

## The Amazing Conversion of Death Row Inmate Claude Newman

NCR article by Angelo Stagnaro Blogs

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**I had heard of the story of a death row inmate** who had converted to Christ's Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church after having experienced a Marian apparition but, frankly, you hear about these stories all the time and they turn out to be little more than pious tales rather than historically accurate accounts.

Having spoken with Father Malcolm O'Leary, the pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Vicksburg, Mississippi, I'm convinced that—though there are some cloudier details—the greater, most important aspects of the story are credible. In other words, there's more truth than myth in the tale and the few discrepancies between versions of the story are barely enough to choke a skeptic.

**Born in Stuttgart, Arkansas,** Claude Newman (1923-1944) was an illiterate, black sharecropper raised by his grandmother, Ellen Newman, of Bovina, Mississippi.

In 1939, Mrs. Newman married a man named Sid Cook who repeatedly sexually and physically abused her. This angered Claude.

In 1940, at the age of 17, Claude found employment as a farmhand on Ceres Plantation in Bovina, Mississippi and got married.

**On Dec. 19, 1942, egged on by his friend** Elbert Harris, Claude lay in waiting at Sid Cook's house. By this time, Sid and Claude's grandmother had separated. As soon as Sid entered his home, Claude shot and killed him, took his money and fled to his mother's house in Arkansas two days later.

In January, 1943, law enforcement captured Claude and returned him to Vicksburg, Mississippi. He confessed to the crime but his lawyer, Harry K. Murray, urged the court to reject his confession as being coerced. Despite this, Claude was found guilty and sentenced to die in the electric chair. An appeal to retry the case was rejected and he was scheduled to be executed on January 20, 1944.

**Prison chaplain Father Robert O'Leary** (1911-1984)—no relation to the current pastor of St. Mary's whom I interviewed—came to know Claude very well during the latter's imprisonment. While on death row, Claude shared a cellblock with four other prisoners. One night, as the five men sat talking, Claude noticed a Miraculous Medal around his fellow prisoner's neck.

Curious, he asked the man as to its meaning. The man either didn't want to speak or was otherwise furious at Claude's question. He gave it to Claude, who picked it up and placed it around his own neck

without fully understanding its significance.

**During that night, some sources say, Claude was awakened** with a gentle touch upon his wrist. He awoke to find, as he later explained to Father O’Leary, “the most beautiful woman that God ever created.”

Shocked at the appearance of this woman in his prison cell, Claude panicked but the mysterious Lady calmed Claude saying, “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.”

At that, the apparition disappeared.

Claude started yelling “A ghost! A ghost!” and demanded to see a Catholic priest.

**Father O’Leary was called first thing the next morning** and met with Claude who nervously told the priest what he experienced the previous night.

Moved by the experience, Claude and his cellmates asked to be received into the Catholic Church.

As part of the catechetical instruction, Father O’Leary came to understand that Claude was completely illiterate and knew almost nothing about Christianity. He believed in God’s existence but knew nothing else—not even that Jesus is God.

**A few days later, two religious sisters** from Father O’Leary’s parish-school visited the prison. They were intrigued to speak to Claude about his remarkable experience. During the same trip, the sisters met some of the women held in the prison. Several of those prisoners had heard about Claude’s experience through the prison grapevine and asked the sisters for instruction so that they too might become Catholic.

Several weeks passed, and Father O’Leary came to the point of needing to teach the catechumens about the Sacrament of Confession. The sisters sat in on the class.

The priest introduced the sacrament when Claude interrupted him saying, “Oh, I know about that! The Lady told me that when we go to Confession, we’re kneeling down not in front of a priest, but in front of the Cross of her Son. And that when we’re truly sorry for our sins, and confess them, the Blood He shed flows down over us and washes us free from all sins.”

**Father O’Leary and the sisters sat** in perfectly stunned silence. Claude mistook their shock for anger and furiously apologized.

“Oh, don’t be angry! Don’t be angry!” he pleaded. “I didn’t mean to just yell that out!”

Overcome with emotion, the priest replied, “We’re not angry, Claude. We’re just surprised. Have you seen the Lady again?”

Claude pulled the priest aside not wanting his cellmates to hear what he was about to say.

When they were alone, Claude whispered, “She told me that if you doubted me, I was supposed to remind you that you made a vow to her while you were lying in a ditch in Holland in 1940 during the war. She said she’s still waiting for you to keep your vow.”

Father O’Leary later related, “Claude then told me precisely what the vow was.”

Claude’s revelation absolutely convinced Father O’Leary that Claude was telling the truth.

**Apparently, Father O’Leary had promised** the Blessed Virgin Mary that he would build a church in honor of Our Lady’s Immaculate Conception. The priest was later able to do exactly that in 1947 when he was transferred to Clarksdale, Mississippi to serve a black parish in need of a church building. The Bishop of Natchez, Mississippi had been sent \$5000 by Boston Archbishop Cushing for the Negro missions. The money was exactly what was needed to build the church for which the Blessed Virgin Mary had been waiting.

Stunned, Father O’Leary returned with Claude to the discussion on Confession. Claude reminded his fellow prisoners, “Don’t be afraid of going to Confession. You’re really telling God your sins, not the priest. 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.”

**A week later, Father O’Leary was preparing** to teach the prisoners about the Blessed Sacrament. The Sisters were again present for this lesson as well. Unbidden, Claude spoke.

“The Lady told me that in Communion, I’ll see what looks like a piece of bread but she told me that it’s really and truly her Son, and that He’ll be with me just as He was with the Lady before He was born in Bethlehem. She told me that I should spend my time like she did during her lifetime with Him—in loving Him, adoring Him, thanking Him, praising Him and asking Him for blessings. I shouldn’t be distracted or bothered by anybody else or anything else. Instead, I should spend that thinking about Him.”

**After this period of catechesis,** Claude and his cellmates and the women prisoners were received into the Catholic Church. Claude took the name Claude Jude. The baptismal log at St. Mary’s parish in Vicksburg records his baptism as being on January 16, 1944. Father O’Leary officiated and Sr. Bena Henken, SSsP, was Claude’s sponsor. Father Malcolm O’Leary, the current pastor of the parish, verified this for me when I interviewed him.

**Claude’s execution was scheduled** for 12:05 AM on January 20, 1944—just four days later.

As a last request, Claude wanted cake and ice cream for himself and his fellow prisoners saying, “All of my friends are all shook up. The jailer is all shook up. But you don’t understand. I’m not going to die; only this body is going to die. I’m going to be with the Lady. So then, I’d like to have a party.”

Though the warden was initially reluctant, Father O’Leary persuaded him to accept the generosity of a wealthy patron of the parish who generously supplied the ice cream and cake for the convicts’ party.

After the party, Claude requested a Holy Hour with a recital of the Stations of the Cross.

**The prisoner received the *Viaticum*** moments prior to his execution and Father O’Leary prayed with the condemned man.

Fifteen minutes prior to the execution, Sheriff Williamson halted the procedure, citing that the governor had given Claude a two-week reprieve. Unbeknownst to Claude and Father O’Leary, the sheriff and the District Attorney were secretly trying to get a stay of execution for Claude to save his life. However,

when Claude found out, he started to cry saying, “But you don’t understand! If you ever saw her face, and looked into her eyes, you wouldn’t want to live another day!”

Claude lamented, “What have I done wrong these past weeks that God would refuse me my going home?”

Father O’Leary later testified that Claude sobbed as one who was completely brokenhearted.

**The priest had a sudden inspiration** and reminded Claude of a fellow prisoner, James Samuel Hughs, a white prisoner similarly on death row, who hated Claude intensely. Hughs was an ex-Catholic and a convicted murderer.

“Maybe Our Blessed Mother wants you to offer this denial of being with her for Hugh’s conversion,” offered Father O’Leary. “Why don’t you offer to God every moment that you are separated from your heavenly Mother for this prisoner, so that he won’t be separated from God for all eternity.”

**Two weeks later, Claude was finally put to death** by the electric chair on Feb. 4, 1944, having offered the intervening time for the expiation of the sins of the reprobate James Hughs. (Coincidentally, Mildred Johnson was also executed for murder in Vicksburg on that same day. She, too, had become a Catholic through the ministrations of the nuns from St. Mary’s parish.)

Father O’Leary later testified to journalists and his fellow priests, and to the current pastor of St. Mary’s (who was a seminarian when the two met): “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 while at the same time actually beaming with happiness.”

Claude had his favorite dessert, coconut pie, on the night before he died. His last words to Father O’Leary were, “Father, I’ll remember you. Whenever you have a request, ask me, and I’ll ask her.”

Claude’s death notice was printed in the *Vicksburg Evening News* on the day of his execution. He was buried in the historic African-American Beulah Cemetery in Vicksburg.

**On May 19, 1944, three months later**, James Hughs was scheduled to be executed for his crimes. Father O’Leary said of him, “This man was the filthiest, most immoral person I had ever come across. His hatred for God and for everything spiritual defied description.”

He refused to speak with any clergyman and showed no remorse for his crimes.

Once strapped into the electric chair, he was asked if he had any last words. At that, he let loose a stream of the vilest invective and blasphemies.

Suddenly, Hughs froze as if in horror staring off at the corner of the room. He screams pierced the otherwise respectful silence of the execution chamber. He begged the sheriff to fetch a priest.

Father O’Leary came forward and the execution chamber was cleared so that the two might speak privately.

Hughs gave his confession, suddenly remorseful of his past life and the murders he had committed.

Apparently, Hughs had experienced two visions while strapped in the electric chair. The first was of Claude Newman who stood before the Blessed Virgin Mary, her hand resting upon his shoulder. Claude only spoke once saying, “I offered my death in union with Christ on the Cross for your salvation. She has obtained for you this gift of seeing your place in Hell if you don’t repent.”

The second vision was of Hughs’ final disposition if he refused to repent.

James Hughs was executed as soon as he had finished his Confession and given the *Viaticum*.

**Now, even if we were to presume** that our Lady’s apparition wasn’t true, even though we have no proof that Claude Newman had lied about it, the burden of proof for all of the rest of these events lies upon the skeptic:

Why did Claude convert to the Church having never been catechized ever before?

Why was his testimony so powerful as to then be able to convert several other inmates?

Why was Claude saddened at word of his reprieve?

How did Claude know so much about the sacraments despite his ignorance about every other aspect of Christianity?

How did he know about Father Robert O’Leary’s secret vow to the Blessed Virgin Mary?

Why was Claude’s conversion enough to convert James Hughs, who was otherwise not given to repentance, let alone spiritual considerations?

**Frankly, I was skeptical** of the above story until I spoke with Father Malcolm O’Leary who admitted that he was given to believing it.

But, does it matter? Whether the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared or not, she was still present in that cell. Why wouldn’t she be—five of her children were there as well. In addition, a soul was saved and that saved soul saved others in turn.

As Stuart Chase pointed out, “For those who believe, no proof is necessary. For those who don’t believe, no proof is possible.” But, as Ronald Reagan reminded us, “Trust, but verify.” No matter where you fall upon the spectrum of credulity, you might consider looking up the

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in which appears John Vennari’s article entitled, “*The True Account of Prisoner Claude Newman (1944).*”

This article is taken from Father Robert O’Leary’s 1960’s radio broadcast testimony.

Don’t forget to pray for enlightenment and for the souls of those who are in need of conversion.