

THE CLAUDE NEWMAN STORY



*The true story of the miraculous
conversion of a black Mississippi
man on death row.*

THE CLAUDE NEWMAN STORY

By John Vennari

Booklet compiled and typeset by Robert T. Hart

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May God reward you for whatever you do to make this edifying true story known to others.

~ Robert T. Hart

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The True Account of Prisoner Claude Newman (1944)

by John Vennari, from the March 2001 issue of
Catholic Family News.

The following true story of Claude Newman took place in Mississippi in 1944. The account was told by Father O'Leary, a priest from Mississippi, who was directly involved with the events. He has left for posterity an audio recording it.

Claude Newman was a Negro man who worked the fields for a landowner. He had married when he was 17 years old to a woman of the same age. One day, two years later, he was out ploughing the fields. Another worker ran to tell Claude that his wife was screaming from the house. Immediately Claude ran into his house and found a man attacking his wife. Claude saw red, grabbed an axe and split the man's head open. When they rolled the man over, they discovered that it was the favorite employee of the landowner for whom Claude worked. Claude was arrested. He was later sentenced for murder and condemned to die in the electric chair.

While he was in jail awaiting execution, he shared a cell-block of some sort with four other prisoners. One night, the five men were sitting around talking and they ran out of conversation. Claude noticed a medal on a string around another prisoner's neck. He asked what it was, and the Catholic boy told him that it was a medal. Claude said, "*What is a medal?*" The Catholic boy could not explain what a medal was or what its purpose was. At that point, and in anger, the Catholic boy snatched the medal from his own neck and threw it on the floor at Claude's feet with a curse and a cuss, telling him to take the thing.

Claude picked up the medal, and with permission from the prison attendants, placed it on a string around his own neck. To him it was simply a trinket, but he wanted to wear it.

During the night, sleeping on top of his cot, he was awakened with a touch on his wrist. And there stood, as Claude told the priest later, the most beautiful woman that God ever created. At first he was very frightened. The Lady calmed down Claude, and then said to him, "*If you would like Me to be your Mother, and you would like to be My child, send for a priest of the Catholic Church.*" With that She disappeared.

Claude immediately became terrified, and started to scream, "*a ghost, a ghost,*" and fled to the cell of one of the other prisoners. He then started screaming that he wanted a Catholic priest.

Father O'Leary , the priest who tells the story, was called first thing the next morning. He arrived and found Claude who told him of what had happened the night before. Then Claude, along with the other four men in his cell-block, asked for religious instruction, for catechism.

Initially, Father O'Leary had difficulty believing the story .The other prisoners told the priest that everything in the story was true; but of course, they neither saw nor heard the vision of the Lady.

Father O'Leary promised to teach them catechism, as they had requested. He went back to his parish, told the rector what had happened, and returned to the prison the next day to give instruction.

It was then that the priest learned that Claude Newman could neither read nor write at all. The only way he could tell if a book was right-side-up was if the book contained a picture. Claude had never been to school. And his ignorance of religion was even more profound. He knew nothing at all about religion. He did not know who Jesus was. He did not know anything except that there was a God.

Claude began receiving instructions, and the other prisoners helped him with his studies. After a few days, two of the religious Sisters from Father O'Leary's parish-school

obtained permission from the warden to come to the prison. They wanted to meet Claude, and they also wanted to visit the women in the prison. On another floor of the prison, the Sisters then started to teach some of the women-prisoners catechism as well.

Several weeks passed, and it came time when Father O'Leary was going to give instructions about the Sacrament of Confession. The Sisters too sat in on the class. The priest said to the prisoners, *"Okay, boys, today I'm going to teach you about the Sacrament of Confession."*

Claude said, *"Oh, I know about that!"*

"The Lady told me," said Claude, *"that when we go to confession we are kneeling down not before a priest, but we're kneeling down by the Cross of Her Son. And that when we are truly sorry for our sins, and we confess our sins, the Blood He shed flows down over us and washes us free from all sins."*

Father O'Leary and the Sisters sat stunned with their mouths wide open. Claude thought they were angry and said, *"Oh don't be angry, don't be angry, I didn't mean to blurt it out."*

The priest said, *"We're not angry. We're just amazed. You have seen Her again?"*

Claude said, *"Come around the cell-block away from the others."*

When they were alone, Claude said to the priest, *"She told me that if you doubted me or showed hesitancy, I was to remind you that lying in a ditch in Holland, in 1940, you made a vow to Her which She's still waiting for you to keep."* And, Father O'Leary recalls, *"Claude told me exactly what the vow was."*

This convinced Father O'Leary that Claude was telling the truth about his visions of Our Lady.

They then returned to the catechism class on Confession. And Claude kept telling the other prisoners, *"You should not be afraid to go to confession. You're really telling God your sins, not this priest, or any priest. We're telling God our sins."* Then Claude said, *"You know, the Lady said [that Confession is] something like a telephone. We talk through the priest to God and God talks back to us through the priest."*

About a week later, Father O'Leary was preparing to teach the class about the Blessed Sacrament. The Sisters were present for this too. Claude indicated that the Lady had also taught him about Holy Communion, and he asked if he could tell the priest what She said. The priest agreed immediately. Claude related, *"The Lady told me that in Communion, I will only see what looks like a piece of bread. But She told me that THAT is really and truly Her Son. And that He will be with me just for a few moments as He was with Her before He was born in Bethlehem. And that I should spend my time like She did, in all Her time with Him, in loving Him, adoring Him, thanking Him, praising Him and asking Him for blessings. I shouldn't be bothered by anybody else or anything else. But I should spend those few minutes with Him."*

Eventually they finished the instructions, Claude was received into the Catholic Church, and the time came for Claude to be executed. He was to be executed at five minutes after twelve, midnight.

The sheriff asked him, *"Claude, you have the privilege of a last request. What do you want?"*

"Well," said Claude, *"you're all shook up. The jailer is all shook up. But you don't understand. I'm not going to die. Just this body. I'm going to be with Her. So, can I have a party?"*

"What do you mean?" asked the sheriff.

"A Party!" said Claude. *"Will you give Father permission to bring in some cakes and ice cream and will you allow the*

prisoners on the second floor to be turned loose in the main room so that we can all be together and have a party?"

"Somebody might attack Father," cautioned the warden.

Claude turned to the men who were standing by and said, *"Oh no, they won't. Will you fellas?"*

So, the priest visited a wealthy patron of the parish, and she supplied the ice cream and cake. They had their party.

Afterwards, because Claude had requested it, they made a Holy Hour. The priest had brought prayer books from the Church and they all said together the Stations of the Cross, and a had a Holy Hour, without the Blessed Sacrament.

Afterwards, the men were put back in their cells. The priest went to the chapel to get the Blessed Sacrament so that he could give Claude Holy Communion.

Father O'Leary returned to Claude's cell. Claude knelt on one side of the bars, the priest knelt on the other, and they prayer together as the clock ticked toward Claude's execution.

Fifteen minutes before the execution, the sheriff came running up the stairs shouting, *"Reprieve, Reprieve, the Governor has given a two-week reprieve!"* Claude had not been aware that the sheriff and the District Attorney were trying to get a stay of execution for Claude to save his life. When Claude found out, he started to cry. The priest and the sheriff thought it was a reaction of joy because he was not going to be executed. But Claude said, *"Oh you men don't know. And Father, you don't know. If you ever looked into Her face, and looked into Her eyes, you wouldn't want to live another day."*

Claude then said, *"What have I done wrong these past weeks that God would refuse me my going home?"* And the priest said that Claude sobbed as one who was broken hearted.

The sheriff left the room. The priest remained and gave Claude Holy Communion. Claude eventually quieted down. Then Claude said, *"Why? Why must I still remain here for two weeks?"*

The priest had a sudden idea.

He reminded Claude about a prisoner in the jail who hated Claude intensely. This prisoner had led a horribly immoral life, and he too was sent to be executed.

The priest said, *"Maybe Our Blessed Mother wants you to offer this denial of being with Her for his conversion."* The priest continued, *"Why don't you offer to God every moment you are separated from Her for this prisoner so that he will not be separated from God for all eternity."*

Claude agreed, and asked the priest to teach him the words to make the offering. The priest complied. At the time, the only two people who knew about this offering were Claude and Father O'Leary.

The next day, Claude said to the priest, *"That prisoner hated me before, but Oh! Father, how he hates me now!"* The priest said, *"Well, that's a good sign."*

Two weeks later, Claude was executed.

Father O'Leary remarked, *"I've never seen anyone go to his death as joyfully and happily. Even the official witnesses and the newspaper reporters were amazed. They said they couldn't understand how anyone could go and sit in the electric chair actually beaming with happiness."*

His last words to Father O'Leary were, *"Father, I will remember you. And whenever you have a request, ask me, and I will ask Her."*

Two months later, the white man, who had hated Claude, was to be executed. Father O'Leary said, *"This man was the filthiest, most immoral person I had ever come across. His*

hatred for God, for everything spiritual," said the priest, *"defied description."*

Just before his execution, the county doctor pleaded with this man to at least kneel down and say the Our Father before the sheriff would come for him.

The prisoner spat in the doctor's face.

When he was strapped into the electric chair, the sheriff said to him, *"If you have something to say, say it now."*

The condemned man started to blaspheme.

All of a sudden the condemned man stopped, and his eyes became fixed on the corner of the room, and his face turned to one of absolute horror.

He screamed.

Turning to the sheriff, he then said, *"Sheriff, get me a priest!"*

Now, Father O'Leary had been in the room because the law required a clergyman to be present at executions. The priest, however, had hidden himself behind some reporters because the condemned man had threatened to curse God if he saw a clergyman at all.

Father O'Leary immediately went to the condemned man. The room was cleared of everyone else, and the priest heard the man's confession. The man said he had been a Catholic, but turned away from his religion when he was 18 because of his immoral life.

When everyone returned to the room, the sheriff asked the priest, *"What made him change his mind?"*

"I don't know " said Father O'Leary, *"I didn't ask him."*

The sheriff said, *"Well, I'll never sleep if I don't."*

The Sheriff turned to the condemned man and asked, *"Son, what changed your mind?"*

The prisoner responded, *"Remember that black man Claude — who I hated so much? Well he's standing there [he pointed], over in that corner. And behind him with one hand on each shoulder is the Blessed Mother. And Claude said to me, 'I offered my death in union with Christ on the Cross for your salvation. She has obtained for you this gift, to see your place in Hell if you do not repent.' I was shown my place in Hell, and that's when I screamed."*

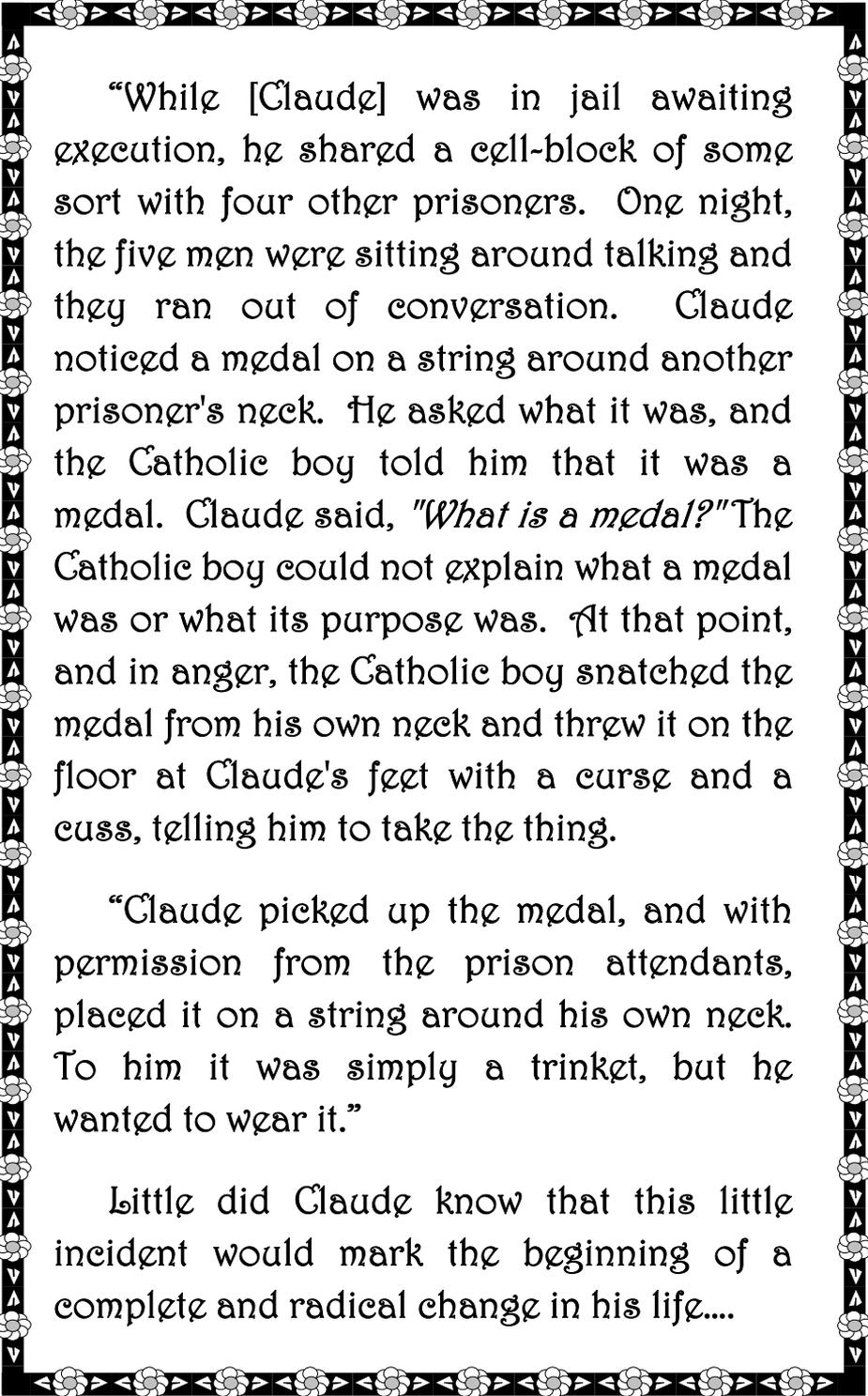
This, then, is the power of Our Lady.

We see many parallels between these facts of Claude Newman story and the Message of Fatima in 1917. There is the emphasis on:

- ❖ Sacramental Confession;
- ❖ Holy Communion;
- ❖ Making sacrifices for Sinners;
- ❖ The vision of Hell.

"Many souls go to Hell," said Our Lady of Fatima, *"because they have no one to pray and make sacrifices for them."*





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“Claude picked up the medal, and with permission from the prison attendants, placed it on a string around his own neck. To him it was simply a trinket, but he wanted to wear it.”

Little did Claude know that this little incident would mark the beginning of a complete and radical change in his life....