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THE CONVERSION OF
FATHER ROBERT ASTON COFFIN C.S.S.R.

Father Robert Aston Coffin was the first superior of the English province, and he continued in that office for seventeen years¹. A term of office of that length, extraordinarily long to a modern mind, was by no means unique among the Redemptorists of the latter half of last century, and it has significance in that the superior inevitably left much of his own personal influence on the developing province. Father T.E. Bridgett, in a panegyric delivered after Father Coffin's death in 1885, has drawn attention to another significant factor². When Father Coffin joined the Congregation in 1851 there were only two English-born professed Fathers. The fact that this distinguished Oxford convert, friend of Newman and Manning, was one of the foundation members of the English province undoubtedly

¹ Published material about Coffin has been listed by Maurice de Meulemeester C.S.S.R., *Bibliographie générale des écrivains rédemptoristes* II, Louvain, 1935, p. 70. In addition there is much useful information in the well-known biographies of Newman: Wilfrid Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, 2 vols. London, 1912; M. Trevor, *Newman*, 2 vols. London, 1962. There are also available two manuscript sketches of his life in the archives of the London province of the Redemptorists at Clapham, quoted in this article ALP. One is anonymous and typewritten and has the title *The Life of the Right Rev. R.A. Coffin C.S.S.R. First Part*: it is quoted *Life*. Copies are to be seen in the General Archives of the Redemptorists in Rome, quoted AGR. There does not seem to have been a *Second Part*. The other manuscript life is handwritten and in French: B. Lubienski C.S.S.R., *Memoires sur la vie de Mgr. Robert Coffin C.S.S.R., Evêque de Southwark*, undated. The author was Father Bernard Lubienski, born 9 XII 1846, professed 15 X 1866 and ordained 19 XII 1870. He remained in England until 1883, when he went to the Austrian province to work among his conationals, passing finally to the new Polish province. His manuscript was probably completed before his departure from England in 1883, as he does not mention Coffin's death, which occurred in 1885.

² The sermon was published by the Redemptorists at Clapham. T.E. Bridgett C.S.S.R., *A Sermon Preached at St. Mary's, Clapham, at the Requiem Mass Celebrated on April 16th. 1885, the Octave Day of the Funeral of Right Rev. Robert Aston Coffin C.S.S.R., Bishop of Southwark*. Concerning Thomas Edward Bridgett, renowned historian see Cyril Ryder C.S.S.R., *Thomas Edward Bridgett*, London, 1906. Father Bridgett was a fellow novice of Coffin and like him a recent convert from the Church of England.

goes far towards explaining the esteem in which he was held by his contemporaries.

The two unpublished biographies in the archives of the London province place their greatest emphasis on the career of Coffin prior to his coming to the Congregation, the anonymous manuscript, in fact, ending abruptly with his reception. That same emphasis is reflected in the letters and papers in the archives at Clapham, collected most probably by Lubinski with a view to his study. Most of them belong to the time before he became a Redemptorist.

The attention given to Father Coffin's early life seems to be well placed. He was so typical of the enthusiastic Anglican scholars who made the Oxford Movement such a powerful influence in both the Church of England and in the Catholic Church; and he was one of the most eager of those young men who were attracted by the learning and piety of Newman, unquestioningly following him along the road that took them from Canterbury to Rome. In the young Coffin it is possible to discern much of the mature Redemptorist who left such a deep impression on the emerging English province. Some knowledge of Father Coffin must also contribute much to an understanding of those provinces that owe their origins to England.

Father Coffin's association with Newman is naturally of particular interest. For a long period the two men were very close. Coffin collaborated with Newman, contributing his *Life of St. William* to the latter's series of *Lives of English Saints*³. He was a frequent visitor to the community at Littlemore, where he found a welcome solitude and an occasional spiritual retreat away from the bustle of his large and fashionable parish. When Newman went to Rome in search of a more regular organisation for his little band of friends, Coffin promptly joined him, becoming one of the half dozen foundation members of the Birmingham Oratory in 1847. In the following year Newman made him superior of St. Wilfrid's, newly acquired by the accession of Faber's disciples⁴. Within a few years Coffin, together with others of the new converts, became dissatisfied with the Oratory; and his search for an alternative led to his being received as a Redemptorist in 1851. Naturally, relations between himself and Newman, his old friend and former superior, became awkward for both, even though between such devout and Christian men there could be no question of hostility.

There is sufficient documentation available to illustrate this interesting period in the life, not only of Robert Coffin, but of the English Church. It is hoped that future studies will treat Coffin's brief experience with the Oratory and his leaving it to become a Redemptorist. For the present

³ Cf. Bridgett, *op. cit.* p. 5. *The Life of St. William* appeared in 1844. On Newman's projected series cf. Wilfrid Ward, *op. cit.* I, 77-78.

⁴ St. Wilfrid's was the house belonging to the Brothers of the Will of God, the group of converts established by Frederick William Faber in 1845 on his being received into the Catholic Church. It was situated at Cheadle in Warwickshire, and Newman found himself embarrassed by the accession of the «Wilfridians» and the acquisition of a new house which he found it difficult to staff with his handful of followers. Cf. R. Chapman, *Father Faber*, London 1961; Wilfrid Ward, *op. cit.* I, 202.

we concentrate on his conversion. His quest for religious truth reveals much of the character of the man, his deepest spiritual aims, his virtues and perhaps too his weaknesses.

In addition to the two manuscript biographies already mentioned there are other papers in the archives of the London province which have proved most informative and which will be appended to this article.

The first is a letter to his friend, Macmullen⁵. It is a careful statement of his beliefs in answer to queries raised by Macmullen and another close associate of his Oxford days, Johnson⁶. Coffin attached some importance to this letter, as he asked that it be sent back to himself after Johnson had seen it. He gives a frank and thorough exposition of the process by which he came to his decision, answering carefully the objections he knew must be being voiced among the circle of his acquaintances. The letter is dated 9th November 1845, barely a month before he was received into the Catholic Church; and it clearly expresses his final decision, as seems to be confirmed by the terse sentence that ends the letter: « My other letter I wrote last night ». That was probably to resign his charge of the church of St. Mary Magdalene.

The second document bears the title, written in a hand other than Coffin's « Statement Concerning his views on Religion ». The paper, written by himself, is undated, but a reference to Newman's conversion places it at least after 9th October 1845. His conclusion is that at least he may not « any longer remain a clergyman of the Church of England ». His point-by-point analysis of his attitude to religion leads to the same conclusion he expressed to Macmullen; and it is probable that the statement was compiled shortly before the letter. Being, naturally, more personal, it reveals more deeply the motives that brought Coffin to the point of his decision.

The final document that has assisted this investigation is a letter to Phillipps, that generous patron who assisted so many of the new converts⁷. There are copies of several letters of Coffin to Phillipps in the

⁵ Richard Gell Macmullen (1814-1895) was a Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. His warm support of the Tractarian movement made him suspect to his Anglican colleagues, once the trend towards Rome had become evident. He became a Catholic himself. Cf. Charles Stephen Dessain Cong. Orat. and Vincent Ferrer Blehl S.J., *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman* (quoted *Letters and Diaries*), vol. XI, London, 1961, p. 345.

⁶ Manuel Johnson (1805-1859) had seen military service with the East India Company before coming to Magdalen Hall in 1834. An amiable and hospitable person, he allowed the Tractarians to meet in his house. From 1839 he was Radcliffe Observer in Oxford. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XI, 343.

⁷ Ambrose Phillipps (1809-1878) had become a Catholic at the age of fifteen and was a student of Cambridge from 1826 to 1828. From 1840 he tried to persuade Newman to become a Catholic, though he did not meet him until two years later. He used his considerable fortune to support the Catholic cause in England, being especially generous as patron to new converts. In 1857 he was one of the cofounders of the Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity from which Catholics were ordered by their hierarchy to withdraw in 1864. On his father's death in 1862 he assumed his mother's maiden name, becoming Ambrose de Lisle Phillipps, though he was sometimes known as Phillipps de Lisle or simply de Lisle, a confusion of names which appropriately represents his extreme eccentricity. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XI, 352.

archives. Their dates range from November 1845 to July 1847. Of the first three there is only a brief indication of the contents, namely negotiations for Coffin to assume the position of tutor to Phillipps' sons, Everard and Ambrose. The letter which is our third appendix, was written after the year spent in the Phillipps' home. It is important in that it reveals certain attitudes of the new convert which seem to have remained with him all his life.

It must be remembered, moreover, that the two manuscript biographies offer very useful help towards understanding Coffin's conversion and subsequent career. Both bear the mark of personal memories that the authors must have heard about their subject either from himself or from others of his acquaintances in the Redemptorist communities where he was so long a familiar figure. They add much detail, some of which is little more than pious reminiscing; but there is no lack of significant incidents. From these sources it is possible to reconstruct briefly the course of his life up to the time of his becoming a Catholic.

Robert Aston Coffin was born on 19th July 1819 of a comfortable merchant family with residences in London and Worthing. He was the eldest of a family of five children with whom he shared a carefully sheltered and warmly affectionate home life that was to make more acute the pain of separation when he became a Catholic. His first school was a select little establishment conducted by Rev. Mr. Edle and his sister for the children of gentlemen. He remained under the care of this gentle, if slightly snobbish, pair of recluses until at the age of twelve he was sent to Harrow, which occasioned the first of several tearful partings from his family.

In 1837 he came to Christ's College, Oxford, having determined to take Orders in the Church of England, apparently having resolved the doubts he had as a small boy as to whether he should become an opera singer or a bishop. In 1840 he gained his M.A. degree, and in the same year to his great delight was admitted as a Fellow of his college, to which he had become characteristically most attached. The frankly ambitious young cleric appears to have determined to assure himself of a comfortable career in Oxford whose academic atmosphere he passionately loved all his life. He was ordained deacon in 1842 and priest of the Church of England in 1843, in the same year being appointed Vicar of the fashionable church of St. Mary Magdalene's, Oxford, on the nomination of his own Christ's College.

At the age of only twenty-four he had gained a position that surely must have been envied by many of his contemporaries. He had already become a familiar figure in Oxford, respected for his skill in European and Eastern languages; he preached regularly to a

distinguished congregation of scholars; and he had every reason to expect further honours.

From the time of his arrival in Oxford he had fallen under the spell of John Henry Newman, and he soon became one of the most enthusiastic of that group of young men who were the great man's constant companions. By 1837 the Oxford Movement was commanding attention far beyond the narrow limits of the Anglican communion, and its *Tracts for the Times* had established themselves as ranking with the most important religious literature of the age. Coffin, looking back on those exciting years, recalled especially the close friendship with Newman that he had experienced and which he always cherished. « I was the son of his heart »⁸.

By 1843 when Coffin was ordained Newman had led his followers through the crisis provoked by Wiseman's article on the Donatist schism in *The Dublin Review*, which led to the final abandonment of the *via media*, the storm aroused by the appearance of *Tract 90* and his own retirement to Littlemore⁹. It was a difficult time when the young men saw all their hopes apparently shattered; and most of them could find no refuge save in the faith so accurately formulated in the creed of W.G. Ward, their most forthright spokesman: « *Credo in Newmannum* »¹⁰.

Coffin subscribed whole-heartedly to Ward's creed, as he frankly admitted to Macmullen. « I have rested chiefly on Newman's theory in the four sermons »¹¹. He was speaking about the sermons preached in November and December of 1841 and published in the collection, *Sermons on Subjects of the Day*. Of them Newman's own footnote in the published edition says they were « on the safety of continuance in our communion »¹². What justified one's remaining in the Anglican communion was the note of sanctity it retained and which Newman struggled to make clear both to himself and to those who trusted him. It was for that reason that he undertook to direct publication of the series, *The Lives of the English Saints* to which Coffin readily contributed his *Life of St. William*. Newman quickly abandoned the project, especially when he

⁸ *Life*, p. 7.

⁹ Cf. Wilfrid Ward, *op. cit.* I, 67-76.

¹⁰ *loc. cit.* I, 60.

¹¹ ALP Coffin to Macmullen, 9 XI 1845.

¹² Cf. the edition in the series *Christian Classics*, Westminster, Maryland, U.S., 1968, p. 308. See also Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, Fontana edition, 1965, p. 213.

found himself compelled to admit that his own first contribution, his *Life of St. Stephen Harding*, was no longer the writing of an Anglican¹³.

It was an anguished time for Newman, and no less so for Coffin. He clung to his « four sermons » as the principal support of his faith in his Church; but in the course of 1844 his grasp was shaken by a series of incidents that he seems to have remembered vividly all his life. Two of them especially left him most profoundly disturbed.

Within a surprisingly short time he had acquired a reputation as a preacher, respected as he was for his learning enhanced by a fine voice and presence so that he was very much in demand in parishes other than his own. He was particularly gratified when his old tutor, Rev. Mr. Edle, invited him to preach in his church. His first sermon, in which he expounded the doctrine of the Real Presence, enraged one of the parishioners; and the gentleman's indignation was tried beyond endurance when on the following Sunday he heard the same preacher and on the same objectionable subject. The offended man sought ease for his spirit in what has long been the sovereign remedy of the disgruntled Englishman, a letter to *The Times*. Bitterly he lamented that he should have lived to see the day when he should find papists in English pulpits. As for Coffin, he was astounded to discover that he had raised such a storm and he deeply regretted that a belief he had long taken for granted should have occasioned such distress to poor Mr. Edle, whom he had revered since childhood¹⁴.

The other incident occurred in his own parish. Summoned to attend a dying woman, he ministered to her according to the *Book of Common Prayer*. After hearing her confession he was pronouncing the words of Absolution in the deprecativ form used in the Anglican rite, when the sick woman interrupted him: « I believe you don't know whether you are a priest or not ». In some consternation Coffin asked her what she meant; and discovering that she believed that the Christian priesthood existed only in the Catholic Church, he very generously went to fetch a priest from the Catholic chapel. Rév. Mr. Newsham received the woman into the Church and heard her confession before she died.

Coffin had tried to act with discretion as well as with a charity

¹³ Cf. Wilfrid Ward, *op. cit.* I, 77-78.

¹⁴ *Life*, 8-9.

that was quite heroic, but the next day the story was all over Oxford. He had to satisfy a formal demand for an explanation by his church wardens. The dying woman's words remained with him, and he was distressed still further when he chanced to overhear the gossip that malicious tongues were spreading about the city: « The Vicar was with the woman at eleven o'clock and the priest at noon ». He could not rid his mind of the thought that threatened to lay his career in ruins: « Perhaps I am not a priest »¹⁵.

The year 1845 was to be the time of decision for the friends of Newman. It had become plain that sooner or later they must accept that Rome was the only choice remaining to them. Coffin, always a man of honour, thought it well to warn his family that he could soon find it necessary to renounce his Anglican priesthood. The experiences of 1844 continued to trouble him, as also did the fact that his own advice had already led some of his friends to « go over to Rome »¹⁶.

As early as January 1845 his mother, disturbed by reports she had heard, came to Oxford and spent a month with her son. It was a dreadfully trying time, especially since, womanlike, she had played on Coffin's weakness, bringing with her his favourite younger sister, Henrietta. At the end of the visit he yielded to the women's tears to the extent of agreeing to come and spend a little time with the family at Worthing¹⁷.

Very likely, the visit to his home was in June¹⁸. On this occasion he informed his parents that he had made up his mind to become a Catholic. The announcement occasioned the inevitable emotional outburst, in which the calmest person appears to have been the elder Mr. Coffin. He insisted that his son discuss his doubts with the eminent Dr. Pusey, in whom both men agreed they had the greatest confidence.

The interview was quickly arranged; but it proved a disappointment to everyone, including Pusey himself, who was so startled at Coffin's news that he could not bring himself to adduce any argument to dissuade him, murmuring over and over that it was all so very sad¹⁹.

¹⁵ *Life*, 10-11.

¹⁶ ALP Coffin to Macmullen, 9 XI 1845; *Life*, 11.

¹⁷ *Life*, 12.

¹⁸ ALP Coffin to Macmullen, 9 XI 1845.

¹⁹ *Life*, 12.

Even after telling his parents that his mind was made up, Coffin still hesitated, as he admitted to Macmullen. He took his doubts to other old friends of Newman who had not joined him in Littlemore, Charles Marriott²⁰ and R.W. Church²¹. Sincere, earnest and affectionate as they were to their friend, they could offer him no help. They « could not lessen my difficulties », he sadly reported²².

He was really now in an impossible position, as he was able to admit when he could see it in retrospect. For the present, however, he took refuge in his parish duties, putting off the final step « to wait until Newman's book came out »²³. Everything seemed to be combining to bring him to the one inescapable point, and yet he waited for a sign from Newman.

Even after Newman and his companions at Littlemore became Catholics early in October, Coffin still hesitated. The anonymous biographer relates two quite important incidents that are not mentioned elsewhere; and one must presume that he learned them, at least indirectly, from Coffin himself²⁴.

His father, disappointed that Pusey had been unable to satisfy him, tried one last friend in whom both men had implicit confidence, Henry Manning, Archdeacon of Chichester and already regarded as a churchman with a future. Coffin readily fell in with the plan and set out. On the way he met a young lady, a friend from Oxford, also on her way to speak with Manning. Coffin scribbled a brief note and sent it on with her while he waited for her to bring back the Archdeacon's written reply. He had put his case bluntly. « May one who believes all the doctrines of the Catholic Church remain a Protestant and not become a Catholic? ». The reply was equally terse. « He who believes all the dogmas of the Catholic Church ought to become a Catholic ». It is an important indication of the state of mind common among the Tractarians that it was five more years

²⁰ Charles Marriott (1811-1858) had been one of Newman's collaborators in producing the *Library of the Fathers* series. After Newman's conversion he purchased Littlemore to prevent its being used for Catholic purposes. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XI, 346.

²¹ Richard William Church (1815-1890) was another collaborator in the *Library of the Fathers*. A gifted writer, he was the author of the sensitive study, *The Oxford Movement, 1833-1845*, London, 1891. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XI, 336.

²² ALP Coffin to Macmullen, 9 XI 1845.

²³ *ibid.* The book in question was the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, which, in spite of everyone's expectations, did not appear until after Newman had become a Catholic. Cf. Wilfrid Ward, *op. cit.* I, 86.

²⁴ *Life*, 13.

before Manning himself applied to his own case the advice so categorically given.

Coffin returned to his family home in Worthing in great turmoil of mind. For three weeks he struggled to find the courage to take the final step he saw now he could no longer avoid. Then, early one morning the post brought him a letter from Newman begging him to wear the enclosed medal of Our Lady Immaculate. Coffin immediately put it around his neck and then at once, his mind again calm, sat down to write to his friends and his ecclesiastical superiors announcing his intention to leave the Anglican Church and ministry and become a Catholic.

His next task was to inform his family that his decision was now final. He did so firmly, making it clear that further argument would be useless. It was his father now who was most affected by the news. He was unable, he declared, to live any longer in Worthing where he had suffered such bitter disappointment; and he set out at once with his family for their London home. It was a sad party, especially so for Robert who went along with the rest of the family, until at a stopping place on the way he met one of his Oxford friends, Edward Douglas, radiantly happy after two or three years as a Catholic. His evident satisfaction served to confirm Coffin's resolution ²⁵.

Coffin returned to Oxford about the end of November to find that Newman and St. John ²⁶ had just returned from their visit to Catholic institutions, which they had undertaken as Newman had suggested in order to meet the Catholics they had joined. Coffin hurried out to Littlemore; and as soon as they met Newman asked: « Why are you not a Catholic? » While Coffin stumbled through the troubled story of the past few months, Newman busied himself with a railway timetable. He interrupted the sorry tale: « There is a good train this afternoon. Would you like to come to Prior Park with me to be received into the Church? » ²⁷. He was received into the Catholic Church on the 3rd December.

²⁵ *ibid.* Edward Douglas was born 1 XII 1819 of an ancient and extraordinarily wealthy Scots family. He was ordained 25 VI 1848 and was professed as a Redemptorist 8 XII 1849. He had a long and distinguished career in the Congregation. Cf. Fridericus Kuntz C.S.S.R., *De Vita Eduardi Douglas brevis commentarium*, Rome, 1909.

²⁶ Ambrose St. John (1815-1875), a student of Christ Church from 1834, had been one of the first to become a Catholic, being received into the Church as early as 1843. He remained probably Newman's closest friend. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XI, 355.

²⁷ *Life*, 14. Prior Park, a large house near Bath, had been a Catholic school and seminary since 1830.

Father Bridgett, himself a convert, made a shrewd observation in his panegyric on Coffin. He quoted Emerson's cruelly cynical comment on the established religion, as being based on the principle: « By taste you are saved », going on to point out that it was not at all easy for a man to pass from the quiet, cultured, academic circles of Oxford to the unknown and only lately tolerated company of the Catholics²⁸. Newman's novel, *Loss and Gain*, spoke eloquently of the painful balancing of accounts so many of his friends had found it necessary to make. In Coffin's case, with his frank delight in his Oxford life, the passing to the Catholic Church could have been more keenly felt than it proved to be, owing to the shelter he found in the Phillipps household.

He had begun writing to Phillipps as soon as he returned to Oxford after taking leave of his family in London²⁹, the first letter being dated 25th November from Littlemore. It was quickly decided that he take charge of the two Phillipps boys and come to live at « Grace Dieu », the rambling mansion in Leicestershire.

Father Lubienski offers some entertaining comments on the Phillipps household where Coffin lived throughout 1846. Ambrose Phillipps was eccentric to a degree quite extraordinary even by the standards of nineteenth century English gentlemen. He had lent his enthusiastic and unrestrained support to the current gothic revival with a passion which found expression in his somewhat peculiar tastes in music and liturgy, in which he could show himself ferociously intolerant. On days he considered sufficiently important he had the Divine Office recited by the entire household, including the servants, all solemnly vested in copes. On one occasion he placed his little daughter in a niche and surrounded her with flowers, while the rest of the family gathered about her for devotions in honour of the Blessed Virgin³⁰.

Phillipps was an unusually forceful character, able even to impose his sterner tastes on the already sufficiently austere and usually inflexible Pugin³¹. During his year at « Grace Dieu » Coffin was exposed to what was possibly far the most extreme form of what

²⁸ T.E. Bridgett, *op. cit.* 7.

²⁹ ALP Coffin to Phillipps, 15 I 1847.

³⁰ Lubienski, *op. cit.* 37.

³¹ On that extraordinary man, Augustus Welby Pugin, his character and his comprehensive views on his Gothic Revival cf. Wilfrid Ward, *The Life and Times of Cardinal Wiseman*, vol. I, London, 1897, pp. 353-362.

Wiseman kindly used to call « The Catholic Movement »³². Some of Newman's younger friends, especially those of the *Rambler* group, called it « The Old Catholic Movement »³³. Reading the letter Coffin wrote to Phillipps in January 1847, one is forced to suspect that this first contact with Catholic life left a very deep impression. One is also led to suspect that the attitudes he showed at the end of his time with that overwhelming family went far towards explaining his later disagreement with Faber and even with the English Oratories.

Of that year at « Grace Dieu » he assured Phillipps: « I shall always feel grateful that the first year of my Catholic life was passed there and shall reckon my connection with yourself and Mrs. Phillipps as among the many great blessings that have been vouchsafed to me »³⁴. Of Pugin Wilfrid Ward said that « his whole soul dwelt in the middle ages »³⁵. Did Coffin, the new Catholic, also find his true spiritual home in the extreme medievalism of Pugin and Phillipps? If his own words are not merely polite thanks for hospitality, one has to say that he did.

It seems possible to discover from the story of Coffin's journey to the Catholic Church indications of his character. And in his case, in view of his long influence on the young English Redemptorists the effort to know him and the kind of man he was will not be without value.

When, a few years later, Coffin was on the point of severing his connection with Newman's Oratory, he went for advice to Father Lans, superior of the Redemptorists at Hanley Castle³⁶. The latter insisted, in spite of vehement protests, that Coffin go and speak with Newman, because « you owe too much to Father Newman, your conversion, your priesthood etc. »³⁷.

It is undeniable that Coffin leaned heavily on Newman's judgement, as for that matter did all of his circle of intimate friends. In his letter to Macmullen he said that for « more than a year and a half » he had experienced « grave doubts about the Church of

³² *ibid.*

³³ Wilfrid Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, I, 205.

³⁴ ALP Coffin to Phillipps, 15 I 1847.

³⁵ Wilfrid Ward, *The Life and Times of Cardinal Wiseman*, I, 354.

³⁶ John Baptist Lans was born 16 VII 1808, ordained priest 16 IV 1833 and professed as a Redemptorist 2 VIII 1843. He died 31 III 1886 in Bishop Eton, Liverpool, after forty years in the service of the English foundations. Cf. Thomas Livius, *A Brief Memoir of the Rev. John Baptist Lans C.S.S.R.*, Liverpool, 1887.

³⁷ Lubienski, *op. cit.* 78.

England ». That would mean practically from the time of his ordination as a priest and his assuming charge of St. Mary Magdalene's.

He told Macmullen, as we have seen, that he had justified his position by relying on « Newman's theory in the four sermons ». His dependence was quite explicit on that notion of continuity in life and holiness by which Newman hoped for a time to show « the safety of continuance in our communion ». He found it necessary to invoke that principle to meet serious problems of conscience, as he reminded himself in the statement he prepared for his own reflections. « At both my ordinations, as also when I took my M.A. degree I signed the XXXIX Articles according to the interpretation of *Tract 90* »³⁸. With that understanding to quieten his doubts, he threw himself into his parish duties, rather in the same spirit, one imagines, as Newman, standing at his desk for hours on end and writing away at his *Essay on Development*³⁹.

As his doubts increasingly troubled him in the course of 1845, Coffin waited for Newman's book, clearly his last faint hope of retaining his place in the Church of England with his family. Then, early in November, before the *Essay* was published, he heard that « at length Newman, Dalgairns⁴⁰, Collyns⁴¹ etc. etc. » had gone. Even then he delayed, and would probably have hesitated longer still had not Newman summarily put him on the train for Prior Park.

Coffin had only recently come to the point where he had to abandon his reliance on the four sermons. When he said in his statement that he had « lately » read the articles of Wiseman and Newman, he probably meant that he had been studying them again. Newman's reply to Wiseman had been his first attempt to formulate the theory that replaced the *via media*. Now Coffin saw, as Newman himself had long recognised, that the attempt to justify the Anglican position on the survival of the note of holiness in its communion must inevitably shatter the unity of the Church. Now that Newman had decided that he had been in schism after all, Coffin could see no other course for himself. « I feel that as far as the intellectual view

³⁸ In Oxford it was still a condition for graduation that the candidate subscribe to the Articles.

³⁹ Cf. Wilfrid Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, I, 87.

⁴⁰ John Dobrée Dalgairns (1818-1876), a Scot, a keen Tractarian and a competent medievalist, was with Newman's Oratory until after some disagreement in the 1850's he went to London and eventually succeeded Faber as superior there. *Letters and Diaries*, XI, 338.

⁴¹ Charles Henry Collyns or Collins (1820-1885) had been Coffin's curate. He had become a Catholic in October 1845. He joined the Jesuits in 1847, but left them and

goes; I must defer to the judgement of another; and I would willingly do so to his ».

In his religion he needed someone to point the way. This was one of his greatest disappointments with the Church of England, as he pointed out in rhetorical language to Macmullen. « With regard to Church authority, is there any in the English system? ». He simply had to have authority; and he discovered that he had little or no trouble about taking the word of Rome on any doctrine: even his small hesitation about the practice of Communion under one kind only he was prepared to yield to Roman authority.

Of his friends among the Oxford convents Coffin seems to have resembled W.G. Ward rather than Newman. One can easily imagine him, too, looking forward to receiving every morning a papal Bull together with *The Times* at his breakfast table. Once he became a Catholic he was immediately attracted to the extremely authoritarian religion he found at « Grace Dieu ».

As a Catholic he also found evident relief in the Eucharistic doctrine he so readily accepted. He had been conscious of difficulty in this regard, as he explained to Macmullen. One can understand how distressing he must have found it to remember the embarrassment he had caused his old friend, Mr. Edle, by his preaching on the Real Presence. It must have been unhappy instances of this kind that made him realise that what he had long held was incompatible with the Prayer Book and the Articles.

To Macmullen he spoke of « many private and internal considerations ». They amounted to the need he felt for confession and spiritual direction, as he put it more plainly in his statement. One would have to suspect that the incident of the sick call affected him profoundly. Probably, the need of reassurance in spiritual matters was his deepest motivation in becoming a Catholic. His long reliance on Newman and his heavily scored emphasis on Church authority are no doubt linked with the same quest for individual guidance, which he could find only in a Catholic confession.

His dependence on a confessor remained with him and eventually helped to tip the scales when he decided to change from the Oratorians to the Redemptorists. When he discussed his position five years later with Newman in an exchange of letters that must have

the Church in 1858. He later became president of the Vegetarian Society and secretary of the British Temperance League. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XI, 337. Curiously enough, Lubienski, *op. cit.* 21, relates that Collyns' predecessor, Rev. Mr. Hathaway, whose Evangelical opinions Coffin could not abide, also became a Catholic and also even a Jesuit, in which calling he showed more constancy than his Tractarian successor.

been painfully embarrassing on both sides, the latter suggested that « I don't suppose *what you seek, a tradition of spiritual direction*, is to be found in England anywhere else but with the Jesuits or Redemptorists »⁴².

It would not be reading too much into the story to see Coffin's conversion as a search for spiritual guidance. He was drawn at once to Newman's circle; and when his influence could no longer keep him in the Church of England, he found refuge in the authority of Rome. As a Catholic his quest continued until it brought him into the company of men who could teach him the ways of God. It was at the end of 1850 that he went to the Redemptorist novitiate, and only five years later he was entrusted with authority over his companions as Rector of Clapham; and he continued for thirty years to exercise authority as Rector, Provincial and Bishop.

The Redemptorists had not been long on English soil when Coffin came to them. They had made their first foundation in Falmouth in 1843, so that their arrival coincided with the great stirring in religious circles caused by what was happening in Oxford. When he made his novitiate during 1851 it was in the heady atmosphere that Newman so unforgettably described in his sermon on *The Second Spring*: the novices were necessarily received with the expectation of great things. And Coffin himself, the brilliant young preacher of St. Mary Magdalene's, the friend of the great Newman, was bound to be considered for positions of importance, even before his distinguished companion, Thomas Edward Bridgett.

In the event, predictably enough one has to say, it was Coffin who gave the English province and the foundations that derived from it in Ireland and Australia their first orientation. One who was as dependent as he was on the guidance of another was particularly amenable to the policy of centralised authority in religious institutes so markedly promoted by the Holy See during the pontificates of Pius IX and Leo XIII⁴³. Father Nicholas Mauron, Superior General of the Redemptorists, certainly found him sufficiently suited to his own style of government to keep him in office for seventeen years.

In all fairness one must give Coffin a generous share of credit for the fact that late last century the English province rightly enjoyed a reputation for scholarship. It is true that he was fortunate in having

⁴² *Letters and Diaries*, XIV, 1963, p. 88. The emphasis is Newman's own.

⁴³ Cf. Roger Aubert, *The Church in a Secularised Society*, vol. V in the series *The Christian Centuries*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1978, p. 114-115.

so many gifted writers among his subjects⁴⁴, but he always remained himself a scholar and one who admired and encouraged learning. His own contribution was limited to his translations of writings of St. Alphonsus, a labour that came easily to him and which was long appreciated in the English-speaking world. His panegyrist and friend of many years' standing said of him that his love for St. Alphonsus had become a passion⁴⁵.

Above all, the quality that emerges in the account of his coming to the Catholic Church is Coffin's firmness in following his conscience. This is a point well made by Father Bridgett, as he speaks of the sacrifices the change of religion cost him: separation from his family, from the Oxford he loved, from the cultured Anglican circles in which he moved⁴⁶. Undoubtedly, it cost him most to occasion his family's bewildered grief. Bridgett, while he gives Coffin the credit he deserves, mentions that others made even greater sacrifices, and he was in a position to know. Certainly, one should learn from Coffin's case to appreciate the many untold stories of heroism occasioned by the Oxford Movement.

DOCUMENTS

1. - Letter of Coffin to Macmullen, 9 XI 1845

My Dear Macmullen,

I have just received your letter, which as it evidently implied that you as well as Johnson think I am acting hastily, I should like to answer as shortly as I can, though I do not expect anything I shall say will materially alter either your or his opinion. Still I shall be glad that you both should know something of what I have to say for myself. Will you therefore let Johnson have this?

With regard to my acting suddenly or hastily or under excitement, I say that I have been a long time in doubt and unsettled, but I have never given myself up seriously to think over my difficulties. It is now more than a year and a half since I have had great doubts about the

⁴⁴ Cf. Austin Berthe, *Life of St. Alphonsus Liguori*, English edition by Harold Castle, II, Dublin 1905, pp. 700-705.

⁴⁵ T.E. Bridgett, *op. cit.* 8.

⁴⁶ *ibid.* 5-6.

Church of England. During that time I have rested chiefly on Newman's theory in the four sermons, as also on being in the position in which God had placed me. From time to time these doubts have come upon me stronger and stronger, and it is now just a year since I heard that Newman had made up his mind to leave this communion; and from that time I have never felt settled and have gradually become more and more convinced that in the end I should join the Church of Rome. Still I was content to go on working from day to day and to smother as it were my doubts by hard parish work, which while it lasted left me little or no time to think upon the subject. Last Easter I felt so sure that it would end in my becoming a Roman Catholic that I made up my mind on a matter that would have affected my whole future life. In June last I was very much unsettled and had then serious thoughts of resigning my Living, but I determined not to think any more about it then but to wait until Newman's book came out, thinking this would be before he left us. I was much worried and taken up with the Confirmation and very much interested in it and until you returned to Oxford had really no time to give to the subject.

At length Newman, Dalgairns, Collyns etc. etc. went, and I *do* think it was naturally a time to make me consider what were the grounds on which I myself was standing. I saw other men whom I greatly respected, far superior in ability, learning and holiness to myself following out their convictions. How could I go on holding the same views as they and not be roused to think over seriously and in order to a decision my own position?

I may also add that in January last and in June last I prepared my mother for what I considered would almost to a certainty eventually take place. So far, then, with regard to the question of acting hastily or under excitement. I believe that the time has come when I must decide one way or another, and I greatly fear that if I go on putting away my troubles as I have done before I may not be allowed to see the truth again and may be unable to follow it.

With regard to what Johnson and others say as to my not being prepared to join the Church of Rome, I hardly know what this means; but I suppose I shall be attempting to answer the objection when I say that I embrace most heartily all that she teaches both in the Canons and Decrees of Trent, which are the points most at issue between her and the Church of England. And not only this, but I am daily more and more convinced that the English and Roman religions are really so different and that in such important points that they cannot both of them be true. I mean as a whole.

I mention one doctrine out of many, that of the Sacrifice of the Mass. This, it cannot be denied, is one of the most prominent points in Roman teaching and practice, indeed *the* prominent point round which the rest circles. This very doctrine one dare not teach in the Church of England. It is not to be found in her formularies: all that taught it was omitted at the Reformation in the Prayer Book; and I cannot but think, notwithstanding no. 90, it is condemned in the Articles.

Again, is this doctrine held by the English Church (certainly one dare not teach it) viz. that the Sacred Presence is in the Sacrament by

virtue of the words of Consecration independently of the receiver and therefore to be worshipped and adored?

Then again with regard to unity, nothing but the Pope being the Visible Head of the Church can to my mind at all answer to the teaching of Holy Scripture, whether one looks at the plain declaration of Our Lord to St. Peter or to the various figures and analogies and the descriptions of the Church in the Epistles.

It may be said: Are you prepared to use all the devotions to St. Mary? To this I answer: I am daily more convinced that the more one tries to dwell on the mystery of the Incarnation the more one comes to appreciate the meaning of these devotions; and I feel sure they have a legitimate part in the Catholic system. And of course, it is nothing to the point to say that they lead to abuse amongst the ignorant, for I suppose nothing has led to greater abuses than the modern circulation of the Bible amongst ourselves or the unreserved preaching of the atonement⁴⁷.

Then again, I feel more and more convinced that the English and Roman systems are antagonistic and that as an English Churchman one is bound to believe the latter to be in many points erroneous. I do not believe this, and when persons join the Church of Rome I not only have nothing to say against them, but I believe them to be doing what is right in itself.

With regard to Church authority, is there any in the English system? Is there any one doctrine that all the Bishops are agreed upon? Or to take our best divines, do they teach *one* definite system, in all cardinal and spiritual points the same? I do not think this can be maintained.

With regard to the doctrines of Purgatory, Invocation of Saints, adoration of Relics, as stated in the Council of Trent, I believe them to be true and part of Christian teaching.

Whether, then, I am prepared to join the Church of Rome or not, I think it would not be denied by anyone that I ought not to continue as a Clergyman in a Body which, say what you will, does and always has protested against the Church of Rome and denied her claims to be the Catholic Church. Can anyone deny that we are a Protestant country or that our Church is Protestant, though not perhaps outwardly to the same extent as the foreign bodies are?

Of course there are many private and personal considerations which are drawing me and which I should not like to mention to anyone but a Confessor, but one thing I may say. I do want Confession, both as to my past and present life. I greatly need, and I feel the need more and more every day, the grace of the Sacrament of Penance. Now, certainly, the Church of England does not hold it to be a Sacrament or necessary to salvation in the case of Post Baptismal sin. I believe both these points; and more than this, I could not confess as long as I was in doubt about the Church to which I belong.

I am aware that there are many points which I have left untouched. I have only attempted to give you some notion of my state of mind. I

⁴⁷ This severe censure of the emphasis on the Scriptures and the doctrine of the Redemption was a not untypical High Church criticism of the Evangelical wing of the Church of England.

have never fairly before considered the question, but *now* I have been doing so ever since Newman left and especially since I have been here alone, and but one course seems open to me. No one can judge entirely in such a case as this for another; and Marriott and Church, who were the only persons I spoke to particularly except Dr. Pusey, could not at all lessen my difficulties.

And now that I have written all this, I cannot but feel that it will be to little or no purpose. I am sure it is not a matter of argument or reading, but of conscience and of being led by God's grace. Why some are inclined one way and some another no one can tell. Still, that God is calling some to join the Church of Rome, while others He keeps settled here for the present, none can doubt. Nor can I doubt on the other hand that most of those to whom we now look, and who are staying, each on his own theory, will eventually be led to Rome, each one in the most fitting time when and as God wills.

Will you let me have this again? My other letter I wrote last night ⁴⁸.

Ever Yours and very sincerely,
R.A. Coffin.

2. - Statement Concerning his Views on Religion

1. I cannot say the Church of England is that one Catholic Church which the Bible and Antiquity lead one to believe is the ordinary and divinely appointed means of salvation, whereas the claims of the Church of Rome to be that one Church approve themselves to me, and for some time past have appeared to me to become daily stronger and more unanswerable.

2. Three years ago I read the History of the Reformation in Collier ⁴⁹, and as far as I was able to judge, the whole movement seemed most irreligious and wholly indefensible. Lately I have read Dr. Wiseman's article in the Dublin Review ⁵⁰, in which he urges the Donatist schism against the English Church and Mr. Newman's answer to it ⁵¹. If the view of the

⁴⁸ The letter was probably written from his parents' home in Worthing. The letter mentioned seems to be one of those which the anonymous biographer says Coffin wrote to his friends and ecclesiastical superiors after he had told his family that his decision was irrevocable.

⁴⁹ Jeremy Collier (also written Collyer) was the author of *Ecclesiastical History of Great Britain to the End of the Reign of Charles II*, which was republished in nine volumes from 1840 and was avidly read by Newman and the Tractarians. Collier was described as a « non-juror », which means he had refused the Test Oath of 1673, which further implies that he was a Catholic. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XI, 186-187.

⁵⁰ The article, *St. Augustine and the Donatists*, appeared in July 1839.

⁵¹ Newman's response to Wiseman came in January 1840 in the *British Critic* of which he was editor and which he had made the quasi-official organ of the Tractarians; and he further expanded his theory in the four sermons to which Coffin attached so much importance.

latter be true, I think the idea of the one visible Church must be given up; and I do not see what there is at present to prevent any Bishop or any member separating themselves from the jurisdiction of Canterbury and forming provincial independent Churches.

3. At both my ordinations as also when I took my M.A. Degree I signed the XXXIX Articles according to the interpretation of Tract 90, believing at the time that that interpretation was not the natural interpretation or that which the Church of England held, but that one might adopt it as long as Mr. N. did so. I would not sign the Articles again without saying that I signed them in the above manner, nor do I think I could sign them again at all.

4. The doctrines of the Roman Church as condemned in the Articles I believe are true and part of Christian doctrine, e.g. Transubstantiation, Purgatory, the Sacrifice for the quick and the dead; and whatever I have read of the Council of Trent, as also of the Catechism, seems to me to bear as manifest signs of being the teaching of the Holy Spirit as do the Nicene and Athanasian creeds.

5. What I have read of the Fathers leads me to think that they must be on the side of Rome, e.g. St. Monica wishing to have the Sacrifice offered for her. Is this doctrine held by the English Church?

6. The want of Confession and individual guidance. I could not with my present opinions confess in the English Church.

7. As long as Mr. N. remained in the English Church I could have been satisfied, especially as at one time he tried to keep persons back; but now that he has decided that we are in schism and has joined the Roman Church, the doubts which have been upon me so long are strengthened and confirmed. I feel that as far as the intellectual view goes I must defer to the judgment of another; and would willingly do so to his.

8. I do not know that I hold any one doctrine because the English Church holds it, and for some time past I have been selecting this or that point out of the Catholic body of teaching and have held it in a certain sense but not on the principle of Church Authority.

9. I have read carefully the profession of faith as decreed by Trent, and in my present mind could accept the whole of it. The only point which is of any difficulty is communion under one kind; but this I would receive on the Authority of the Church; and the great Roman Saints are a proof that the whole and entire grace of the Blessed Eucharist is in the Church of Rome.

With these opinions how can I any longer remain a Clergyman of the Church of England, not to say a member?

3. - Letter of Coffin to Phillipps, 15 I 1847

I came here on Monday, having spent Sunday at Birmingham with Macmullen⁵² and Mrs. Wilkinson⁵³. Catholicity certainly presents a noble appearance at St. Chad's⁵⁴, except alas! the figured music. You have so inoculated me with the love of the Church music that I find it difficult even to sit still while they are figuring with scales and chromatics at the Kyrie and Gloria, at the former of which Mr. Moore said he felt ready to dance⁵⁵. You will be glad to hear that he is all for the Plain Chant and singing in Choir and will do all in his power to introduce it at St. Chad's; but at present one of their chief supporters is so against it that he is unwilling to give offence by bringing in things abruptly. The converts with me were all displeased with the music. The ceremonial, crowded congregation and the devotion of the people were all most striking. I was much pleased with the Convent and House of Mercy, for which the Nuns are now building a beautiful church. The House of Mercy is one of the most beautiful institutions I have ever seen. I go to St. Edmund's⁵⁶ tomorrow with Macmullen and shall return to town on Monday. In this way I shall avoid another dose of figured music at Warwick Street or Chelsea. Grace Dieu has spoiled me and I miss it very much I can assure you. I shall always feel grateful that the first year of my Catholic life was passed there and shall reckon my connection with yourself and Mrs. Phillipps as among the many great blessings that have been vouchsafed to me.

⁵² Macmullen, who always remained a close friend, became a Catholic in that same year and accompanied Coffin to Rome.

⁵³ Mrs. Wilkinson was the proprietor of a boarding house next door to the Sisters of Mercy in Birmingham, and her home became a familiar refuge for the new converts, especially after the Oratory came to Birmingham. Cf. *Letters and Diaries*, XI, 361.

⁵⁴ St. Chad's, the newly completed cathedral, was one of Pugin's first works after he became a Catholic in 1834.

⁵⁵ Dr. Moore was a priest of Birmingham whose pastoral zeal was much admired by the convert Tractarians. He later became president of the seminary at Oscott. Wilfrid Ward, *The Life and Times of Cardinal Wiseman*, I, 410.

⁵⁶ St. Edmund's College, Ware, was founded in 1793. It had become the seminary of the London district. Coffin had evidently been affected by the elitist neo-gothic influence of Phillipps to the extent that he avoided the little London chapels of Warwick Street and Chelsea.