

DISCUSSION GUIDE

for book clubs, the classroom, and personal reflection
by Jennifer S. Bryson

© Jennifer S. Bryson, 2024

for use with
*John Henry Newman:
A Life Sacrificed*
by Ida Friederike Görres

Edited and with an Introduction
by Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz.
Translated by Jennifer S. Bryson.
Ignatius Press, 2024.



Special thanks to Stephen Behnke, Kent Hill, Jens Hussmann, Alex Lessard, and Richard Whitekettle for sharing their insights and suggestions for this discussion guide.

In this guide, the numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers in the printed edition.

INTRODUCTION

by Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz

1. Ida Görres died in 1971. The first edition of this book was published in German in 2004. When did Ida Friederike Görres write this book? (19, 23–26)
3. How does Görres describe the spiritual and historical outlook that motivated her and other German-speaking Catholics to study and write about Newman after the Second World War? (27)

CHAPTER 1

The Man Who Was Sacrificed: An Initial Reconnaissance of His Life

1. In her “initial reconnaissance” of the life of Newman, what is it about him that moves and captivates Görres the most?
 - 1A. Why does Görres say that this aspect of Newman is “hidden to every curious eye”?
2. If you were writing a general biography or a biography of a saint, which of the challenges identified by Görres for these genres would you find most daunting?

CHAPTER 2

The Golden Apple

1. “Apples”:

1A. What is the “Golden Apple”?

1B. What is a sodom apple?

1C. In what ways did the “Golden Apple” turn out to be, in fact, a sodom apple?

2. In the eyes of many, Newman is most famous for the brilliance of his written work. Yet Görres, introducing the central theme of this book, tells us that something else is what matters most about Newman:

Here Newman confronts us in a strange light. Not so much his language in texts, letters, and sermons as his life and his character give the answer: unsolicited, surprising, perhaps terrifying.

For he was a man of an extraordinary nature, of an almost Goethe-like abundance of faculties, who seemed destined for a victorious and triumphant encounter and experience with

the world ... But, thwarted by the Spirit and by grace, he must accomplish the overcoming of the world by way of renunciation, and it is precisely in this rupture, in the fate of nonfulfillment, that he achieves his distinctive human and Christian perfection. (62)

Discuss.

CHAPTER 3

Newman’s Religious and Human Character in Letters and Sketches

1. In Ch. 3, Görres surveys Newman’s life. Which aspects of it did she highlight that are different from other biographies of Newman you have read?

2. “Today,” writes Görres, “it is commonplace to assume such a man” of great intellect “to be a ‘cold intellectual’ with a withered heart and far from real life.” How does Newman differ from this? (82)

3. What does Görres say Newman sacrificed to enter the Catholic Church? (84-88 et al.)

4. How does Görres describe the “tension between loneliness and friendship” in Newman's life? (88 ff.)

5. In the poem “The Pilgrim,” Newman wrote: “Yet kept he safe his pledge, prizing his pilgrim-lot.” How does this relate to celibacy in Newman’s life and Newman’s pledge to celibacy in his vocation? (89-91)

CHAPTER 4

Passion for the Truth

1. Imagine: Newman shows up on a secular American college campus today. A student bursting with self-adulation says to him, “I am not religious. I am spiritual; I am a seeker.” How do you think Newman would respond? (199 et al.)

2. Why does Görres describe the pursuit of “the question of what is true” as “the most dangerous undertaking that a person can embark on”? (97-98)

3. How does Görres portray the inner life of Newman in his quest for Truth?

4. In a sermon, Newman said, “For is not this the error, the common and fatal error, of the world, to think itself a judge of Religious Truth without preparation of heart?” (106). What did you learn in Ch. 4 about the need for “preparation of the heart”?

5. Görres writes, “The revelation of God is such a bottomless pit of riddles and darkness. It never satisfies our sheer thirst for knowledge. It tells us not what we would like to know but what we need.” How does this relate to how she describes Newman’s experience of God’s revelation? (110 et al.)

CHAPTER 5

Taking Christianity Seriously: The Tracts and Sermons

Regarding the “Tracts for the Times,” see Timeline, 246-247.

1. In the 1830s, the movement to disestablish the Church of England gained momentum. What questions did this raise for Newman and his circle?

2. How did the notion that “religion had something to do with life” (123) distinguish the Oxford Movement from more commonly held Anglican sentiments of the era?

3. How might the “fad of neo-Gothic buildings” and the “echo of Romanticism” in the architecture and literature of the era have shaped the way some viewed “the new religious excitement emanating from Oxford”? (126–127)
4. In a sermon delivered in 1842, Newman said: “Surely we are pretending allegiance to the Church to no purpose, or rather to our own serious injury, if we select her doctrines and precepts at our pleasure; choose this, reject that; take what is beautiful and attractive, shrink from what is stern and painful.” (127–128) Why might one’s “own serious injury” in such a case involve?
5. Why was the Oxford Movement suspected of having Rome-ward leanings instead of being viewed as merely a voice in an intra-Anglican discussion?
6. Why was Newman greatly concerned by the move, in 1841, to establish a joint Anglo-Prussian bishopric in Jerusalem? (137–138)

CHAPTER 6

Rome: Hatred and Love

1. Why was it difficult for Newman to let go of his view that the Roman Catholic Church was the Antichrist?
2. Which elements does Görres highlight in the lives of John Keble and Edward Pusey to show how their lives bore witness to their faith?
3. Görres writes, “An apparently very insignificant phrase from Augustine's work against the Donatists hits him like ... like contact with a magnet that yanks scattered iron fragments together in a flash into a clear shape.” (157–158) What happened?
4. Newman wrote, “All the logic in the world would not have made me move faster towards Rome than I did.” (163) What did he mean by this?
5. Describing Newman at the threshold of his conversion, Görres writes: “And as is so often the case with death, not only is dying terrible but above all the step into the dark unknown.” (159)
 - 5A. How do you think Newman felt, stepping into “the dark unknown”?

5B. How do you think St. Paul felt in the darkness he experienced when blinded for three days following his conversion? (Acts 9:9)

5C. If you experienced a period of darkness after conversion, reversion, or a stage of significant growth in your spiritual life, what was that like?

6. Görres writes:

One often has the impression that nowhere is the authentic concern of the skeptic, the incorruptible knowledge of the limits and the sources of error in human thought, taken seriously and carried through more honestly than with Newman, but also nowhere else is there the serious confidence in the power of the human spirit to recognize and grasp Truth. (165)

Discuss.

CHAPTER 7

Newman Brought Low

1. How does Görres describe the tension Newman felt between the “unprecedented outbreak of disbelief around

the world,” which he saw unfolding before his eyes, and how the Anglican church, and then later the Catholic Church, were adapting to this? (168 ff.)

2. Regarding the gap between the stellar role Newman might have had in the Catholic Church in England after his conversion and what he encountered, Görres writes, “He feels as if he is being buried alive.” Why? (174)

3. In Ch. 4, Görres explains that Newman’s “great heartache at conversion is only the first and most difficult of the many separations and farewells. Again and again, by way of a thousand pains, the passion for Truth must defeat the allegiance of the heart.” (118) Identify some of the “separations and farewells” and “pains” that Newman endured in the decades after his conversion.

4. Why does Görres suggest that Newman’s many letters may prove “perhaps far more valuable in our estimation for posterity than a few more volumes of theological or historical treatises would be”? (178)

5. Görres writes that since Newman's lifetime, "perhaps our eyes have sharpened to recognize the sign of the face

of Christ, which is holiness, not only in the prophet, martyr, or miracle worker.” (180) Share an example of a saint—from the twentieth century or earlier—whose life did not have the grand public profile of a “prophet, martyr, or miracle worker.”

6. To what does Görres attribute “the fact that his heart neither hardened nor became cold”? (181)

7. In a letter in 1859, Newman wrote, “God overrules all things.” What does Newman mean by this? (183–184)

CHAPTER 8

Newman’s Piety

1. Regarding the Holy House of Loreto, Newman wrote:

He who floated the Ark on the surges of a world-wide sea, and inclosed in it all living things, who has hidden the terrestrial paradise, who said that faith might move mountains, who sustained thousands for forty years in a sterile wilderness, who transported Elias and keeps him hidden till the end, could do this wonder also ... In

short I feel no *difficulty* in believing it, though it may be often difficult to *realize*.
(190)

How do you think your friends or relatives who are skeptical about the Catholic faith would react if they told you a tradition in the Catholic Church was ridiculous and you gave them this response of Newman?

2. Which petitions stood out to you in Newman’s “General Objects” of prayer? (192–193)

3. What is the significance of the phrase Newman selected for his tombstone? “Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem” (“From shadows and images into Truth”).

CHAPTER 9

Two Poems

Before answering each question, read the poem for the question out loud. Have one person read the entire poem or take turns, each reading one verse.

1. Why do you think Görres selected “The Death of Moses” for this book?

2. Which stanzas of the poem “The Two Worlds” echo themes in Görres’s account of the life of Newman? Share them by reading the stanzas out loud.

PART I: The Life of Newman

CHAPTERS 1-9

1. Reconsider question #3 in Chapter 2: In the eyes of many, Newman is most famous for the brilliance of his written work. Yet Görres tells us that something else is what matters most about Newman:

Here Newman confronts us in a strange light. Not so much his language in texts, letters, and sermons as his life and his character give the answer: unsolicited, surprising, perhaps terrifying.

For he was a man of an extraordinary nature, of an almost Goethe-like abundance of faculties, who seemed destined for a victorious and triumphant encounter and experience with the world ... But, thwarted by the Spirit and by grace, he must accomplish the overcoming of the world by

way of renunciation, and it is precisely in this rupture, in the fate of nonfulfillment, that he achieves his distinctive human and Christian perfection. However far we look, we hardly find any “world” to be possessed and enjoyed, the Golden Apple snapped back high out of reach. (62)

How has your understanding of this perspective on the life of Newman changed now that you have read all of Part I?

CHAPTER 10

On Conscience

1. How does Görres describe the “dubious legend” attached to Newman claiming “that he was a forerunner and key witness of a certain conception of conscience,” that is, a popular modern conception of conscience? (201)
2. Why does Görres consider a tendency to separate religion from law problematic?
3. Görres writes, “Because” conscience “is the bearer of a message, it has authority.”

3A. Who sends the message?

3B. What must the recipient do to avoid garbled reception of the message (like in a message passed along in the children's game "Telephone")?

4. Why does Görres argue that "for Newman, the task of conscience in providing us with the foundations of morality, which the intellect can develop into a moral law, is only secondary"? (207)

5. According to Newman, what is the relationship between "obedience" and "conscience"?

6. Görres writes:

But the guilty person experiences fear and anxiety in his heart even when his evil act is praised and rewarded. This fear implies something: conscience has to do not only with the deed and with the "I" as the perpetrator but with a third party, a living Being, to whom I am responsible for the deed. The fact that besides me there is another participant who has a concern in my behavior is contained in the experience of conscience, and conscience

knows that it is dealing with Someone, not something." (207)

Explain why you agree or disagree with this assertion.

7. "The separation of moral reason from obedience to God," argues Görres in her reflection on Newman, "is the real root of every degeneration of conscience because only both, inseparably united, form a healthy conscience." (209) Identify ways moral reason and obedience to God can be reunited in a culture in which they have been separated.

8. "Does conscience need to be formed in a Christian way?" asks Görres. (209)

8A. If yes, What would a specifically Christian formation include?

8B. If no, what, if any, non-Christian formation would be needed?

9. Görres writes:

By eradicating fear, the conscience loses that which is "numinous," the character of being a

messenger from the world of that which is completely different. (212)

How does Newman portray the role of fear, rightly understood, in conscience?

10. What is the relationship between conscience, obedience, and love? (210)

11. Why does Görres assert that “natural conscience, as it is, is only barely reliable”? (216)

12. Görres asserts:

The conscience, which is always able to ‘come into agreement with God and therefore master the situation sovereignly,’ is rarer and, above all, more difficult to achieve than is claimed by those who think that it is a requirement to be ‘assumed’ for every Tom, Dick, and Harry. (218)

What are the implications for Catholic

pastoral ministry and apostolates of the view that mastery of conscience is not easy,

not something that can be taken for granted?

13. What are the “sources of error for the objective, unbiased view” Newman identifies? (218–220 et al.)

14. In a sermon, Newman says, “he who gives up regularity in prayer has lost a principal means of reminding himself that spiritual life is obedience to a Lawgiver, not a mere feeling or taste ... this is the path which leads to death.” (222) How does Newman describe the steps along such a path “which leads to death”?

15. How does Newman characterize “the notion of conscience in this day in the popular mind”? (228)

16. Görres details two understandings of the Catholic virtue of obedience. (231) Share examples of times you have seen one or both of these understandings of the virtue of obedience exercised.

16A. One, she calls a “caricature”:

Obedience that is military and

cadaver-like, forced, coerced, hypocritical, with gnashing of teeth, conventional

obedience of going along and conforming, the hysterical and subservient obedience of emotional bondage. (231)

16B. As for the second, exemplified by Newman, she laments that it has become “alien ... to us”:

The obedience of great trust, free and upright, bold and daring, without resentment and suspicion, without reservations and secret rebellion, simple and ardent, confident.

17. What is the relevance of Balaam to Chapter 10? (226–234 and see Numbers 22–24)

CHAPTER 11

Encore: A Sketch from 1955

1. In many ways, Newman was a well-known figure in his lifetime. Why does Görres describe his holiness in terms of “sobriety,” “discretion,” and “inconspicuousness”?

2. Newman was known for his great intellect and as a man of knowledge during his lifetime and he remains so today. Yet Görres writes, regarding his conversion,

“nothing is more erroneous than trying to shift these processes to the level of the peer intellect and deductions or derivations from them.” How would you explain this apparent paradox to a non-believer?

3. She notes that Newman gave “a cycle of sermons about the presumptuousness of reason.” She marvels at “the boundless resignation of this man of knowledge, this prince in the realm of knowledge.” What enabled Newman to maintain a healthy sense of humility?

4. Görres describes Newman’s role in the middle of the twentieth century as, the “morning star; not the evening star of a cherished, but sinking culture, humanism, etc., rather the morning star of a free, lonely, believing spirituality.” How would you describe the role of Newman in the middle of the twenty-first century?

THE BOOK OVERALL

1. What distinguished Görres’ book on Newman from other books about him that you may have read?