape contemporary reflections among Catholics, Anglicans, and Orthodox Christians. Thus, this article seeks to illuminate the enduring relevance of Newman's intuitions on Christian unity and their significance for contemporary ecumenism.

## 2. Newman's Desire for Unity and His Attitude Towards Other Christian Communities

In John Henry Newman, we can observe a strong and sincere desire for unity between Anglicans and Catholics, several years before his conversion to the Catholic Church. In his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, he mentions that he had been praying regularly for this intention since 1839 (Newman 1908, pp. 122–24). However, he remained realistic and aware that if such unity was to be achieved, a great deal of work still needed to be done in the field of what we would today term ecumenical dialogue. In the 1840 edition of the *British Critic* Newman stated that the separation of the Catholic and Anglican Churches is a cause for serious reflection because “it is so strong a duty for the whole Church to be in active communion together, that it can hardly be made too strong and can hardly be exaggerated” (Newman 1840, p. 63). He ends the article by appealing to the prayer for unity: “And though we may not live to see that day, at least we are bound to pray for it; we are bound to pray for our brethren that they and we may be led together into the pure light of the Gospel, and be one as we once were one.” (Newman 1840, p. 88)

Newman's fundamental attitude towards other Christian denominations is evident even before his conversion: he pursued truth without fear and criticized what contradicted it, sometimes even by employing polemics and satire. At the same time, he demonstrated openness to seeking and appreciating truth beyond his own Christian community. A very good illustration of this attitude can be found in his work, *Lectures on Justification*, published in 1838. Newman was not afraid to employ a strongly polemical tone and to criticize Martin Luther, however, it is clear that he did not oppose Luther himself, but rather what he called “popular Protestantism” by which he understood an extreme branch of Evangelical wing in his Church (Sheridan 2009, p. 112; Castaldo 2017). It is important to note that while challenging the principles of “*sola scriptura*” and “*sola fide*” and the danger of reducing faith to feelings, Newman, as a former Evangelical, dealt with deeply personal subjects (Castaldo 2017). As he later stated in his *Apologia* (Newman 1908, p. 72): “I wrote my *Essay on Justification* in 1837; it was aimed at the Lutheran dictum that justification by faith alone was the cardinal doctrine of Christianity. I considered that this doctrine was either a paradox or a truism—a paradox in Luther's mouth, a truism in Melancthon's.” In addition to these objections, Newman identified another significant problem, one that contributed to his own conversion: the ahistoricity of Protestantism. As he expressed it in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Newman 1909, p. 5): “To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant.”

Despite such critical comments, *Lectures on Justification* is now regarded by many theologians, including Ian Ker and Avery Dulles, as an important contribution to ecumenical theology (see Ker 2009, p. 157; Dulles 1990, p. 720). The main aim of this work was to compare the Protestant doctrine of justification with the Catholic doctrine, between which he sought to find a *Via Media* (cf. Sheridan 2009, p. 107). This attempt allowed him to point out that “these separate doctrines, justification by faith, and justification by obedience, thus simply stated, are not at all inconsistent with one another”. The problem is, as he continues, “when one or other is made the elementary principle of the gospel system—when professed exclusively, developed consistently, and accurately carried out to its limits” (Newman 1874, p. 1). The reality that there is more common ground between these positions than was generally considered is also supported by the fact that Newman republished his *Lectures on Justification* as a Catholic in 1874 with only minor revisions, while explicitly clarifying that he would not have done so if he had not held the same position on this matter (Newman 1874, pp. IX–X). *Lectures on Justification*, thus, demonstrated the need for dialogue between Catholics and Protestants, which would enable Catholics to reflect on specific Protestant insights and to refine and deepen their teaching. At the same time, Protestants could recog-

nize that Catholic teaching is not fundamentally opposed to their own faith (Bouyer 1967, p. 12). Finally, it was precisely on the doctrine of justification that the twentieth-century ecumenical dialogue has made significant progress, and its most notable fruit is the Joint Declaration between Catholics and Lutherans, signed in 1999. This dialogue continued along the lines already outlined by Newman (Holtzen 2017, p. 129).

Regarding the Orthodox Christians, Newman had his first personal encounter with them during his voyage around the Mediterranean in 1832–1833, when he visited Italy and the Greek island of Corfu. His letters reveal his admiration for the church that gave the world such saints and Church Fathers as Gregory of Nazianzus, Athanasius, and John Chrysostom. However, he perceived contemporary Greek priests as uneducated yet morally upright. The relationship of Orthodoxy to the Trinity, the Mother of God, and the saints was presented everywhere, especially in their liturgy. He had no objections to the texts in the prayer books he came across. Still, he had his questions about popular piety: “By the bye, what answer do Protestants make to the *fact* that the Greek Church invokes saints, over-honors the Virgin, and substitutes ceremonies for a reasonable service, which they say are the *prophetic* marks of Antichrist?” (LD III, see Newman 1961–2009, p. 205). As a Catholic, in his work *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, he briefly dealt with Orthodox Christians, or Greeks, as he called them. Despite the validity of their sacraments, he considered their religion to be mechanical and superstitious, and he mentioned that he did not believe the existence of Orthodox communities to be an obstacle to the catholicity of the Roman Catholic Church (Newman 1901a, p. 11:343; cf. Dulles 1990, p. 719).

However, Newman did not engage with Orthodox Christianity in a broader dimension. This might suggest that he excluded Orthodox Christianity from his search for the true form of Christianity. Orthodox theologians like Georges Florovsky, George Dragas, and Jaroslav Pelikan, however, appreciate how Newman approached Eastern Fathers, their way of thinking, and rediscovered them in the West (see Lattier 2015). Charles S. Dessain (Dessain 1976, p. 85) even characterized Newman as “an embodiment of the Eastern Tradition. . . in the West” because he upheld the theology of the Eastern Fathers. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to conclude that Newman rejected Orthodoxy *in toto*; for him, as for an Anglican, Roman Catholicism was closer than Orthodox Christianity. As he later wrote in his letters, even thinking about conversion from Anglicanism to Orthodoxy was nonsensical: “I could not bring myself to contemplate the absurdity (as it seems to me) of an Anglican becoming a Greek” (LD XIII, see Newman 1961–2009, p. 296). George Dragas (Dragas 1980, p. 279) claims that Newman’s position is an example of authentic ecumenism, where all Christians are to return to the Church Fathers and look to them for answers: “In so far as Newman’s stance was patristically catholic. . . his entry into the Roman Catholic Church represents the opening of a way in the West for reconciliation with the East.”

After his conversion, when Newman recognized the truth in the Catholic Church, he sought to defend it, and, as Cardinal Dulles (Dulles 2002, p. 130) aptly observes, “the convert often spoke louder than the ecumenist.” He recognized Catholic Church as the true Church and saw it as the one through which man could attain salvation. However, he recognized and highly valued the work of God’s grace in other Christian communities, but with the proviso that God does not grant this grace through their churches, but according to His inscrutable generosity (cf. Ker 2009, pp. 695–96; Dulles 1990, pp. 719–21). Newman also pointed out that a person does not have to be in complete ignorance of the need for the Church for salvation, only if they have never heard of the Catholic faith; psychological barriers can be just as great an obstacle as physical distance (LD XX, see Newman 1961–2009, pp. 268–69).

Newman’s openness to seeking the Catholic truth in other Christian communities is evident in his own journey to the Catholic Church, which progressed from Evangelicalism

through Anglo-Catholicism. After his conversion, he always remembered some of the great truths he had learned during those periods, truths he did not have to renounce, but rather found fulfilled in the Catholic Church (cf. [Dulles 1990](#), pp. 719–22). Therefore, in his efforts to spread the truth, he was able to support other Christian communities, stating that it was not Catholics who made him a Catholic, but the Anglican Oxford (LD XIX, see [Newman 1961–2009](#), p. 352). For this reason, he was not opposed to the efforts to officially recognize the Anglican Church as the National Church, describing it as a useful bulwark against much more serious errors: “Doubtless the National Church has hitherto been a serviceable breakwater against doctrinal errors, more fundamental than its own” ([Newman 1908](#), p. 342; cf. [Ker 2009](#), p. 580). He was aware that Catholics in England did not have enough power to protect Catholic truth, and therefore considered it reasonable to support Anglicans in this role ([Dulles 1990](#), p. 722).

### 3. Unity of Heart as the Basis of Unity in Doctrine

For Newman, differences in doctrine were a serious obstacle to unity, but he was aware that ecumenical efforts must begin with a strengthening of mutual dialogue. Even as an Anglican, he noticed that although Catholics and Anglicans were relatively close on doctrinal issues, there was still a wide gap between them, and he longed for Catholics to make a greater effort to bridge this gap through dialogue ([Newman 1908](#), pp. 70–71; [Ker 2009](#), pp. 214–15). Newman states that in that time they “had a real wish to co-operate with Rome in all lawful things, if she would let us, and if the rules of our own Church let us; and we thought there was no better way towards the restoration of doctrinal purity and unity” ([Newman 1908](#), p. 71).

He considered mutual dialogue equally important, even when observing relations between the Anglican and Catholic Churches from the perspective of a Catholic. He considered unity of heart to be the foundation on which unity in doctrine could be further built ([Dulles 2002](#), p. 127). In one of his letters, he wrote:

“Whatever tends to create a unity of heart between men of separate communions lays the ground for advances towards a restoration of that visible unity, the absence of which among Christians is so great a triumph and so great an advantage to the enemies of the Cross.” (LD XXIV, see [Newman 1961–2009](#), p. 22)

At the time of the First Vatican Council, when Catholics sought to discuss the planned declaration of the dogma of papal infallibility with Anglicans, Newman remarked that starting the discussion with the doctrine of the papacy was like beginning the construction of a cathedral with its cross on the top. Therefore, he said that it was necessary to start from the bottom—not just from the foundations, but from the soil on which the foundations were to be built (LD XXIV, see [Newman 1961–2009](#), p. 391). He considered the pursuit of a holy life according to the Gospel to be the best soil on which to build (cf. LD XXVI, see [Newman 1961–2009](#), p. 188). He regarded political efforts at unification as empty unless they were based on this soil of holiness, which leads all believers to God and at the same time to fraternal unity ([Newman 1888](#), pp. 421–22).

The Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* ([Second Vatican Council 1964](#), art. 7) later expressed very similar ideas:

“There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart. For it is from renewal of the inner life of our minds, from self-denial and an unstinted love that desires of unity take their rise and develop in a mature way... All the faithful should remember that the more effort they make to live holier lives according to the Gospel, the better will they further Christian unity and put it into practice.”

Newman anticipated the Second Vatican Council also in his emphasis on the importance of conscience. It led him to prefer dialogue with Anglicans over putting pressure on their conversion. He saw the inner guidance of the conscience as fundamental to every human being and therefore knew that the effort to convert others could go against their conscience. This was also an experience that he gained through his own conversion and was able to contribute to the correct understanding of ecumenism (Newman 1908, p. 206; Ker 2009, pp. 580–81). In mutual dialogue, the respect for human beings and their conscience always led Newman to speak appropriately about Catholic doctrine and never to ridicule or insult the faith of others (Dulles 2002, p. 128).

Newman's emphasis on fidelity to conscience combined with freedom of religious belief was continued by the Second Vatican Council, which stated in its Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae* (Second Vatican Council 1965, arts. 2–3) that in the religious sphere no one can be forced to act against his conscience, and no one can be prevented from acting in accordance with his conscience within appropriate limits.

#### 4. The Need for a Constant Reform of the Church

The ability to think critically about one's own Church was also one of the characteristics of John Henry Newman, and it was this capacity that led him to his conversion. After the conversion, he brought his typically British critical thinking to the Catholic Church, which resulted in his regular reflections on the need for internal renewal of the Church. Although he opposed Protestantism, he realized that it was a reaction to some of the mistakes made by Catholics and therefore sought to consider critical perspectives that might help correct them (cf. Dulles 1990, pp. 725–27; Ker 2009, pp. 226, 232, 244). Newman longed for mutual dialogue in which the Anglican Church could become more Catholic and the Catholic Church more Christian (cf. Ker 2009, p. 569).

Even as one of the leading figures of the Oxford Movement, Newman was involved in efforts to reform the Anglican Church, placing particular emphasis on catholicity. Still, the Oxford Movement was not initially focused on ecumenism, and catholicity was understood primarily as continuity with the Church of the first centuries, with an emphasis on apostolic succession, rather than visible unity with Rome (Chapman 2017, pp. 500, 504). Nevertheless, the teaching developed by the Oxford Movement naturally contributed to ecumenism, and in the period following Newman's conversion, the movement also took on an ecumenical dimension (Chapman 2017, p. 509).

The most famous work of the first period of the Oxford Movement is Newman's *Tract 90*, which caused much controversy and was the last of the *Tracts for the Times* to be published. In it, he undertook a kind of test to see how far the Anglican *Thirty-Nine Articles* could be interpreted in accordance with the Catholic doctrine. His primary intention was not to seek unity with Rome, but to prove that the Anglican Church itself bears the mark of catholicity and that the main articles of its faith do not contradict the faith of the early Church (Newman 1908, pp. 130–31).

The *Tract 90* came at a time of anti-Roman sentiment among Anglicans, and this was an opportunity for Newman to contribute to the formation of a more positive relationship with the Roman Catholic Church (Duke 2020, p. 264). In this regard, he said: "If it tends to bring men to look less bitterly on the Church of Rome, so much the better" (Newman 1908, p. 130). He left open the question of "whether this process will not approximate the whole English Church, as a body, to Rome," stating that "it may be the providential means of uniting the whole Church in one" (Newman 1908, p. 135).

After entering the Roman Catholic Church, Newman did not pressure other Anglo-Catholics to convert because he realized that conversion requires adequate preparation of the heart. He emphasized the need for education in the faith and inner renewal on both

sides: not only must the convert be prepared for the Church, but the Church must also be prepared for the converts (Ker 2009, pp. 521, 629). Newman even considered that God, in His providence, might use Anglicans of good faith to remain in their own community and educate others in the faith, thus working for the greater work of conversion (Ker 2009, pp. 521, 696).

## 5. Newman's Contribution to the Anglican Community

In addition to the aforementioned features of Newman's attitudes towards ecumenism and other Christian communities, it is important to consider the attitude of contemporary Anglicans towards their former great figure and to answer the question of whether his theology has the potential to help strengthen their ecumenical attitude towards Catholics.

As Jeremy Morris (2022) points out, the perception of Newman among Anglicans has had a turbulent history. While at first there was even a sense of relief within the Church at his departure, the 20th century brought a positive change, even recognition of the sanctity of Newman's life. His name was added to the Anglican Franciscan list of saints in 1992. The universal Anglican *Common Worship* (2000) commemorates him on August 11th. In the Episcopal Church in the United States, Newman is mentioned in the *Holy Men, Holy Women* calendar, in the section Celebrating the Saints (cf. Jeremy Morris 2022, p. 346).

However, according to Jeremy Morris (2022), this complicated attitude towards Newman's "former" community can be seen as a challenge for Anglicans. Of course, the Catholic understanding of authority, which has been firmly established in the Catholic magisterium over the last two centuries, presents an obstacle that Anglicans will not overcome quickly. However, Newman's conception of authority, interpreted through the prism of the threefold office of Christ, may provide a way to move beyond a simple rejection of the Catholic teaching on the royal office. Newman opposed the simplistic model of hierarchical authority as the fulfilment of the royal office without correction from the other two offices, the priestly and the prophetic, which centered on all believers and theology (Newman 1901b, pp. XL–XLI). It is clear that such mutual correction and complementarity of the three offices is also close to Anglican theology, and if we accept that the Catholic Church has already implemented certain corrections during the twentieth century, then a shift in the mutual dialogue between Christian communities is both possible and appropriate (Jeremy Morris 2022, p. 349).

While Jeremy Morris (2022) and Scerri (2021) offer various Newmanian theological themes and nuances that can be drawn upon in ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Anglicans, the most significant and central motif of the dialogue seems to be Newman's understanding of doctrinal development, as mentioned above. The simple principle of gradual organic maturation in God's truth over time, which applies to both individuals and the whole community, is the fundamental principle of spiritual maturation on both sides in mutual dialogue. What is not obvious and completely clear now, at a certain time may bear unexpected and unforeseen fruit, as has happened and continues to happen in the ordinary and spiritual life of every human being. Morris aptly comments on this analogy between life and ecumenical dialogue with the words:

"Newman's understanding of the Church and its life in time, then, converges with his understanding of the Christian's spiritual life. It mandates, if I may put it this way, a spiritual ecumenism, a sense that, just as the full, visible unity of Christ's body on earth, reuniting severed communities of faith, requires us to think beyond where all of us are at present, so our own growth in faith and sanctity is itself part of the process of growth and change." (Jeremy Morris 2022, p. 351)

Thinking beyond the current situation offers openness to Newman's ideas, which are themselves evolving within the Anglican community. The current disagreement on several issues and themes that Newman criticized in Anglican theology does not mean closing oneself off to possible future developments, because the same thing has happened in Catholic theology from Newman to the present day. The Second Vatican Council, of which Newman is considered by many theologians as an unofficial "father", in a sense "caught up" with Newman, for he had anticipated several important theological themes and concepts a century earlier (Ker 2014, pp. 1–2).

## 6. Contemporary Development and Newman's Canonization

With his apostolic constitution *Anglicanorum coetibus*, Pope Benedict XVI (2009) established a Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham for those Anglicans who enter into full communion with the Catholic Church. In 2011, three serving Anglican bishops joined the Ordinariate and were ordained as Catholic deacons and later as Catholic priests. During Easter 2011, almost 1,000 people were received into the Ordinariate. This Ordinariate was placed under the patronage of St. John Henry Newman (Sala Stampa della Santa Sede 2011).

Although there were some voices among the representatives of the Anglican Church that criticized the constitution *Anglicanorum coetibus* for disrupting the line of ecumenical dialogue or even for its "triumphalistic accent" (Whalon 2009; Epting 2009), the Archbishop of Westminster Rowan Williams published a joint statement with the Catholic Archbishop of Canterbury Vincent Gerard Nichols where they wrote that "the Apostolic Constitution is further recognition of the substantial overlap in faith, doctrine and spirituality between the Catholic and the Anglican tradition. Without the dialogues of the past forty years, this recognition would not have been possible" (Nichols and Williams 2009). The Ordinariate should not be seen as proselytism, which is the opposite of ecumenism, but rather as a search for deep principles of catholicity inside the Anglican community and their position within the Catholic communion. Tracey Rowland (2021), in her edited volume *The Anglican Patrimony in Catholic Communion*, states that the Ordinariate is an example of "receptive ecumenism" because its creation is an attempt to affirm and receive in the Catholic Church valuable elements of Christian tradition present in the Anglican patrimony.

In the creation of the Ordinariate one can see the ecumenical fruit of Newman's work among the two Churches, as illustrated, for example, by Clinton Brand (2021). Ultimately, those who sought communion with God and the whole Christian world, as Newman did, found it within the Catholic communion as a fulfillment of their Anglican inclinations, piety, and spirituality. This can be seen as a remarkable and unexpected consequence of Newman's conversion to the Roman Catholic Church in 1845. Moreover, when Cardinal Newman was canonized in Rome by Pope Francis (13 October 2019), his canonization solidified the importance of the Ordinariate, and Newman's role in the modern ecumenical movement was not left unnoticed by the world. The day before the canonization, Prince Charles, now King Charles III, wrote an editorial for *L'Osservatore Romano* where he stated:

"When Pope Francis canonizes Cardinal John Henry Newman tomorrow, the first Briton to be declared a saint in over forty years, it will be a cause for celebration not merely in the United Kingdom, and not merely for Catholics, but for all who cherish the values by which he was inspired." (Prince Charles 2019)

Prince Charles continued that Newman's conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism is not to be understood negatively as apostasy but as a reason for celebration that eventually brought together both English Catholics and Anglicans:

“While wholeheartedly committed to the Church to which he came through so many intellectual and spiritual trials, he nonetheless initiated open debate between Catholics and other Christians, paving the way for later ecumenical dialogues. . . . As we mark the life of this great Briton, this great churchman and, as we can now say, this great saint, who bridges the divisions between traditions, it is surely right that we give thanks for the friendship which, despite the parting, has not merely endured, but has strengthened.” (Prince Charles 2019)

These words of Prince Charles harmoniously emphasize Newman’s role in the field of ecumenism: while not intentionally pursuing any modern ecumenical movement, his commitment to the Church and the truth opened the way for a dialogue of friendship and respect. And, especially, a dialogue where one must study the other tradition with an open heart, without prejudices: “. . . difference is not to be feared. Newman not only proved this in his theology and illustrated it in his poetry, but he also demonstrated it in his life” (Prince Charles 2019).

## 7. Conclusions

John Henry Newman was not an ecumenist in a modern sense, but his humble openness to the truth, his emphasis on fidelity to conscience, and his ability to look critically at his own Church enabled him to formulate many intuitions relevant to later ecumenical movement. In many respects, his positions anticipated ideas later expressed by the Second Vatican Council. Even today, we see Newman’s insights bearing fruit in ecumenical efforts. This study has, therefore, highlighted both historical and contemporary developments, including the Anglican Communion’s partial recognition of Newman as a saint and Prince Charles’ acknowledgement of his significance in fostering the dialogue between traditions. Even Orthodox theologians Florovsky, Dragas, and Pelikan appreciate Newman’s journey back to the ancient Eastern fathers and Dragas (1980, p. 279) does not hesitate to see in him a “patristically Catholic.” These examples further demonstrate that Newman’s emphasis on pursuing truth wherever it leads—even beyond the boundaries of his own Church—while avoiding false tolerance, represents a fundamental approach to ecumenism. The existence of the Personal Ordinariate in England serves as a confirmation of this and encourages further progress.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, P.H. and J.K.; Methodology, P.H. and J.K.; Formal analysis, P.H. and J.K.; Investigation, P.H. and J.K.; Resources, P.H. and J.K.; Writing—original draft, P.H. and J.K.; Writing—review and editing, P.H. and J.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Abbreviation

The following abbreviation is used in this manuscript:

LD The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman

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