

[John Henry Newman's Reluctant Prayer for Christian Unity](#)

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Today marks the end of the annual octave of prayer for Christian unity. Blessed John Henry Newman, the great English convert, helped and continues to help many Christians enter into full communion with Rome. But did he actually pray for Christian unity?

Initially, it was another Anglican convert to Roman Catholicism, Fr. George Spencer, who initiated Newman into this project by inviting him to join Catholics in France who were praying for such a goal. At first, Newman was reticent. He argued that many Catholics were not living with the charity that should have been at the center of their faith. Newman actually personally knew very few Catholics, however, and after some time with this group he admitted that he had made a generalized assumption. And so, a few months after Fr. Spencer's petition, Newman [drafted a prayer](#) to be used by Anglicans on Fridays asking God for the re-union of Christians.

Despite his rash judgment about Roman Catholics, Newman was right in conceiving charity as the mark of a true Christian. His concern was echoed in Blessed John Paul II's repeated insistence on fraternal charity among Christians, and of the need for a *conversion of heart* in ecumenical dialogue.

Today, examples of this dialogue abound. It is expressed with particular beauty in the pro-life cause, and Monday's March for Life in Washington, DC saw a broad coalition of Christians from nearly every denomination come together in solidarity.

Still, prayer and charity do not exclude rigorous study of religious doctrine. Newman's life, after all, was characterized by a passionate study of Scripture, the Church Fathers and liturgy. This, together with fasting, led him to ultimately accept the primacy of Peter.

There are other valuable lessons Newman teaches us about Christian unity, notably his respect for each person and his conscience, and the need for patient and prayerful discernment of God's calls. But his sober and steady work for reunification, especially thorough sincere prayer, remains this future saint's strongest example.

Fr. Juan R. Vélez is the author of the forthcoming [Passion for Truth: the Life of John Henry Newman](#) (TAN Books, 2012), a biography for the general reader.