

CHESTERTON AND THE FAITH

What can we say of Chesterton and the Catholic Church? Was he not an Apostle, even as the man of old on whom sat the Holy Spirit? Does not he too bring men back—back from the coils of a creed more deadly than the pagan beliefs of old, a creed in which man is but a mere mass of protoplasm, with dignity and without value? Is he not an exponent of a return to the true values, a return to God as the creator and sovereign Lord of all things? Here is a man who, living a normal existence and enjoying life to the fullest, has set for us a great example of clear thinking in a world not especially noted for such. He deserves to be ranked among the greatest of great Catholics — a writer of the highest rank — a Catholic who can give reason for the faith that is in him—an example to men of his faith, a revelation to those without faith.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born a respectable pagan at Kensington, London, in 1874. His education and early training were those of the average middle-class youth of his age. He attended a school of art, but left it to become a reader at a publisher's and in 1900, armed with a fiery zeal for combat, he sallied forth into the literary battle-field. Since that time, until his death in 1936, he showed a depth of genius almost unparalleled in many literary departments, religious controversy, journalism, poetry, literary criticism, detective stories; in all these fields he shone with his own particular brilliancy.

For a man with his particular qualities of mind, a conversion to the Catholic Church was almost inevitable. He was brought up an agnostic and any contact he might have had with Christian theology served only to turn him away from it. The real factor which drew him inexorably toward the Church was his love of charity, and his amazing power of analysis of mind. He saw the fault in the rationalism of the day, saw that it led, logically, to a denial of reason itself and to insanity. "A madman is one who has lost everything except his reason" (*Orthodoxy*).

In *Orthodoxy*, his best work, written when he was a Catholic in everything but faith, is seen the processes by which he arrived at and embraced Catholicism. His expla-

nation and reconciliation of an evil world and a good Creator, one of the basic principles in Christian doctrine, showed him the way. It came as a revelation by the blinding light of which he saw other things—the zealous joy of the Catholics in the world but not of it; the adventure and romance of being orthodox.

The depths of materialism into which the Victorian age had sunk—the reaction towards Hedouism from the strait-laced respectability of Victorian society—the advent of evolutionism, prompted by Darwin; these provided ample opportunity for Chesterton to consolidate his beliefs and to defend them vigorously against all comers. The time, as Hamlet put it, was “out of joint” and Chesterton, with the glorious enthusiasm for which he was noted, threw himself into the task of setting it right.

The same clarity of thought and love for truth which led to his conversion ensured the high quality of his literary works. This was combined with an ever-youthful enthusiasm and a hilariousness which makes his readers respond in like manner. Although spontaneous, his hilarity is not unpremeditated, for he takes this method of making his work attractive to his readers, and thus increases the spread of his teaching. There was natural to him a deep zest for living, a wonderful appreciation of the value of small things. He could discourse for hours on the woodenness of wood, or, as he says, “the magnificent soapiness of soap”. The same shade of temperament enabled him to look upon the orthodoxy which he had adopted in its true light—he was not restricted, but emancipated, not enslaved by narrow bands of Puritanism, but embarked on a glorious adventure. In our times to be orthodox is to be different; we in our “ism”-torn world, fling forth the same challenge as did the Crusaders of Mediaeval times. There is in Chesterton the same adventurous spirit, the same fiery enthusiasm, the same desire to defend the faith against the power of the Crescent. This was the reason why the orthodoxy of the Roman Church was so peculiarly suited to his spiritual needs. He had in him not only a deep admiration for the Crusaders and for what they defended, as well as for the mediaeval times in which they lived; he had the true spirit of the Crusaders; he was a knight—without steed or mail, sword or lance, but with the

same flaming red cross banner over him, and the same gallant challenge to the rationalists and atheists of his time as the Crusaders hurled at the followers of the Soldan.

His high good humour, his joyfulness, was as we have said, not unpremediated; he used it as a salesman uses window-dressing, to sell his wares—his ideas. But his hilarity welled up from the depths of his nature—from a mind rejoicing in life, happy in the thought of enjoying God's creation. And, living and believing as he did, it is not surprising that the reason for his happiness should be found in his work. Although he wrote in a score of diverse literary forms, the thread of the Catholic philosophy by which he regulated his life exerts a unifying influence throughout them all. Although much of his work was written before he formally became a member of the Church, most of it shows the development of Christian theology which he worked out independently.

The best known and best of his work, *Orthodoxy*, gives conspicuous evidence of the religious development which he attained. Although published more than a decade before he became a Catholic, he defends the orthodox Christian theology, at which he had arrived under the delusion that he was arranging a personal code to satisfy his individual needs. In defending this orthodoxy, he was indeed departing from the current opinion, whose cardinal rule was that there is no cardinal rule. It was, and is, an adventure to be orthodox. In the topsy-turvy world of today the only man out of place in the tangle of intellectual contortionists is the one who stands on his feet; everyone is marching out of step but he, since only he can hear the band—the absolute criterion—the word of God.

Of his amazingly prolific output this work ranks highest. In it the sparkle and verve of his rapier-like mind destroy with ease the arguments of his opponents. It contains a spontaneity and liveliness not so evident in later works, written after he became a Catholic.

In *The Everlasting Man*, we find the same clear-cut thinking and logical arguments, but in a slightly heavier form; we see again a demonstration of his power to annihilate the arguments of his opponents, and, by a striking illus-

tration, by a turn of a phrase, to turn their very arguments against their authors. Here he strikes another powerful blow in the defence of his way of living and believing.

It is to be expected, however, that in the books dealing with religious controversy his religion should bulk so largely. It is more surprising, and gratifying, when we find that it underlies every essay, every poem, in fact every thought that he ever put on paper. The detective stories that he wrote are genuine, they have all the suspense, all the excitement of the modern "whodunit", but the author goes beyond the ordinary questions of "who" and "why". He has the detective, Father Brown, discover the motive and the philosophy behind it which prompted the crime. He points out the fact, usually unnoticed, that heresy is simply a good thing carried too far. The fact that books containing propaganda of this sort are read without the propaganda being noticed, is sufficient evidence of its subtlety, and is not token of inefficacy.

The same may be said of the novels he wrote. In every one, he defends some aspect of his faith, or attacks some heretical opinion of the day. The novels, or allegories, as they really are, are so skilfully written that one may read and enjoy a novel as a novel, without understanding the allegory. The physic is so well mixed with the pleasant drink that the patient does not notice it, nevertheless the medicine performs its good office. We may cite an excellent example of this in *The Flying Inn*. Here Chesterton, influenced by his admiration of mediaeval times and the Crusades in particular, tells of the vanquishment of the rationalistic madness of the day, personified by Lord Ivywood and his Turkish henchman, by the true, sane Christian spirit, as shown by Pump and Dalroy. Even if we fail to grasp the fact that it is an allegory, we enjoy the realistic, exciting adventures of the two proprietors of *The Flying Inn*.

The other novels are of like quality. In each the philosophy of Chesterton, his Christian orthodoxy, is evident. In *Manalive* he expresses his own love of life and appreciation of common things, and urges that we do likewise. In *The Ball And The Cross*, he shows the conflict between faith and science, resulting from the fact that science claims to answer too many questions.

The fact which distinguishes Chesterton's allegories from those of other writers is that Chesterton gives us a striking blend of allegory and realism, which has a universal appeal. This was exactly what Chesterton wanted. He wished to spread the truth to all nations, to all classes of people. He was merely being a Catholic in the true sense of the word.

At the bottom of the innumerable essays which he wrote lies his zest for living, his gratitude to God for merely existing, and from this root we may trace the ultimate motive, not just an animal zest but an almost spiritual love of the small, the commonplace, because in these he sees the reflection of God's greatness. He seizes on these "tremendous trifles", and shows the deeper symbolic meaning which we, plodding along with our feet and our gaze in the mud, fail to grasp. He writes on anything and everything, because he is interested in anything and everything. I deny most "energetically", he says, "that anything is or can be "unexciting." (*Alarms and Discursions*).

As a poet Chesterton ranks with the best of his age. Here too, he wrote to defend his own ideas and to condemn those of the age, but he wrote poetry which will live, the resplendent, joyful poetry which is characteristic of his personality. The beautiful Catholic faith permeates every line of his poetry—the love of life as a God-given gift, the hatred of sin and love of sinner, the impetuous, high-minded crusading spirit; all this sways the mind and heart towards the true philosophy of life.

His finest poem, perhaps the finest poem of the age, is *The Ballad Of the White Horse*. In passionate picturesque language he contrasts the cold hopeless pagan life with the joyfulness of Christianity; he contrasts the empty life of those whose "gods were sadder than the "sea," with the warm colorful and human world of the Christians, the sweetness of Christian charity, the giant laughter of Christian "men." He also returns to the attack on the rationalism, the humanistic principles of our modern day, and scourges them with a whip of flame.

His love for mediaeval times is depicted in *Lepanto*, a poem which stirs the blood as no other can. He shows here his love of brilliant colors, magnificence in sight and sound,

the blood-reds and the golds, the stirring notes of trumpets, the pride and panoply of the mediaeval battles. Poems such as these have an almost universal appeal, and *Lepanto* richly deserves a place in the literary spotlight.

In his poems and in his essays, in the allegories, criticisms, and controversial articles which he wrote in such abundance, Chesterton preserves the same great theme—the realization of man's position as a creature and servant of God, and his dependence on that God. This religious thread can be traced throughout all his works, for Chesterton was a militant Catholic, a type of which we are at present in dire need. Men cannot see that our world is turned upside down. They do not see how values have been reversed, how we are forgetting the spiritual for the material. They only know that the world is in great distress, both spiritually and materially. The world needs men who are balanced by faith in God, men who can, as Chesterton did, say in no uncertain terms what is wrong with humanity. The world needs Catholics, men who are not afraid to attack openly the vices of our time, men who will stand as signposts pointing toward Heaven, guides to civilization, leading them on to their end and ultimate fulfillment.

RONAN MacDONALD, '42

DICKENS AS A NOVELIST

After having read Charles Dickens's life both as a boy and as a man, one can see immediately that his position in life as a boy has been largely responsible for the beliefs and desires of his manhood. In his youth, he knew poverty and hard work, for at the early age of ten he was forced to work in a factory for the miserable sum of six shillings a week. His education, such as it was, was got in the streets of London. It was such conditions that made Dickens the man he was, a man who fully realized the need for the improvement of the conditions of men and society.

As Dickens believed in men and a better future for the great powers of the world. As a result of this new interest