

Some well-known converts to the Catholic Faith

The Gospel account of the ‘Good Thief’ crucified alongside Jesus, with the mercy of God granting the grace of conversion and salvation in the dying minutes of his life, calls to mind other conversions, ‘death-bed’ and otherwise. Here are some people of past and present whom you may not have known were adult converts to the Catholic Faith.

(‘Convert’ is often used in a stricter sense to mean only the radical change from non-belief to faith in Christ, linked especially with Baptism. But more broadly, any deep change of heart can be termed a ‘conversion’, so also included here are some who came into full communion with the Catholic Church from another Christian community.)

Some names listed, most people will know; many other names may only be known if you have some deeper knowledge of their particular field of activity. In the greater scheme of religious knowledge, these facts might be considered ‘Catholic trivia’, but maybe they will be a good spark for a conversation sometime.

‘Celebrity’ is not a goal in life for Christians, and of course ‘famous’ people are no more (and no less) special to God than everyone else – but these conversions help remind us that society over the centuries, which may seem to many to be little but a blur of religious indifference and worldliness, is also infused with the search for religious truth, and with Christian and Catholic conviction.

Of course, there are also countless ‘cradle Catholics’ among the prominent of our world, but it is good to know as well that many have made this step in later life from personal conviction. Religious conviction can arise from the seed-bed of life experiences; intellectual and moral reflection; the influence of family and friends.

We can never read another person’s heart, but we include here only those whose conversions do appear to have been matters of genuine conviction; and who, as far as we can tell, permanently persevered in considering themselves Catholic. Neither is it necessarily the case that all those listed lived exemplary Christian lives after becoming Catholic – though doubtless many did. (Some may look askance at the politicians mentioned – but remember that these too are children of God!) (The date of conversion is given where known.)

AMONG THE SAINTS – **St Paul** (c. 35); **St Justin** (c. 140); **St Augustine** (386); **Blessed Nicolas Steno**, Danish Lutheran, scientific pioneer in geology, study of fossils & crystals, became Catholic and a bishop (1667); **St Kateri Tekakwitha**, ‘Lily of the Mohawks’ (1676); **St Elizabeth Ann Seton** (1805); **St John Henry Newman**, Anglican vicar, leader in the ‘Oxford Movement’, became Catholic priest and cardinal, model for many subsequent converts (1845); **St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein)**, German philosopher - Jewish, then atheist, finally Catholic and Carmelite nun, killed at Auschwitz (1922).

DEATH-BED – **King Charles II** of England (1685); **Oscar Wilde**, playwright (1900); **Buffalo Bill Cody**, frontiersman & showman (1917); **John Wayne**, actor (1979); **Ann Miller**, actress (2004); **Patricia Neal**, actress (2010).

ART & MUSIC – **Johannes Vermeer**, Dutch painter (1653); **Johann Christian Bach**, composer, son of J.S. Bach (c. 1755); **Dave Brubeck**, jazz musician & composer (1980).

MOVIES & TV – **Mary Astor** (1941); **Ann Sothorn** (1952); **Jane Wyman** (1954); **Alec Guinness** (1956); **Gary Cooper** (1959); **Delia Smith** (1963); **Susan Hayward** (1966); **Diana Dors** (1973); **Betty Hutton** (c. 1975); **Faye Dunaway** (c. 1985); **Bob Hope** (1996).

LITERATURE – **Richard Crashaw**, English poet (c.1644); **John Dryden**, English poet (1686); **Gerard Manley Hopkins**, English poet, Jesuit priest (1866); **Joyce Kilmer**, American poet (1913); **G.K. Chesterton** English author, raised Anglican, then agnostic, Anglican again and finally Catholic; wrote many works in defence of Catholic Faith (1922); **Graham Greene**, English novelist (1926); **Evelyn Waugh**, English novelist (1930); **Muriel Spark**, Scottish novelist (1954); **Edith Sitwell**, British poet (1955); **Dean Koontz**, American author (c. 1965); **Rumer Godden**, English author (1968); **John C. Wright**, American science fiction author (2008).

PHILOSOPHY – **Jacques Maritain**, French Thomist philosopher (1906); **Frederick Copleston**, Jesuit priest, author of the standard ‘History of Philosophy’ (1925); **Gabriel Marcel**, French philosopher of personalism (1929); **Marshall McLuhan**, Canadian philosopher, a founder of media theory (1937); **Elizabeth Anscombe**, British analytic philosopher (1938); **Michael Dummett**, British philosopher (1944); **E.F. Schumacher**, German economist and philosopher (1971); **Alasdair MacIntyre**, philosopher of virtue ethics (c. 1982); **Mortimer Adler**, American philosopher, editor of *Encyclopædia Britannica* and *Great Books* series, born Jewish, then agnostic, Episcopalian in his 80s, became Catholic at 96 (1999).

POLITICS – **Lou Tseng Tsiang**, prime minister of China 1912, 1915-16, later a Benedictine priest (1911); **Clare Boothe Luce**, American politician, author, diplomat (1946); **Kim Dae-jung**, President of South Korea (1956); **Svetlana Alliluyeva**, daughter of Stalin, brought up atheist, baptised Orthodox 1962, religious search after defecting to America in 1967 (1982); **Jeb Bush**, American politician (1995); **Malcolm Turnbull**, Australian Prime Minister (2002); **Tony Blair**, British Prime Minister (2007); **Bill Hayden**, Australian politician and Governor General (2018).

PRO-LIFE – **Dr Bernard Nathanson**, prominent American abortionist, born Jewish, then atheist, leading lobbyist for legalised abortion; after himself performing tens of thousands of abortions, became a pro-life advocate in 1970s while still atheist, until his baptism as a Catholic (1996).

ROYALTY – **Queen Christina** of Sweden, abdicated on her conversion (1654); **King James II** of England (1668); **Katharine, Duchess of Kent** (long familiar as presenter of Wimbledon trophies), first royal convert since 1600s (1994); her son, **Lord Nicholas Windsor**, renounced succession to the throne by converting, now international pro-life speaker (2001).

AND SOME OTHERS – **Caroline Chisholm**, worked for welfare of women immigrants to Australia (1830); **Dorothy Day**, founder of the Catholic Worker movement (1927); **Arnold Lunn**, mountaineer, inventor of slalom skiing, writer in defence of Catholic Faith (1933); **Thomas Merton**, American writer, Trappist monk (1938); **Israel Zolli**, Chief Rabbi of Rome in World War Two - converting after the war, he took the baptismal name ‘Eugenio’ in honour of wartime Pope, Pius XII (Eugenio Pacelli) (1945); **Peter Benenson**, founder of Amnesty International (1958); **Bishop Peter Elliott**, Auxiliary Bishop of Melbourne (1968); **Malcolm Muggeridge**, British journalist, agnostic (1982); **Graham Leonard**, Anglican Bishop of London (1994).