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**MODERN VALUES
IN THE APOLOGETICS
OF G. K. CHESTERTON**

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PRESENTATION

Motive of the Present Study

We would first like to state the reason for this study. An eminent Thomistic philosopher, Etienne Gilson, thought Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* «the best piece of apologetic the century had produced»¹. If someone had said the same of an eighthcentury apologist eleven hundred years ago, it would not have been the same; Gilson's judgement becomes all the more interesting when we remember that Chesterton's century has been the century of the great apologetic studies, second in importance only to the epoch of the Fathers of the Church and their apologetic endeavours. Moreover, it is not just *Orthodoxy* that has captured our attention. Rev. Ronald Knox —himself a renowned Catholic apologist— said of Chesterton «that, if every other line he wrote should disappear from circulation, Catholic posterity would still owe him an imperishable debt of gratitude, so long as a copy of *The Everlasting Man* enriched its libraries»². And although the honor constitutes no guarantee by the Magisterium of the Church on the doctrinal content of Chesterton's works in general, Pope Pius XI conferred the title «Defender of the Catholic Faith» on the British apologist shortly after his death in June of 1936³.

In addition to these remarks and facts there is a final and more

1. See C. CLEMENS, *Chesterton as Seen by His Contemporaries* (Webster Groves, Missouri: International Mark Twain Society, 1939), p. 149-150.

2. R. A. KNOX, *Occasional Sermons* (London: Burns & Oates, 1960), p. 405.

3. See Maisie WARD, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1944), p. 553; Ward, a personal friend of Chesterton and his wife, recalls in her biography that a few days after the author's death on June 14th, Cardinal Pacelli (later to become Pope Pius XII) sent two telegrams, one to Mrs. Chesterton and the other to Cardinal Hinsley, expressing the Pope's condolences. The second telegram, which was read in the Requiem Mass in Westminster Cathedral, announced that Pope Pius XI had bestowed on Chesterton the above mentioned title.

important reason for examining Chesterton's apologetic method in detail. Catholics and non-Catholics alike read his works; and many of the latter have been strongly influenced in their decision to convert to the Church because of the works. We could again refer to Ronald Knox; but we would prefer to point out Rev. John O'Brien's book, *The Road to Damascus*, as an eloquent proof of the fact. The book is a collection of fifteen short essays, each of which has been written by a convert telling the story of his conversion. Gretta Palmer, an American journalist, speaks of the arguments she found in *The Everlasting Man*⁴; Ross Hoffman, a university professor, read all of the many books written by Chesterton «that he could get his hands on»⁵; Douglas Hyde, former news editor for the Communist paper the *Daily Worker* in London, speaks in general of the works of both Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc as influential in his conversion⁶; and Theodore Maynard, an Anglo-american novelist, writes the following:

There was one book which deeply impressed me, which I read when it first appeared in 1909 and reread many times. This was Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*. It still seems to me an extraordinary work and it sank deeply into my mind. On his last page the author did, indeed, run away from the question of authority by saying that he was quite ready to write another book on that subject under challenge. But whether or not such a challenge was ever made, Chesterton failed to write the promised book and did not himself enter the Church until thirteen years later. So far as I was concerned this did not matter; long before that he had made a Catholic of me⁷.

Although it will be noted that the above remarks are from Chesterton's contemporaries, the effect of the author's apologetic writings cannot be limited to an historical question. Even though Chesterton's popularity and readership slowly withered

4. See J. A. O'BRIEN, ed., *The Road to Damascus* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1960), p. 32-3.

5. *Ibidem*, p. 70; see also p. 65, 74 for further references.

6. See *ibidem*, p. 149-150.

away during and after the Second World War, there has been a notorious revival in the last ten or fifteen years.

Status Questionis

To date several books have been published which in a more or less direct manner deal with the subject of Chesterton's apologetic⁸. In chronological order, first there is Horace J. Bridges' *Criticisms of Life* (1915), wherein the writer makes several harsh criticisms of Chesterton's early apologetic works. This work is followed by Joseph de Tonquédec's *G. K. Chesterton: Ses Idées et son Caractère* (1920), a book not exclusively dedicated to the question of apologetic method but useful if one takes into account the French theologian's understandable reservations towards the not-yet-Catholic Chesterton. We would also mention A. Handacre's *Authorodoxy: A Discursive Examination of G. K. Chesterton's Orthodoxy* (1921), which as the title would suggest is dedicated to *Orthodoxy*.

While these three studies are of limited value, having been written before Chesterton's conversion to Catholicism in 1922, Sister Maria Virginia had the advantage of working with most of the author's important books when she published her work *G. K. Chesterton's Evangel* (1939). The next study does not

8. There are also many articles written on the subject of Chesterton's apologetic and theological ideas, method, content, etc. They are not so many, however, as one might be led to believe; that is, they are not innumerable as are for instance the articles on St. Thomas Aquinas's theological thinking or even Cardinal Newman's work. If one checks through the theological literature, he will find the articles on Chesterton few and far between. Example: *The Irish Theological Quarterly*: number of articles on Chesterton to date — one, by N. D. O'Donoghue. Example: *Revue Pratique d'Apologétique*: number of articles on Chesterton during the history of the magazine (1905 to 1940) — three. Example: *The American Ecclesiastical Review*: number of articles to date — two, plus nine book reviews. Indexed reference to Chesterton in official papal documents (*Acta Apostolicis Sedis* and *Insegnamenti*) — one, in the transcript of Pope Paul VI's general audience of October 13, 1971. There are many articles on Chesterton in general or on aspects of his writings other than the apologetic, theological aspect; yet consulting the *Index to Religious Periodical Literature*, one will find only five «Chesterton» articles indexed for the 20 to 260 plus periodicals reviewed bi-annually during the period 1949 (first publication of the *Index*) to date. The articles that we have been able to locate we have, of course, taken into account, although we do not consider them here for the sake of brevity.

appear until much later: Thomas N. Hart's work, *G. K. Chesterton's Case for Christianity: A Critical Study* (1974). Hart classifies Sister Maria Virginia's *Evangel* as «an entirely unsystematic and uncritical encomium», while at the same time he ignored Handacre's *Authodoxy* completely⁹. At present, the last analysis related to Chesterton's apologetic can be found in Yves Denis' *G. K. Chesterton: Paradoxe et Catholicisme* (1978), which in turn ignores Hart completely. Denis takes all of Chesterton's works into consideration — from the poems and travel books to the more obviously apologetic writings. He analyzes, at great length, the author's use of paradox as an apologetic tool, wheresoever such uses can be detected¹⁰.

Hart's book is the only one among these six mentioned to study all of Chesterton's apologetic works with the express intention of defining and analyzing the author's defense of the faith. Because the object of the present study is exactly the same, Hart's investigation has been of special interest. Whereas Hart makes his analysis on the basis of a philosophical method, we shall use a theological method.

This difference in approach to the study of Chesterton's apologetic method involves a radical change of perspective and consequently leads to a considerable difference in the conclusions drawn from such a study¹¹. Above all, this change of pers-

9. Hart's *A Critical Study* is a doctoral dissertation which was submitted at the Graduate Theological Union (Berkeley, California). One can obtain his book in the form of a photocopy «published on demand» by University Microfilms. We also take into account the article published as a summary of the conclusions arrived at in his dissertation. See T. N. HART, «G. K. Chesterton's Case for Christianity» in *Communio* (U. S. edition), Vol. II, N° 4 (1975). For Hart's commentary on Sister Virginia's book, see *G. K. Chesterton's Case for Christianity: A Critical Study* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1974), p. 17-8, footnote 26.

10. In addition to the six books referred to above, one of more general the definite interest for the topic of our study is Maisie Ward's *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*. Although understandably brief in her consideration of the author's writings, Ward makes available much of the personal correspondence and biographical detail pertinent to Chesterton's intellectual formation and final conversion. We would also add here that Ian Boyd is presently preparing a study of Chesterton's theological thought and will possibly provide further insight on the topic of the author's apologetic method. In this same respect, it should be noted that William M. Ogradowski is in the final stages of his doctoral dissertation on Chesterton's conversion to Catholicism; the thesis will be defended in June of 1982 at the Gregorian University in Rome.

11. The key note of Hart's study is that of judging, from a philosophical perspective, the truth of what Chesterton argues in his apologetic. He treats the

pective enables us to discover and appreciate the originality of the argumentation and mode of exposition used by Chesterton in his apologetic.

Scope and Procedure of the Present Study

Therefore, using a theological perspective, we intend in the present study:

- 1) to extract the basic arguments from Chesterton's apologetic writings;
- 2) to determine the apologetic method which the author employs in his defense of the faith.

As far as determining apologetic method, it should be understood that we are seeking not only the overall combination and logic of a series of arguments proposed as a justification of the rational foundation of the faith, but also the author's mode of exposition, that is, the very manner in which he argues, his presentation, and the qualities of his argumentation.

With respect to the works which compose Chesterton's apologetic, two are especially important because of their systematic

apologist as a philosopher of life who with little or no methodological awareness makes a convincing case for Christianity. The first part of the study is the most interesting; Hart cites Chesterton extensively, making a point to restrict his exposition to what the apologist says and to the order in which he presents his arguments. The present reader will find no substantial difference between Hart's study and our own in that which concerns the quotes cited and the summaries presented of Chesterton's arguments. On the other hand, Hart criticizes Chesterton on the grounds that the author diminishes the effectiveness of his case for Christianity because of his «spousal to Roman Catholicism», thus identifying himself with «an institution under heavy attack». Chesterton «saw the various Protestant bodies as exaggerating particular Christian insights at the expense of others; he thought the original balance of truths was preserved best in Roman Catholicism has itself been driven to exaggerations in reaction against ideas it has judged to be too strong». Unfortunately, Hart concludes, Chesterton had no sense of the «provisional character ... attached ..., at least to some extent, to dogmatic and ethical commitments of our forebears in the Church». Hart also affirms that Chesterton's apologetic suffers because he was «content with the theology of St. Thomas», a theology «which may not be best suited to man's present self-understanding». Although these statements do not appear in Hart's article published in *Communio*, they are noted occasionally in his doctoral dissertation. See HART, *A Critical Study*, *op. cit.*, p. 5, 23-4, 49, 249-50, 272-4.

presentation; namely, *Orthodoxy* (1908) and *The Everlasting Man* (1925).

Heretics (1905), *The Thing* (1929), and *The Well and the Shallows* (1935) are each a collection of diverse and mostly independent essays loosely tied together by an introduction and the general purpose of apologetic argument. *The Catholic Church and Conversion* (1927) follows a slightly more ordered exposition than these last three, but again is a general unsystematic collection of arguments and ideas which in this case Chesterton threads together with the common theme of his own conversion. At the end of *The Catholic Church and Conversion* are currently included two short essays originally published separately in other works; the two are: «The Reason Why» and «Upon This Rock». *The Common Man* (1960) —also a collection of essays, some of which are only indirectly related to apologetic argument— follows the basic line of *Heretics* and *The Well and the Shallows*.

St. Francis of Assisi (1923) and *St. Thomas Aquinas* (1933), being biographies of a sort on the two respective friars, are written with the same general purpose which guides Chesterton's argument in all the previously mentioned works; namely, to show the rational foundation of the faith here explained through the living example of the two saints. We also consider *Autobiography* (1936) in the same way as a general support to the main argument of *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man*. Though neither a true autobiography nor in the strict sense an apologetic work, it is also a primary element in the author's defense of the faith inasmuch as its overall argument concerns the process and reality of his change from agnostic to Roman Catholic.

We have additionally attempted to account for the other works among the approximately one hundred books written by Chesterton. While not forming part of the author's apologetic and yet bearing certain relation to it, *What's Wrong with the World*, *George Bernard Shaw*, *Generally Speaking*, and others need to be taken into consideration. In this respect we have briefly noted or in general consulted one aspect or another of such works to the extent possible and proper to the scope of the present study.

Because I have enjoyed the cooperation and assistance of so



many in the realization of this study, it would only be fair and just to thank them. Perhaps few have had, as I, the reliable and constant guidance which Prof. Dr. Luis Baturone has provided these last two years as director of this doctoral thesis. I hold in no less esteem the insight with which the Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Prof. Dr. José Luis Illanes, selected the topic of study, not to mention the many other professors of the University of Navarre who lent me their support and ideas.





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BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE THESIS

The works listed in our bibliography have been selected according to the following criteria:

- a) Works directly referenced in our study; these have been highlighted with an asterisk.
- b) Works both by G. K. Chesterton and other authors which have been consulted either directly or indirectly and which the reader will find interesting for a better comprehension of Chesterton's defense of the faith, his conversion, and the more immediate cultural and historical circumstances.
- c) G. K. Chesterton's works are arranged according to the date of the original British publication. (Reprints are denoted by the abbreviation «rpt».)
- d) No attempt has been made to list all of the approximately one hundred books and fifteen hundred plus articles written by Chesterton, nor the equally voluminous material by other authors on Chesterton and his work. Instead we have listed those works directly relating to the study of Chesterton's apologetic method. For a more complete yet by no means exhaustive bibliography of the works by Chesterton and his commentators, consult:

John SULLIVAN, *G. K. Chesterton: A Bibliography* (New York: Barnes & Noble/London: University of London Press, 1958); 208pp.

— *Chesterton Continued: A Bibliographical Supplement* (London: University of London Press, 1968); 120pp.

— *Chesterton Three: A Bibliographical Postscript* (Bedford: Vintage Publications, 1980); 48pp.

— «Additions to Chesterton Three» in *The Chesterton Review*, vol. VII, n° 3 (1981) 225-8.

Many books, articles, reviews, etc. written by Chesterton or by other authors on Chesterton, not listed in the Sullivan bibliographies, can be found in the Vintage Books Catalogue (15 Shaftesbury Avenue, Bedford England) put together by Aidan Mackey.

In consulting the bibliography, the reader should not be surprised to find some of Chesterton's works listed as first editions with dates of publication such as 1965 or even later. Many of the author's articles, essays, poems, etc. are currently being collected from the magazines and newspapers he wrote for and being published in book form.

I. WORKS OF G. K. CHESTERTON

A. *Works of Primary Interest in Chesterton's Apologetic*

- (*) *Heretics* (1905, rpt. London: John Lane, 1928)
- (*) *Orthodoxy* (1908, rpt. London: John Lane, 1943); this is the edition used for the present study. First British edition: 1908; first American: 1909. It does not include «Preface».
- (*) *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1959); an American edition including «Preface» by G. K. Chesterton.
- (*) *The Everlasting Man* (1925, rpt. Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1960).
- (*) *The Catholic Church and Conversion* (1926, rpt. London: Burns & Oates, 1960); includes two additional essays by G. K. Chesterton: «The Reason Why» (p. 101-112), originally published in *Twelve Modern Apostles and their Creeds* (New York, 1926), and «Upon This Rock» (p. 113-126), originally published in *An Outline of Christianity* (London, 1926).
- (*) *The Thing: Why I am a Catholic* (1929, rpt. New York: Dodd & Mead, 1948).
- (*) *St. Francis of Assisi* (1923, rpt. Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1957).
- (*) *St. Thomas Aquinas* (1933, rpt. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1956).
- (*) *The Well and the Shallows* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935).
- (*) *Autobiography* (1936, rpt. London: Hutchinson, 1937).
- (*) *The Common Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950).

B. *Other Works by Chesterton*

- The Defendant* (London: Johnson, 1901); collection of various essays.
- All Things Considered* (London: Methuen, 1908); collection of various essays.
- (*) «Jesus or Christ? A Reply to Mr. Roberts» in *The Chesterton Review*, Vol. VII, n° 2 (1981); originally published in *Hibbert Journal* (July, 1909).

- (*) *George Bernard Shaw* (London: John Lane, 1909/second edition with additional chapter published 1935, rpt. London: John Lane, 1961); literary criticism bordering on biography.
The Ball and the Cross (London: Wells Gardner, 1910); novel.
- (*) *What's Wrong with the World* (1910, rpt. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956).
The Innocence of Fr. Brown (London: Cassell, 1911); first of five books in Fr. Brown series.
- (*) *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1912, rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1955); literary criticism, important for Chesterton's comments on Cardinal J. H. Newman.
The New Jerusalem (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1920); important travel book containing reflections on Chesterton's Holy Land visit.
The Superstition of Divorce (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920).
Eugenics and Other Evils (London: Cassel, 1922).
Superstitions of the Skeptic (Cambridge: Heffer, 1925).
Social Reform and Birth Control (London: Simpkin-Kent, League of National Life, 1927); pamphlet.
Chesterton Catholic Anthology (New York: Kenedy and Sons, 1929); compiled and edited by Patriack Braybrooke with approval of G. K. Chesterton, foreword by Owen Francis Dudley.
Generally Speaking (1928, rpt. New York: Dodd & Mead, 1929); collection of various essays.
G. K. C. as M. C. (London: Methuen, 1929); collection of thirty-seven introductions previously published in the works of other authors.
The Resurrection of Rome (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1930); historical, political, social, and apologetic commentary.
Christendom in Dublin (London: Sheed and Ward, 1932); essays on Eucharistic Congress of Dublin.
- (*) *Essays and Poems* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1958).
The Man who was Chesterton: The Best Essays, Stories, Poems and Other Writings of G. K. Chesterton (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1960); representative anthology of Chesterton's writings.

II. SOURCES OF MAGISTERIUM AND SACRED SCRIPTURE

- (*) Pope LEO XIII, encyclical *Libertas* in *Acta Leonis XIII*, vol. VIII (1888).
- (*) SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965.
Pope PAUL VI, «Trasfigurazione del Sacerdote in Ministro di Cristo» in

Insegnamenti di Paolo VI, vol. IX (1971); text of general audience of October 13, 1971 containing parenthetic reference to G. K. Chesterton's Fr. Brown stories.

- (*) *The Holy Bible*, Confraternity Version (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1958); all texts cited are taken from this translation in the «New American Catholic Edition».

III. WORKS OF ST. AUGUSTINE AND ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

- (*) St. AUGUSTINE, *Answer to Skeptics in The Fathers of the Church: Writings of St. Augustine*, vol. I (New York: CIMA, 1948); original title — *Contra Academicos*, translation by D. J. Kavanagh.
- (*) — *The Advantage of Believing in The Fathers of the Church: The Writings of St. Augustine*, vol. II (New York: Father of the Church, Inc., 1947); original title — *De Utilitate Credendi*, trabskatuib by L. Meagher.
- (*) St. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* (Romae: Marietti, 1956; of particular interest to our study. — I, q. 1, art. 1; III, q. 61, art. 1.
- (*) — *In Symbolum Apostolorum Expositio in Opuscula Theologica*, vol. II (Romae: Marietti, 1954).

IV. BOOKS AND ARTICLES BY OTHER AUTHORS

- American Ecclesiastical Review*, Book reviews of works by Chesterton: *St. Francis* — vol. LXXI (1924)214; *Superstitions of the Sceptic* — vol. LXXIII (1925) 556; *The Catholic Church and Conversion* — vol. LXXVI (1927)223; *Catholic Anthology* — vol. LXXXI (1929)557; *Come to Think of It, Resurrection of Rome, and The Thing* — vol. LXX-XIV (1931)318; *Christendom in Dublin* — vol. LXXXIX (1933)447; *St. Thomas* — vol. XC (1934)436; «On Running after One's Hat» — vol. XC (1934)445; *Autobiography* — vol. XCVI (1937)437.
- (*) X. M. LE BACHELET, «Apolotétique. Apologie» in *Dictionnaire Apolo-gétique de la Foi*, 4th ed. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1925).
- Dudley BARKER, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (New York: Stein & Day, 1973).
- A. BAUDRILLART, ed., «Revue des Revues» in *Revue Pratique d'Apolo-gétique*, vol. XXX, n° 350 (1920)509-11; appraisal given of J. de Ton-quédec's articles on Chesterton's apologetic.
- A. D. BELDEN, «G. K. Chesterton: The Prince of Paradox» in *London Quartely & Holborn Review*, vol. CLXXXI (1956).
- Hilaire BELLOC, *On the Place of Gilbert Chesterton in English Litera-ture* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1940); insightful analysis on Ches-terton's use of imagery.

- Ian BOYD, *The Novels of G. K. Chesterton: A Study in Art and Propaganda* (London: Elek, 1975); a study of Chesterton's eleven novels which gives a good insight into the author's use of propaganda for his political, social, and religious thought.
- (*) — ed., «News and Comments» in *The Chesterton Review*, vol. VIII, n° 1 (1982).
- (*) Horace J. BRIDGES, *Criticisms of Life: Studies in Faith, Hope and Despair* (New York/Philadelphia: Houghton-Mifflin, 1915).
- Auguste T. P. de BROGLIE, *Problèmes et Conclusions de l'Histoire des Religions* (Putois-Cretté, 1897).
- Emile CAMMAERTS, *The Laughing Prophet: The Seven Virtues & G. K. Chesterton* (London: Methuen, 1937).
- Cecil CHESTERTON, *G. K. Chesterton: A Criticism* (London: Alston Rivers, 1908).
- (*) Cyril CLEMENS, *Chesterton: As Seen by His Contemporaries* (Webster Groves, Missouri: International Mark Twain Society, 1939).
- Lawrence J. CLIPPER, *G. K. Chesterton* (New York: Twayne, 1974).
- D. J. CONLON, *G. K. Chesterton: The Critical Judgements, Part I, 1900-1937* (Antwerp: Antwerp Studies in English Literature, 1976); reproduces significant reviews of Chesterton's major works as they appeared.
- (*) Yves DENIS, *G. K. Chesterton: Paradoxe et Catholicisme* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1978); lengthy and detailed study of paradox in Chesterton's writings with analysis of his apologetic use of paradox in argumentation. Also includes interesting comparison of Newman's and Chesterton's conversions. This book is the publication of l'abbé Denis' doctoral dissertation in Theology at the Sorbonne (Paris).
- (*) — «The Theological Background of Chesterton's Social Thought» in *The Chesterton Review*, vol. VII, n° 1 (1981).
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- (*) Christopher DERRICK, «Chesterton and the Pursuit of Happiness» in *The Chesterton Review*, vol. VI, n° 2 (1980).
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- (*) Reginal GARRIGOU-LAGRANGE, *El Sentido Común* (Buenos Aires: Desclée, 1945); original title — *Le Sens Commun*, Spanish translation by O. N. Derisi and E. E. Melo.
- (*) — *De Revelatione*, vol. I & II, 5th ed. (Romae: Desclée, 1950).
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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Auto</i>	<i>Autobiography</i> (London, Hutchinson, 1937).
<i>C.C. and C.</i>	<i>The Catholic Church and Conversion</i> (London: Burns & Oates, 1960)
<i>Common Man</i>	<i>The Common Man</i> (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950).
<i>Ever.Man</i>	<i>The Everlasting Man</i> (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1960).
<i>Heretics</i>	<i>Heretics</i> (London: John Lane, 1928).
<i>Orthodoxy</i>	<i>Orthodoxy</i> (London: John Lane, 1943).
<i>Shaw</i>	<i>George Bernard Shaw</i> (London: John Lane, 1961).
<i>St. Francis</i>	<i>St. Francis of Assisi</i> (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1957).
<i>St. Thomas</i>	<i>St. Thomas Aquinas</i> (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956).
<i>Thing</i>	<i>The Thing: Why I am a Catholic</i> (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1948).
<i>Well and Shallows</i>	<i>The Well and the Shallows</i> (London: Shee and Ward, 1935).
<i>What's</i>	<i>What's Wrong with the World</i> (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956).





MODERN VALUES IN THE APOLOGETICS OF G. K. CHESTERTON

Some Preliminary Remarks

A frequently employed argument in apologetics is that based on the sublimity of revealed doctrine. The argument demonstrates that the excellence of the teachings of the Catholic faith can only be explained by one fact: the faith is of divine origin. And since it comes to us from God, it is credible. Chesterton uses this logic continually; so much so, that it constitutes one of the principal arguments of his apologetic. The manner in which he formulates the argument, however, differs slightly from that found in the apologetics structured according to the traditional method. The sublimity of revealed truth is seen most clearly in the supernatural content of Sacred Scriptures, the theological virtues, the life of sanctity within the Church, etc.; consequently, many traditional apologetics have expounded on this idea to show the divine origin of Catholic doctrine. Chesterton, on the contrary, emphasizes not the supernatural but rather the natural content of God's Revelation.

What, we may ask, is so sublime about the natural content of God's Revelation? What does Chesterton hope to show by demonstrating that the Church teaches natural truths? In *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, the author explains the logic of his method:

... the Catholic Church plays exactly the part that she professes to play; something that knows what we cannot be expected to know, but should probably accept if we really knew it. I am not in this case, any more than in the greater part of this study, referring to the things that are really best worth knowing. The supernatural truths are connected with the mystery of grace and are a matter for theologians;

admittedly a rather delicate and difficult matter even for them. But though the transcendental truths are the most important they are not those that best illustrate this particular point, which concerns the decisions which can be more or less tested by experience. And of all those things that can be tested by experience I could tell the same story: ...The world deceived me and the Church would at any time have undeceived me ¹.

There are certain fundamental natural truths. They are not the most sublime truths; but they are for every man at every moment the principles of his nature. We are often deceived by the fashions and fads of the world, but the Church can undeceive us by teaching us these truths. Once we have listened to the Church, we can determine the veracity of these truths on account of the fact that they are part of our natural experience, on account of the fact that «there almost always is a human reason for all the merely human advice given by the Church to humanity» ². More important still, we will begin to see the credibility of the Church when we thus realize that «the Faith had not only been true all along, but it had been true to the first and last things, to our unspoilt instincts and our conclusive experience...» ³. In short, whether or not the Church will make us saints, whether or not we know what it is to be a saint, we will see that the Church has at least provided us with a way to be men.

To those whom Chesterton addresses, his argument will appear at first sight untenable, perhaps absurd, at best an excuse for his adherence to the Catholic faith. For he directs himself to those who like himself before his conversion have been schooled in the superstition that Catholics have fled from the world to shelter themselves safely under the dogmas of the Church in order to avoid confrontation with the realities of the present life ⁴. In return for that shelter — as we still hear today

1. *C.C. and C.*, p. 90.

2. *Ibidem*, p. 92.

3. *Ibidem*, p. 89.

4. In his writings Chesterton had to defend both the Church and his own conversion against statements such as the following made by his contemporary, Hugh Kingsmill: «I attribute this change of fact that as he grew older, he could not summon up enough energy to continue his celebration of the man in the

from the critics of the Church — the Catholic surrenders his freedom and forsakes the possibility of happiness. And this (continuing the criticism) because the Church restricts man to a backward ethics and a parochial philosophy, thus hindering him from attaining his noblest aspirations; it impedes progress and jeopardizes world social order; and finally because the Church lacks authenticity, indulging in a pharisaical tyranny of the minds and hearts of men. Some may admit there being a certain reason for hiding behind the mystical ideal of holiness, the supernatural, and the world to come; but their first reaction is one of negative surprise to be faced with Chesterton's claim that the faith makes the Christian the most manlike among men.

This being the superstition, Chesterton defends the Church by taking the offensive; that is, he attempts not only to vindicate the Church but also to show that it is the Church with all of its dogmas which allows men to be free and happy in this life as well as the next, that the Church alone provides for the ideal of progress and social order, etc.

These five themes, namely: 1) the pursuit of happiness, 2) freedom, 3) man's noble aspirations, 4) the ideal of progress and social order, 5) authenticity, are those which Chesterton has chosen in order to show the sublimity of revealed doctrine. They may be called, for the importance conceded them today, the modern values. There is nothing especially modern about them; but, ironically, they are esteemed as particularly modern, if only because men feel of late that there has never been a greater lack of freedom, nobility, progress, and authenticity. On the same account, from the author's point of view, never have they been so poorly understood. And if men have misrepresented these values, it can only be that they have failed to reach an understanding or acceptance of the fundamental truths of the natural order.

Consequently, Chesterton structures his argument on an analysis of human nature and the created order so as to determine that which constitutes each of these modern values. In the same stroke of argumentation, he tries to show that the Church has preserved these ideals in their integrity for the benefit of all men.

street, and was more concerned with finding seasons (*sic* — read: reasons) for his faith in his last refuge from a perplexing world, the Roman Catholic Church». See CLEMENS, *op. cit.*, p. 30-1.

1. *The Pursuit of Happiness*

The ideas of freedom and happiness are necessarily connected; Chesterton usually speaks of one only to refer to the other, and for as much either could be examined first. But of the two, happiness is the more important, being the first and last of all things, the primary motive and the final goal.

Chesterton finds the true meaning of happiness and its subsequent apologetic value in two medieval men of definite modern appeal: St. Francis of Assisi and St. Thomas Aquinas. Both stand out in the author's work, if only because he wrote a biography on each; yet they are not just any two. Each of them is an example of one of the basic elements in Chesterton's apologetic and, in particular, his case for the faith as the means to happiness: St. Francis because of his mysticism, St. Thomas for his common sense.

The Paradoxical Terms of Happiness

Something about being happy exceeds the obvious calculations: «Happiness is a mystery like religion, and should never be rationalized»⁵. The Christian mysticism of St. Francis best illustrates in life what cannot be immediately defined in formulas, or in other words, that part of happiness which cannot be rationalized without destroying its meaning. There are many aspects of his life which strike us today as especially noble and intelligible: «...St. Francis anticipated all that is most liberal and sympathetic in the modern mood; the love of nature; the love of animals; the sense of social compassion...»⁶. But that which explains his joy will be found in an apparently unhappy and unintelligible ideal, namely, the saint's hunger for sacrifice and suffering.

Christian doctrine insists on the reality of two different passions: joy and sorrow. Chesterton first attempts to reconcile them in *Orthodoxy* claiming that «Christianity is a superhuman paradox whereby two opposite passions may blaze beside each other»⁷. They «blaze» as such because the Christian faith

5. *Heretics*, p. 103.

6. *St. Francis*, p. 9.

7. *Orthodoxy*, p. 252.

maintains a peculiar balance in the question of happiness: «Everything human must have in it both joy and sorrow... 'but' man is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial». Christianity provides man with that manliness because «by its creed joy becomes something gigantic and sadness something special and small»⁸. There must be more, however, to this peculiar balance. Every Christian has to take up his cross and follow Christ; no one will deny, for example, that St. Francis carried his with a life of abnegation and penance. But how, many will ask, can *that* make anyone happy?⁹

In order to show that the faith leads men to happiness, the apologist might choose one of several paths. First, one could portray a Christianity without the Cross; but then that is not Christianity. Second, one could emphasize the joyous aspects of the faith while taking the Cross and Christian penance into account only as an objection to be overcome, only «as a sort of scandal, to be touched on tenderly but with pain»¹⁰. This, however, Chesterton also calls a mistake:

You may dislike the idea of asceticism; you may dislike equally the idea of martyrdom; for that matter you may have an honest and natural dislike of the whole conception of sacrifice symbolised by the cross. But if it is an intelligent dislike, you will still retain the capacity for seeing the point of a story; of the story of a martyr or even the story of a monk. You will not be able rationally to read the Gospel and regard the Crucifixion as an afterthought or an anti-climax or an accident in the life of Christ: it is obviously the point of the story like the point of a sword, the sword that pierced the heart of the Mother of God¹¹.

The Cross of Christ is the stumbling block. The very image of the cross suggests the same; «...it has at its heart a collision

8. See *Orthodoxy*, p. 274-6.

9. This is the question which Chesterton states to be the first and most important for the would-be convert; or as he says in *St. Thomas*, p. 81, it is the «obstacle for most modern people in even beginning to understand them», i. e. the saints and their creed.

10. *St. Francis*, p. 14.

11. *St. Francis*, p. 14.

and a contradiction»¹². That block and that contradiction are real in the sense of really there in the path of anyone's conversion. So the question inevitably arises and repeatedly. How can Christian penance lead to happiness or even be compatible with joy? What is the «practical reconciliation of the gaiety and austerity» in the life of a Christian?¹³

The question is paradoxical; it denotes the seeming opposition encountered at every turn in the doctrine of the Cross. To answer it, Chesterton turns to something from human experience, though something as paradoxical as the question posed by the would-be convert:

The first fact to realize about St. Francis is involved in the first fact with which his story starts; that when he said from the first that he was a Troubadour, and said later that he was a Troubadour of a newer and nobler romance, he was not using a mere metaphor, but understood himself much better than the scholars understand him. He was, to the last agonies of asceticism, a Troubadour. He was a lover. He was a lover of God and he was really and truly a lover of men... And for the modern reader the clue to the asceticism and all the rest can best be found in the stories of lovers when they seemed to be rather like lunatics. Tell it as the tale of one of the Troubadours, and the wild things he would do for his lady, and the whole of the modern puzzle disappears. ...All these riddles (of asceticism) would be easily resolved in the simplicity of any noble love...¹⁴.

Christ never used more paradoxical terms than when He spoke of happiness to His disciples: «For he who would save his life will lose it; but he who loses his life for my sake will find it»¹⁵. The Christian doctrine of the Cross cannot be rationalized; but the natural experience of a noble human love does a great deal towards explaining it. Admittedly the explanation, that is, the example of human love, is itself something of a mystery in the natural order. But it forms part of our natural

12. *Orthodoxy*, p. 36.

13. *St. Francis*, p. 14.

14. *St. Francis*, p. 15-16.

15. *Matthew XVI*, 25.

experience; it can be grasped as a reality; and therefore it does illustrate the truth of Christ's teaching, if only partially.

The Straightforward Terms of Happiness

The shortcoming of the explanation, even as Chesterton realizes, is that human love often becomes confused with mere sentiment and emotion. Worse still, the mysterious thing called love can be used as an excuse for something equally mysterious called sin. While it is true that a mystic like St. Francis can not be full understood «by the exercise of common sense»¹⁶, we should always return to common sense. «The mystic will have nothing to do with mere mystery; mere mystery is generally a mystery of iniquity»¹⁷. For this reason Chesterton also proposes a few straightforward principles on the nature of happiness, first in the refutation of several errors (those of the hedonist, voluntarists, and stoics), secondly in the positive example of St. Thomas Aquinas¹⁸.

In *Heretics* the author confronts man's ever prevalent temptation to limit happiness to the enjoyment of the momentary pleasure. It is hedonism in the refined form of a cult:

Many of the most brilliant intellects of our time have urged us to the same selfconscious snatching a rare delight. Walter Pater said that we are all under sentence of death, and the only course was to enjoy exquisite moments simply for those moments' sake. ...It is the *carpe diem* religion; but the *carpe diem* religion is not the religion of happy people, but of very unhappy people¹⁹.

16. See *St. Francis*, p. 62.

17. *Ibidem*, p. 76.

18. In connection with the question of asceticism, Chesterton also gives an answer of a doctrinal nature in *St. Thomas*, p. 83: «...the Catholic mind moves upon two planes; that of the Creation and that of the Fall». In the development of this argument, he stresses again the faith's balance of pleasure and suffering, joy and sorrow. The Christian life is essentially one of praise for God because He created all things good (the doctrine of Creation); but at the same time a life of abnegation because man all too easily becomes a slave of creatures (the doctrine of the Fall). The best synthesis of the idea is found in a definition stated in *The Common Man*, p. 158: «The saint is he who enjoys good things and refuses them».

19. *Heretics*, p. 102.

In contrast to this sort of pleasure-seeking motivated by a fear or ignorance of where and when this life will end, common sense dictates that happiness must be in essence a thing for eternity:

Great joy has in it the sense of immortality... A man may have, for instance, a moment of ecstasy in first love, or a moment of victory in battle. ...But the patriot thinks of the flag as eternal; the lover thinks of his love as something that cannot end. These moments are filled with eternity; these moments are joyful because they do not seem momentary ²⁰.

In effect, the man without a vision of the next life ends up with a poor vision of his present existence. He awaits his death sentence. «He feasts because life is not joyful; he revels because he is not glad» ²¹.

In an essay titled the «The Frivolous Man», Chesterton comes back to make the same point with an added precision:

The really frivolous man, the frivolous man of society, we all know, and any of us who know him truthfully know that if he has one characteristic more salient than any other it is that he is a pessimist. The idea of the gay and thoughtless man of fashion, intoxicated with pagan delights, is a figment invented entirely by religious people who never met any such man in their lives. The man of pleasure is one of the fables of the pious. Puritans have given a great deal too much credit to the power which the world has to satisfy the soul; in admitting that the sinner is gay and careless they have given a way the strongest part of their case ²².

As the author implies with his reference to Puritanism, a religion based on prejudices and taboos fails to distinguish frivolity from Christian joy. Such a religion distorts the notion of

20. *Ibidem*, p. 103-4.

21. *Ibidem*, p. 106; Chesterton makes a similar point when refuting the Marxist identification of happiness with economic prosperity; see *Well and Shallows*, p. 128 and *Ever.Man*, p. 137-141. In short, he argues that material goods alone do not satisfy man because man is not just an animal but rather a creature constituted of both a body and a spiritual soul.

22. *Common Man*, p. 137-8.

happiness by assuming in effect that there is something wrong with being happy in this life. The Catholic Church is the first to agree that pleasure-seeking will not make men happy in the next life; but then she is also the first to add that neither will it make them happy in this one.

There is another error yet more fatal to the notion of human happiness than that of the *carpe diem* cult. At least the hedonists have one clear idea; they are seeking something to make them happy, even if what they find does not lead them there in practice. In *Orthodoxy* Chesterton points out the danger of the second mistake, namely that of the voluntarists:

They say that choice is itself the divine thing. Thus Mr. Bernard Shaw has attacked the old idea that men's acts are to be judged by the standard of the desire of happiness. He says that a man does not act for his happiness, but from his will. He does not say, «Jam will make me happy», but «I want jam»²³.

The proponents of this philosophy substitute happiness for will as if the will had no object, as if we were not moved to want something because it will make us happy. Of course, the author does not pretend that jam lifts a man into ecstasy. The jam, or the example of jam, serves to show that even man's final end must be something as real as jam: «You cannot admire will in general, because the essence of will is that it is particular»²⁴.

Happiness and Man's Final End

Chesterton describes the singularly negative error of the stoic philosophy in his presentation of the extraordinarily positive faith of the Angelic Doctor. In *St. Thomas Aquinas*, he narrates briefly the account of a certain occurrence according to which Our Lord spoke to the saint, «told the kneeling Friar that he had written rightly, and offered him the choice of a reward among all the things of the world»²⁵. What is important is not so much Our Lord's miraculous question as the saint's

23. *Orthodoxy*, p. 53.

24. *Ibidem*, p. 55.

25. *St. Thomas*, p. 107.

down-to-earth reply to the Creator offering Creation: «I will have Thyself». As the author comments: «Not all, I think, have appreciated the point of this particular story as applied to this particular saint. ...His answer is not so inevitable or simple as some may suppose»²⁶. For the meaning of the reply is only understood in comparison to what another man might have responded:

The hermit, true or false, the fakir, the fanatic or the cynic ... can all be pictured as tempted by the powers of the earth, of the air or of the heavens, with the offer of the best of everything; and replying that they want nothing. In the Greek cynic or stoic it really meant the mere negative; that he wanted nothing. In the Oriental mystic or fanatic, it sometimes meant a sort of positive negative; that he wanted Nothing; that Nothing was really what he wanted²⁷.

In the pursuit of happiness, many may have realized that material goods and rewards do not satisfy, or further still, that they leave us unmistakably dissatisfied. But we do not attain happiness through wanting nothing in particular, and even less through desiring Nothing.

St. Thomas, continues the author, «was not a person who wanted nothing; and he was a person who was enormously interested in everything»²⁸. When the saint gives his answer, he is enormously desirous of something. It is the Creator Himself offering Creation itself; and St. Thomas asks for nothing less than his Creator. But the point is not in the beauty of having been enough of a mystic to rise above the petty rewards of the world to choose the ultimate gift of God. The point is found not in what St. Thomas leaves behind but in that he wants and chooses something — that something or rather Someone who is the Creator of everything. For happiness is not in the escape, nor in the attainment of the desire by which nothing is desired. It is found in the possession of a reward. Some may differ

26. *St. Thomas*, p. 107-8.

27. *Ibidem*, p. 107.

28. *Ibidem*, p. 107-8.

about the reward; it is only common sense, however, that to be happy we must attain some good.

It has been implied in the whole of the argument so far given that not just anything will make men happy. That St. Thomas chooses the Creator instead of a creature is not incidental to the notion of happiness, even as already suggested. In *Heretics, Orthodoxy, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chesterton only leads up to a conclusion which he makes explicitly in his arguments against the Communists and the Capitalists: «They have taken what all ancient philosophers called the Good, and translated it as the Goods»²⁹. For example, when contesting the Communist ideal in an essay from *The Common Man* titled «God an Goods», the author sketches the historical development of modern atheistic movements. In every case, be it the Naturalism of the eighteenth century, the Liberalism of the nineteenth, etc., some sort of substitute in the form of an Earthly Paradise is offered to replace God. The substitutes are always disappointing. For the leaders of those movements have forgotten one fact of common sense:

...it is rather more difficult to be a happy animal, than to be a happy man. Indeed, a man cannot be an animal for the same reason that he cannot be an angel; because he is a man³⁰.

The atheists will always have an ideal; but their ideal is necessarily «some supposed betterment of humanity which will be a bribe for depriving humanity of divinity»³¹. And between God and goods, the Creator and creatures, only He will make man happy³².

In *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chesterton makes one final clarification of the Christian notion of happiness which more than any

29. *Well and Shallows*, p. 225.

30. *Common Man*, p. 74.

31. *Ibidem*, p. 75.

32. Chesterton gives related arguments showing that only the man grateful to God for everything that exists, and especially for his own unmerited life, can be truly happy. The idea is the same as above but stated from a different perspective; the realization of our dependence on God implies an acceptance of God as our ultimate end. See *Orthodoxy*, p. 81-2; *St. Francis*, p. 76-82; and *Auto*, p. 330-341.

of the preceding points argued is especially significant of the sublimity of the faith:

Alone upon the earth, and lifted and liberated from the wheels and whirlpools of the earth, stands up the faith of St. Thomas; ... vitally and vividly alone in declaring that life is a story, with a great beginning and a great close; rooted in the primeval joy of God and finding its fruition in the final happiness of humanity; opening with the colossal chorus in which the sons of God shouted for joy, and ending in that mystical comradeship, shown in a shadowy fashion in those ancient words that move like an archaic dance; «For His delight is with the sons of men»³³.

Or to state the idea more simply, the happiness of the Christian is not his own happiness but God's own happiness which is shared with His creature.

In summary, Chesterton argues for the Christian faith showing: 1) that the Christian can be happy both in this life and the next; 2) that only those who await the reward of the world to come are happy in the world which surrounds them; 3) that our happiness is essentially the possession of some good; 4) that the only good which satisfies man is God, the Supreme Good; and, in conclusion, 5) that the Christian is happy whether with joy or sorrow in the carrying of the Cross of Christ because of all that he renounces, he does not renounce happiness. The Christian can live happily while refusing many of the goods of Creation because of all the goods he goes without, he is always coming closer to possessing the Supreme Good, his Creator or to be more precise, his Creator is gradually taking an ever greater hold on him. These points may not «prove» the credibility of the faith; but they are the beginning of the argument to be continued and, for that matter, the most important part. For everyone will ask himself at one point or another: Is this going to make me happy? Chesterton has only tried to give a better definition to the question by asking first: Do you know what happiness is?

33. *St. Thomas*, p. 92; see *Proverbs VIII*, 31.



2. *The Freedom of the Christian Faith and the Doctrine of the Dignity of Man*

In *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, having already presented several considerations in defense of the Catholic faith, Chesterton proposes a challenge to his reader:

Let the convert or still more the semiconvert, face any one fact that does seem to him to deface the Catholic scheme as falsehood; and if he faces in long enough he will probably find that it is the greatest truth of all. ...Indeed, I can undertake to justify the whole Catholic theology, if I be granted to start with the supreme sacredness and value of two things: Reason and Liberty. It is an illuminating comment on recurrent anti-Catholic talk that they are the two things which most people imagine to be forbidden to Catholics³⁴.

The sacredness of reason and liberty may seem little to ask of the would-be convert. Granted an acceptance of the value of both and nothing more, Chesterton does not pretend to give a complete justification. But it is the necessary basis for an apologetic; it is, according to the author, the indispensable point of agreement. Once the individual doubts the capacity which man has to grasp and verify truth, no argument can be given for no amount of reasoning will lead to a conclusion. This much Chesterton emphasizes time and again, as we have seen already, with his appeal to common sense. In the same manner, only the person who treasures his liberty will seek the freedom offered by the Church — and that regardless of his previously conceived opinions on what kind of freedom (or slavery) he imagines to find there.

The Outline of Liberty

If reviewing the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no one, not even the staunchest cri-

34. *C.C. and C.*, p. 93.

tic of Catholicism, could reasonably object to the Church's brief statement on freedom in modern society: «Never have men had so acute a sense of liberty as today while at the same time there arise new forms of social and psychological slavery»³⁵. Even so, many non-Catholics may be vaguely convinced that the Church herself has for a long time been the cause, or one of the causes, of such oppression. After all, her enemies have frequently said that the Church keeps Catholics, and would keep all men, from doing what they would be happier doing and from thinking what they would be wiser to think. Precisely on this point, Chesterton attempts to give a justification of the Catholic faith by showing that only in the Church does anyone find true liberty.

Chesterton insists adamantly on the «only»:

Of [the Church's] many extraordinary characters, this is perhaps the chief; that it proclaims Liberty. ...That is the real outstanding peculiarity, or eccentricity, of the peculiar sect called Roman Catholic. ...If anyone says that it is not in fact and history bound up with the Faith or Roman Catholicism, it is enough to refer him to the history and the facts. Nobody especially emphasised this spiritual liberty until the Church was established. People began instantly to question this spiritual liberty, when the Church began to be broken up. The instant a breach, or even a crack, had been made in the dyke of Catholicism, there poured through it the bitter sea of Calvinism, or in other words, of a very cruel form of fatalism. Since that time, it has taken the much duller form of Determinism. This sadness and sense of bondage is so general to mankind that it immediately made its appearance when the special spiritual message of liberty was silenced or interrupted anywhere. Wherever that message is heard, men think and talk in terms of will and choice; and they see no meaning in any of the philosophies of fate, whether desperate or resigned³⁶.

35. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965: «Numquam homines tam acutum ut hodie sensum libertatis habuerunt, dum nova interea genera socialis et psychicae servitutis exsurgunt». (N^o.4).

36. *Common Man*, p. 236-7; we would like to make reference to Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Libertas*: «Nihilominus complures numerantur, qui obesse

In the essay «The Outline of Liberty» from *The Common Man*, Chesterton does not go much beyond the history and the facts here cited. The argument is very much an outline; yet from the author addresses more fully in other works with respect to his argument of the facts and the history, namely, the notion of liberty and the historical case.

The Notion of Freedom

Just as many Catholics today, Chesterton had to confront in his own time the objection to any type of universal moral or intellectual restriction, an objection expressed aptly in G. B. Shaw's phrase cited in *Heretics*: «The golden rule is that there is no golden rule»³⁷. Also influential, as much during Chesterton's time as in our own, is the determinist negation of man's free will.

Against the determinis Chesterton asks the simple common-sense question: «Has a man free will; or is his sense of choice an illusion?»³⁸. In other words, one has to deny the evident to arrive at the less obvious conclusion of the determinists. Yet there is an equally tempting converse to the determinist position; namely, that of identifying liberty with choice, or liberty with the lack of limitations. In *Orthodoxy* the author notes that choice is only the beginning of our freedom; the end of liberty

Ecclesiam humanae libertati putent. Cuius rei causa in perverso quodam praeposteroque residet dei ipsa libertate iudicio. Hanc enim vel in ipsa sui intelligentia adulterant, vel plus aequo opinione dilatant, ita ut pertinere ad res sane multas contendant, in quibus, si recte diiudicari velit, liber esse homo non potest. (...) Iamvero sicut animi humani naturam simplicem, spirituales atque immortales, sic et libertatem nemo nec altius preaedicat, nec constantius asserit Ecclesia catholica, quae scilicet utrumque omni tempore docuit, sicque tueretur ut dogma. Neque id solum: sed contra dicentibus haereticis novarumque opinionum fautoribus, patrocinium libertatis Ecclesia suscipit, hominisque, tam grande bonum ab insteritu vindicavit». See P. LEO XIII, *Libertas in Acta Leonis XIII, VIII* (1888) 213,215; N^o. 1 and N^o. 5. In his own argument, Chesterton follows the same line of reasoning as suggested in the encyclical. He first refutes the adulterated concept of humana freedom as proposed by the liberals and other materialist philosophers in order to show that historically the Church alone has made true freedom possible for all men.

37. *Heretics*, 55.

38. *St. Thomas*, p. 130.

is to bind ourselves. Being free certainly requires the shedding of any slavery; but we are wrong to conclude then that freedom is the lack of all limitations because not all limitations are slavery:

If you draw a giraffe, you must draw him with a long neck. If, in your bold creative way, you hold yourself free to draw a giraffe with a short neck, you will really find that you are not free to draw a giraffe. The moment you step into the world of facts, you step into a world of limits. You can free things from alien or accidental laws, but not from the laws of their own nature. You may, if you like, free a tiger from his bars; but do not free him from his stripes. Do not free a camel of the burden of his hump: you may be freeing him from being a camel. Do not go about as a demagogue, encouraging triangles to break out of the prison of their three sides. If a triangle breaks out of its three sides, its life comes to a lamentable end³⁹.

Likewise, man may become a free man; he will not be free, however, by ceasing to be a man. His free will is essential to him, but there is something limited even in his faculty of volition. Because the will is particular, always desiring something specific, man limits himself by wanting something.

Every act of the will is an act of self-limitation. To desire action is to desire limitation. In that sense every act is an act of self-sacrifice. When you choose anything, you reject everything else⁴⁰.

This will appear a sort of philosophical exposition. But Chesterton directs it against the liberalists who would create an opposition between the constraints of Catholic doctrine and the ideal of human liberty. As in everything he argues about happiness, man has a goal. Man's greatness is always measured by the attainment of that goal. The reason of his freedom is not mere choice. In this connection, when summarizing the Angelic Doctor's insight on liberty, the author notes that the dignity of

39. *Orthodoxy*, p. 57.

40. *Ibidem*, p. 56; see also p. 57-61 and *Heretics*, p. 193-4.



man is rooted in the freedom he has to seek his final end, God, the Supreme Good:

And in exactly this sense he [St. Thomas] emphasized a certain dignity in Man, which was sometimes rather swallowed up in the purely theistic generalizations about God. Nobody would say he wanted to divide man from Good; but he did want to distinguish Man from God. In this strong sense of human dignity and liberty, there is much that can be and is appreciated now as a noble humanistic liberality. But let us not forget that its upshot was that very Free Will, or moral responsibility of Man, which so many modern liberals would deny. Upon this sublime and perillous liberty hang heaven and hell, and all the mysterious drama of the soul. It is distinction and not division; but man *can* divide himself from God, which, in a certain aspect, is the greatest distinction of all ⁴¹.

Man can attain happiness; he is free to do so. At the same time, in that liberty lies also a danger and a risk, since man, being free to choose, can divide himself from God. That is the drama of each soul; man is responsible for his destiny, be it heaven or hell ⁴².

The Historical Case

Chesterton was fond both of unmasking the fallacies hidden behind some of the catchwords of public opinion and of using other cant phrases to the advantage of apologetic argument. As there was, and perhaps still is, a certain public acceptance of the idea that man achieves real social freedom in democracy, he attempted to make a case for the Church as the defender of man's freedom by showing that only Christian doctrine has protected the democratic ideal ⁴³. An orthodox theologian might

41. *St. Thomas*, p. 29.

42. Chesterton gives lighter treatment to the same question in other texts; see *Orthodoxy*, p. 83-89 (discussion of the so-called «Doctrine of Conditional Joy»); p. 208-9, 233-4 (liberty and adventure); *Thing*, p. 17; *Auto*, p. 47-8; *Common Man*, p. 247.

43. An example of this argument can be found in *Orthodoxy*, p. 69ff and p. 199ff.

understandably cringe at the mere mention of such an argument, supposing that it refers to some connection between Catholicism and political interests. Whereas Chesterton assuredly does connect democracy with Christian doctrine, he states the ultimate foundation for it in terms possibly unacceptable to many «democrats», yet in a way definitely applicable to a viable apologetic:

The Catholic theology has nothing to do with democracy, for or against, in the sense of a machinery of voting or a criticism of particular political privileges. It is not committed to support what Whitman said for democracy, or even what Jefferson or Lincoln said for democracy. But it is absolutely committed to contradict what Mr. Mencken says against democracy. There will be Diocletian persecutions, there will be Dominican crusades, there will be rending of all religious peace and compromise, or even the end of civilization and the world, before the Catholic Church will admit that one single moron, or one single man, «is not worth saving»⁴⁴.

The force of Chesterton's argument, therefore, even when speaking of the democratic ideal, rests on his claim that only the Church defends the dignity of all men. In his *Autobiography* he explains that he was at first and finally attracted to Catholicism because he encountered, in the social-political circumstances of the early twentieth century, one authority which upheld the principle of human dignity and scores of other authorities who only talked about liberty while they proceeded to trample on a good number of human beings in the name of freedom:

Anybody reading this book (if anybody does) will see that from the very beginning my instinct about justice, about liberty and equality, was somewhat different from that current in our age; and from all the tendencies towards concentration and generalisation. It was my instinct to defend liberty in small and poor families; that is, to defend the rights of man as including the rights of

44. *Thing*, p. 18; see also p. 164-9 and *Well and Shallows*, p. 31.



property; especially the property of the poor. I did not really understand what I meant by Liberty, until I heard it called by the new name of Human Dignity. It was a new name to me; though it was part of a creed nearly two thousand years old. In short, I had blindly desired that a man should be in possession of something, if it were only his own body. In so far as materialistic concentration proceeds, a man will be in possession of nothing; not even his own body. Already there hover on the horizon sweeping scourges of sterilisation or social hygiene, applied to everybody and imposed by nobody. At least I will not argue here with what are quaintly called the scientific authorities on the other side. I have found one authority on my side ⁴⁵.

These words refer to a personal experience; as usual they are many. They are indicative, however, of Chesterton's case for the uniqueness of the Church's claim to being the protectress of man's liberty and dignity. For he argues in effect that wherever the notion of liberty is separated from Catholic doctrine (and especially the one doctrine that every man is a living body and immortal soul whom God wants to make happy forever in heaven), we no longer find liberty but slavery. This sounds, of course, to any Catholic all very reasonable. But can the author prove his point? Cannot we become, asks the sympathetic outsider, splendid humanists without going to the extremes of Catholicism? Is it not somewhat contradictory, in spite of all the refutations of the liberalists, to say that the Church defends liberty when we all know that she also demands strict subjection to a rigid system of dogmas?

Chesterton's first answer is to point out that the Church teaches dogma; but not for that can anyone logically contend that she imposes her teaching. Catholics are free to believe or not; the would-be convert has the liberty to convert or not ⁴⁶.

Still, we require more than this consolation. Why should we not exercise our freedom by accepting just that which is particularly human in the teaching of the Church without subjecting

45. *Auto*, p. 342.

46. This is the logic suggested by Chesterton in *C.C. and C.*, p. 46-7. See also *Well and Shallows*, p. 11.

ourselves to a series of supernatural mysteries incomprehensible by their very nature? What Chesterton tries to show in answer to this apparently sensible reaction is that in practice the merely natural advice given by the Church cannot be separated from the supernatural mysteries and manage to survive. Thus stated in *Heretics*, yet perhaps demonstrated better elsewhere: «Take away the supernatural, and what remains is the unnatural»⁴⁷.

Not aspiring to demonstrate his claim theoretically, Chesterton gives in *The Well and the Shallows* and historical argument, noting the practice of the Church as a teacher of dogmas and the general tendencies of the state governments which challenge those dogmas:

Suppose I said (as I do say) that every government ought to be checked by an opposition; suppose I said (as I do not say) that free international exchange is demonstrably better than all this economic nationalism. Suppose I said that recognised majority rule is better than random minority rule; suppose I said that Dictatorship as a success. I could say all this, and much more, and remain a quite ordinary and orthodox member of the ancient Church. But I could not say it, over a great part of the modern world, without being punished by the modern world, without being punished by the modern State. Rome with its religious authority would not silence me. But Fascism with its secular authority would silence me. Bolshevism with its secular authority would silence me. Hitlerism with its secular authority would silence me. When I began to live and (alas) to write, all the other Liberals had inherited a huge legend that all persecution had come from the Church. Some of them still mumble old memories about the Spanish Inquisition (a thing started strictly by the State); with the fact staring them in the face that the actual persecution now going on in Spain is the spoliation of Spaniards, simply because they are Catholic priests and schoolmasters. But anyhow, it was supposed

47. *Heretics*, p. 94.



that what was called superstition was somehow the mother of persecution. I appeal to all my fellow-Liberals to admit that the facts have flatly contradicted this idea. Every Catholic enjoys much more freedom in Catholicism than any Liberal does under Bolshevism or Fascism⁴⁸.

The reader may only see in Chesterton's argument a sort of antiquated piece of early twentieth-century journalism, with the insistence on bolshevism, Hitler, and the Communist revolt in Spain. Whatever one's impression be, the author continues the same idea in the first essay of *The Common Man*, where he refers not only to what he witnessed at the beginning of the twentieth century but also to what he thought we would see towards the end of it:

The thesis is this: that modern emancipation has really been a new persecution of the Common Man. If it has emancipated anybody, it has in rather special and narrow ways emancipated the Uncommon Man. It has given an eccentric sort of liberty to some of the hobbies of the wealthy, and occasionally to some of the more humane lunacies of the cultured. The only thing that it has forbidden is common sense, as it would have been understood by the common people. Thus, if we begin with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we find that a man really has become more free to found a sect. But the Common Man does not in the least want to found a sect. He is much more likely, for instance, to want to found a family. And it is exactly *there* that the modern emancipators are quite likely to begin to frustrate him; in the name of Malthusianism or Eugenics or Sterilisation or at a more advanced stage of progress, probably, Infanticide. It would be a model of modern liberty to tell him that he might preach anything, however wild, about the Virgin Birth, so long as he avoided anything like a natural birth; and that he was welcome to build a tin chapel to preach a twopenny creed, enti-

48. *Well and Shallows*, p. 247-8; in the sentence about «the actual persecution now going on in Spain», Chesterton refers to the beginnings of the Spanish Civil War.

rely based on the text, «Enoch begat Methuselah», so long as he himself is forbidden to beget anybody. And as a matter of historical fact, the sects which enjoyed this sectarian freedom, in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, were generally founded by merchants of manufacturers of the comfortable, and sometimes of the luxurious classes. On the other hand, it is strictly to the lower classes, to use the liberal modern title for the poor, that such schemes as Sterilization are commonly directed and applied ⁴⁹.

According to Chesterton's argument, it would appear then that the opponents of Catholic doctrine are those who *impose* their opinions on other men through the laws and power of the State. Whether they are justified or not in either their opposition to the Church or their imposition of opinion is beside the point. The question is one of freedom and the Church seems one more to support it than her opponents. Whereas the Church teaches, for example, that man has a natural right to private property, that artificial birth-control is illicit and sterilization a crime, the wealthy States are those who impose birth-control and sterilization on the inhabitants of poorer nations (or even at times on those of their own), and deprive men not only of their right to property but also of their property as well ⁵⁰.

While all of this may be palatable and especially so to many Christians, one further objection will most likely arise. Why so much insistence on Catholicism as the defender of freedom? Many Christians and even non-Christians have stood up for the ideal of freedom against the totalitarian states and the abuses of the so-called democratic states.

In *The Thing* Chesterton replies that if there are different religious or secular authorities who defend human liberty as the Church defends it, it is only because they have had the advantage of learning some way or another the doctrine of Christ

49. *Common Man*, p. 1-2; see also *Heretics*, p. 52-55 and p. 227-8 where the author gives a similar argument against the «iron-rule» of the materialists.

50. Here we make scattered references: see *Well and Shallows*, p. 142-46; *Orthodoxy*, p. 238-9; *What's*, p. 212-216; and *Thing*, p. 107-9. The main idea is taken from Chesterton's contrast between Church excommunication and State extermination in *Well and Shallows*, p. 246.



which the Church has preserved (and not without great difficulty) for two thousand years:

The fact is this: that the modern world, with its modern movements, is living on its Catholic capital. It is using, and using up, the truths that remain to it out of the old treasury of Christendom; including, of course, many truths known to pagan antiquity but crystallized in Christendom⁵¹.

Chesterton draws attention to the specific meaning and historical support of this fact throughout the whole of his argument in *The Thing*. In brief, what he comes to say is that the Protestant doctrines on human liberty have been taken directly from Catholicism. To counter the obvious retort that, of course, Protestantism really rescued that doctrine from an impending corruption, the author adds an historical clarification. The Protestant doctrines on the liberty of man and human dignity became part of the Protestant creed (or creeds) —not before the founders of Lutheranism, Calvinism, and their sequels parted ways with the Catholic Church and with each other— but *after* the Protestants themselves rejected Luther's attack on free will and the Calvinist notion that God deliberately creates some men for involuntary sin and immortal misery⁵².

For this reason Chesterton describes the Reformation as the «shipwreck of Christendom»⁵³.

Whether it be called a Catholic tendency or no, all the movements of all the sects of late have been in the direction of trying to put together again those separate pieces that were pulled apart in the sixteenth century. The main feature of our time has been the fact that one person after another has recovered one piece after another, and added it to the new scheme by borrowing it from the old. There is one sufficient proof that there

51. *Thing*, p. 13; see also *Common Man*, p. 236-7.

52. See *Thing*, p. 20-26, 63-71, 230-35; also *Well and Shallows*, p. 23-29 (on the Protestant return to Catholic doctrines denied by the reformers); and *St. Thomas*, p. 154-7 (about Luther's reform effort and subsequent influence on the modern world).

53. *Thing*, p. 231; note that Chesterton, drawing from Hilaire Belloc's phrase, says Christendom and not Christianity.

has indeed been a shipwreck. And that is that Robinson Crusoe has, ever since, been continually going back to get things from the wreck ⁵⁴.

Two of the pieces recovered by the Protestants, from the general ideas which the Church has managed to keep in circulation despite the opposition, have been the liberty that Luther disowned and the doctrine on the dignity of all men that Calvin denied.

Following the same line of reasoning, Chesterton goes on to point out in *The Thing* that the humanists who reject the Christian teaching of Creation have thrown away the foundation of their conviction in the dignity of man in exchange for the materialist theory of absolute evolutionism. They continue to be right in concluding that man has a special dignity, but they are at a loss to support their conclusion:

The world, especially the modern world, has reached a curious condition of ritual or routine; in which we might almost say that it is wrong even when it is right. It continues to a great extent to do the sensible things. It is rapidly ceasing to have any of the sensible reasons for doing them. ...I mean that when we are right, we are right by principle; and when they are right they are right by prejudice. We can say, if they prefer it so, that they are right by instinct. But anyhow, they are still restrained by healthy prejudice from many things into which they might be hurried by their own unhealthy logic. It is easiest to take very simple and even extreme examples; and some of the extremes are nearer to us than some may fancy. Thus, most of our friends and acquaintances continue to entertain a healthy prejudice against Cannibalism. The time when this next step in ethical evolution will be taken seems as yet far distant. But the notion that there is not very much difference between the bodies of men and animals —that is not by any means far distant, but exceedingly near. It is expressed in a hundred ways, as a sort of cosmic com-

54. *Thing*, p. 235; see also «The World Inside Out» in *C. C. and C.*, p. 63-78.

munism. We might almost say that it is expressed in every other way except cannibalism⁵⁵.

Fortunately, the majority of men still hold a strong conviction about the maliciousness of cannibalism. But as Chesterton adds, «the *reason* for disapproving of cannibalism has already become very vague»⁵⁶.

What is expressed in every other way except cannibalism is whatever other practice which the modern world justifies with the notion that there is not very much difference between men and animals (e. g. abortion, euthanasia, eugenics, sterilization, etc.). Such practices cannot be called wrong when the prejudice disappears. Unfortunately, yet adding all the more force to the author's argument, these modern practices are no longer exceedingly near, as he affirmed and feared in 1929. They are now with us and in some cases as commonplace events.

This is in substance what Chesterton argues in several apologetic works, further but minor precisions being made in his argument in other passages not here cited. The author does not pretend that the logic of his various statements necessarily leads to the conclusion that the faith is credible. What he has hoped to show is really in the way of suggestion and best suggested in that work which is the most suggestive of all, *Orthodoxy*:

Men who begin to fight the Church for the sake of freedom and humanity end by flinging away freedom and humanity if only they may fight the Church⁵⁷.

The historical evidence for his claim might not be conclusive; he may not have been able to prove that only in the Church and the Church alone do we find true liberty and human dignity. Nevertheless, he does give enough reason to any reader possessive of a minimum of common sense to investigate further the credibility of the faith. There is on the other hand a final argument which Chesterton presents, and in this case one based more on his personal experience than any of the preceding.

55. *Thing*, p. 182-3.

56. *Ibidem*, p. 183.

57. *Orthodoxy*, p. 238.

Fear and the Final Liberty of Man

In *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, the author, speaking to his fellow converts, gives his often cited definition of «the three stages of conversion considered as a practical process»:

Many a man, looking back cheerfully on them now, will not be annoyed if I call the first, patronizing the Church; and the second, discovering the Church; and the third running away from the Church⁵⁸.

As far as the history of Chesterton's conversion, a further clarification should be noted. What principally attracted him to the Church, what he mainly discovered, and, perhaps more surprising, what he mostly feared before his conversion was the freedom he found in Catholicism.

To be more specific, we would have to recall the words spoken by Christ to his disciples about the final liberty of man:

You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. ...Amen, amen I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. But the slave does not abide in the house forever; the son abides there forever. If therefore the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed⁵⁹.

Chesterton only gradually came to see the truth and meaning of these words, and then only by parts. The would-be convert may agree with the first part of Christ's declaration; many have seen Catholic doctrine as the most coherent and the most sublime formulation of man's true dignity and natural freedom. It is the second part which demands not a theoretical but a practical and very personal application, which Chesterton speaks of in the closing comments of his *Autobiography* when he states the most substantial reason for his conversion:

When people ask me, or indeed anybody else, «Why

58. *C.C. and C.*, p. 62.

59. John VIII, 32,34-46.

did you join the Church of Rome?» the first essential answer, if it is partly an elliptical answer, is, «To get rid of my sins». For there is no other religious system that does *really* profess to get rid of people's sins. It is confirmed by the logic, which to many seems startling, by which the Church deduces that sin confessed and adequately repented is actually abolished; and that the sinner does really begin again as if he had never sinned. ...Well, when a Catholic comes from Confession, he does truly, by definition, step out again into that dawn of his own beginning and look with new eyes across the world to a Crystal Palace that is really of crystal. He believes that in that dim corner, and in that brief ritual, God has really re-made him in His own image. He is now a new experiment of the Creator. He is as much a new experiment as he was when he was really only five years old. He stands, as I said, in the white light at the worthy beginning of the life of a man. The accumulations of time can no longer terrify. He may be grey and gouty; but he is only five minutes old ⁶⁰.

The liberty which the Church accords man is given to each person in the Sacrament that frees him of the only real slavery, sin. This was the freedom Chesterton discovered.

The author is writing to the would-be converts and the sympathetic critics of Catholicism, urging them on to investigate the credibility of the doctrines of the Church. He specifically states in his *Autobiography*: «I am not here defending such doctrines as that of the Sacrament of Penance; any more than the equally staggering doctrine of the Divine love for man» ⁶¹.

In *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, however, he does want to show that even in the doctrine on Confession the individual who has already seen many definite signs of the credibility of the faith finds a final indication of the liberty given him by the Church. It is that liberty discovered in the final stage of conversion when the would-be convert is, according to Chesterton, running away from the Church:

60. *Auto*, p. 329.

61. *Ibidem*.

The short way putting it is to say that he is no longer afraid of the vices but very much afraid of the virtues of Catholicism. For instance, he has forgotten all about the old nonsense of the cunning lies of the confessional, in his lively and legitimate alarm of the truthfulness of the confessional. He does not recoil from its insincerity but from its sincerity; nor is he necessarily insincere in doing so. Realism is really a rock of offense; it is not all unnatural to shrink from it; and most modern realists only manage to like it because they are careful to be realistic about other people. He is near enough to the sacrament of penance to have discovered its realism and not near enough to have yet discovered its reasonableness and its common sense ⁶².

The idea will surely be lost on anyone still convinced of the various heretical conceptions of the Church and the Sacraments. On the other hand, Chesterton here means to advise more those well along the way toward their conversion than the hardened materialist or obstinate nonbeliever:

The man who has come so far as that along the road has long left behind him the notion that the priest will force him to abandon his will. But he is not unreasonably dismayed at the extent to which he may have to use his will. He is not frightened because, after taking this drug, he will be henceforward irresponsible. But he is very much frightened because he will be responsible. ...If he still has the notion of being trapped, he no longer has the notion of being tricked. He is not afraid of finding the Church out, but rather of the Church finding him out ⁶³.

What Chesterton is driving at is the so-called subjective motive of credibility, though he does not, of course, formulate his idea as such. Most significant is the twist which he gives to the usual apologetic categorization of the subjective motives. Here the author suggests that not so much the sense of joy and interior peace as the consciousness of one's own fear impresses the would-be convert with the depth and veracity of the faith he has found but yet to accept. Peace may follow the act of faith

62. *C.C. and C.*, p. 43-44.

63. *Ibidem*, p. 45, 56-7; see also *Auto*, p. 330.

as a posterior confirmation. Chesterton, being more practical about the situation of the sympathetic outsider, points out the *lack* of peace as a subjective, though definite indication of credibility.

Furthermore, there is a sign of credibility denoted by the completeness and coherency of the Church's doctrine on freedom brought to its culmination in Confession. Thus Chesterton concludes:

It is only possible here to give the reasons for Catholicism, not the cause of Catholicism. I have tried to suggest here some of the enlightenments and experiences which gradually teach those who have been taught to think ill of the Church to begin to think well of her. That anything described as so bad should turn out to be so good is itself a rather arresting process having a savour of something sensational and strange⁶⁴.

We do not find the exact character of a miracle in any or all of this review of liberty in the Church. Nevertheless, there is something «strange», as Chesterton says, in the discovery that the Church so often accused of crushing man's liberty seems on close inspection to be the one authority promoting freedom in the most personal way.

Summary

Here ends what may be considered Chesterton's argument on the freedom of Catholic doctrine. The perspective given in the above compilation of quotes and references states it more explicitly and logically than any single, sustained argumentation made by the author himself. Nonetheless, the reader could pick out from the whole of his apologetic these principal ideas: 1) The reason of our liberty is not mere choice, but rather the goal of binding ourselves so as to seek our ultimate end, God the Supreme Good. 2) Only the Church has consistently allowed men this true liberty. 3) This is seen historically, and especially in the most recent of historical events, through the

64. *C.C. and C.*, p. 57.

contrast of the Church's teaching and the State's usurpation of man's natural rights. 4) Again we can judge the same upon reviewing the contrast between the Church's firmness in defending free will and the dignity of man and the negations of the Reformers. Lastly, 5) the would-be convert faces the final step of his conversion when realizing that the Church not only defends man's freedom in general, but proposes the somewhat frightening ideal that the individual should exercise his own in order to break the bonds of the only real slavery — sin.

3. *The Fulfillment of Man's Ideals*

«To say that man is an idealist is merely to say that he is a man»⁶⁵. Chesterton strikes on another of the parts of his extensive argument for the sublimity of Christian doctrine by focusing on this idea mentioned in *Heretics*. Man seeks ideals just as he seeks happiness, or better said, because he seeks it. For our author the greatest of these ideals is liberty; yet liberty alone and isolated from the rest of human activity does not explain the whole of man's noble aspirations. If we have freedom, it is freedom to attain all of our noblest ideals. Again we return to the question of happiness, but here to one aspect of it which we have left until now to consider as Chesterton considers it in *Orthodoxy*:

The perfect happiness of men on the earth (if it ever comes) will not be a flat and solid thing, like the satisfaction of animals. It will be an exact and perilous balance; like that of a desperate romance⁶⁶.

The happiness of man must be «composite» such as to combine all possible goods:

It must not (if it is to satisfy our souls) be the mere victory of some one thing swallowing up everything else, love or pride or peace or adventure; it must be a

65. *Heretics*, p. 248.

66. *Orthodoxy*, p. 191.



definite picture composed of these elements in their best proportion and relation ⁶⁷.

The reader will recall with these words what we explained briefly in the introduction to this chapter. Chesterton bases his argument on the natural leading to the supernatural; he tries to show that «only the supernatural has taken a sane view of Nature» ⁶⁸, and especially that part of the created order which is human nature.

Ideals, Simplicity, and Materialism

As usual it would only be proper to begin this part of *Everlasting Man* of some of the pre-Christian philosophers, yet with a phrase applicable to most everything else said of certain the contrast between modern fallacies and the perennial truth of Christian doctrine. In this case, however, it is not a given heresy or series thereof but rather the general quality which characterizes all heresy; namely, simplicity. Speaking in *The Everlasting Man* of some of the pre-Christian philosophers, yet with a phrase applicable to most everything else said of certain modern philosophers in *Orthodoxy*, *The Thing*, etc., Chesterton juxtaposes the general quality of non-Christian thought to the common sense of Christianity:

...all religious history shows that this common sense perishes except where there is Christianity to preserve it. It cannot otherwise exist, or at least endure, because mere thought does not remain sane. In a sense it becomes too simple to be sane. The temptation of the philosophers is simplicity rather than subtlety. They are always attracted by insane simplifications, as men poised above abysses are fascinated by death and nothingness and the empty air. It needed another kind of philosopher to stand poised upon the pinnacle of the Temple and keep his balance with casting himself down ⁶⁹.

67. *Ibidem*, p. 192; Chesterton is speaking here at the same time about the requirements for the ideal of progress which we will deal with in the following section of this chapter.

68. *Orthodoxy*, p. 188.

69. *Ever. Man*, p. 135.

The outstanding characteristic of the supernatural faith, even in what it declares about the merely natural order, is that it refuses to fall for the easy but false escape to simple solutions by simplistic explanations.

Throughout his apologetic Chesterton gives many examples of the way in which certain philosophies reduce man's noble aspirations to some unsatisfactory idea. An example frequently used in his later works is related to the still prevalent notion, proposed by K. Marx, which the author refutes in *The Everlasting Man*:

The materialist theory of history, that all politics and ethics are the expression of economics, is a very simple fallacy indeed. It consists simply of confusing the necessary conditions of life with the normal preoccupations of life, that are quite a different thing. It is like saying that because a man can only walk about on two legs, therefore he never walks about except to buy shoes and stockings. ...Cows may be purely economic, in the sense that we cannot see that they do much beyond grazing and seeking better grazing-grounds; and that is why a history of cows in twelve volumes would not be very lively reading. ...But so far from the movements that make up the story of man being economic, we may say that the story only begins where the motive of the cows and sheep leaves off. It will be hard to maintain that the Crusaders went from their homes into a howling wilderness because cows go from a wilderness to a more comfortable grazing-ground. It will be hard to maintain that the Arctic explorers went north with the same material motive that made the swallows go south ⁷⁰.

The simple explanations of apparently simple human activities do not explain man. Something much greater than the materialist conception of human nature is needed:

Even those dry pendants who think that ethics depend on economics must admit that economics depends on

70. *Ever. Man*, p. 137.

existence. And any number of normal doubts and day-dreams are about existence; not about how we can live, but about why we do⁷¹.

Formulating the Apologetic Question

Once we have seen that man has more than material motives for his actions, we might then ask: What are his higher aspirations and how is it that Christian doctrine provides a unique fulfillment of them?

For Chesterton this question, and in particular the first half of it, should be posed in the light of what we have already learned from the refutation of the materialists. The simplistic reductions afford an easy answer but are only a flight from the real difficulties of the question. If anyone has met with a certain perplexity when trying to answer the question, it is only because — notes the author in the background of *Orthodoxy* — we have habitually made the question too simple and the answer too involved as a result. The answer would be more intelligible if the question contained all the complexities which it implies. In other words we should begin our inquiry by realizing how complicated a thing is Nature, and how more complex man is by comparison:

The real trouble with this world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonable, but not quite. Life is not an illogicality; yet it is a trap for logicians. It looks just a little more mathematical and regular than it is; its exactitude is obvious, but its inexactitude is hidden; its wildness lies in wait. I give one coarse instance of what I mean. Suppose some mathematical creature from the moon were to reckon up the human body; he would at once see that the essential thing about it was that it was duplicate. A man is two men, he on the right exactly

71. *Ibidem*, p. 138; Chesterton gives another refutation of the Marxist theory in «The Backward Bolshie» from *Well and Shallows*, p. 128.

resembling him on the left. Having noted that there was an arm on the right and one on the left, a leg on the right and one on the left, he might go further and still find on each side the same number of fingers, the same number of toes, twin eyes, twin ears, twin nostrils, and even twin lobes of the brain. At last he would take it as a law; and then, where he found a heart on one side, would deduce that there was another heart on the other. And just then, where he most felt he was right, he would be wrong⁷².

The natural aspirations of man, as Chesterton has symbolized here metaphorically, are in their own right mysteries. This is the key concept in the author's explanation; for he emphasizes that even in the created order there are truths not completely comprehensible to the human intellect⁷³. Given the capacity of man reason, we can discover these truths; but we cannot entirely exhaust their meaning and content:

It is this silent swerving from accuracy by an inch that is the uncanny element in everything. It seems a sort of secret treason in the universe. ...A blade of grass is called after the blade of a sword, because it comes to a point; but it doesn't. Everywhere in things there is this element of the quiet and incalculable. It escapes the rationalists, but it never escapes till the last moment⁷⁴.

Once the question as been stated with the full complexity required by the nature of things and man, the answer, so goes Chesterton's argument, will make more sense. The author thereby outlines the logic of his answer:

Now, actual insight or inspiration is best tested by whether it guesses these hidden malformations or surprises. If our mathematician from the moon saw the two arms and the two ears, he might deduce the two shoulderblades and the two halves of the brain. But if he

72. *Orthodoxy*, p. 131-2.

73. For a discussion on the concept of mystery and the difference between natural and supernatural mystery see R. GARRIGOU-LAGRANGE, *De Revelatione*, Vol. I (Romae: Desclée, 1950), p. 160-165s.

74. *Orthodoxy*, p. 132.



guessed that the man's heart was in the right place, then I should call him something more than a mathematician. Now, this is exactly the claim which I have since come to propound for Christianity. Not merely that it deduces logical truths, but that when it suddenly becomes illogical, it has found, so to speak, an illogical truth. It not only goes right about things, but it goes wrong (if one may say so) exactly where the things go wrong. Its plan suits the secret irregularities; and expects the unexpected. It is simple about the simple truth; but it is stubborn about the subtle truth. It will admit that a man has two hands, it will not admit (though all the Modernists wail to it) the obvious deduction that he has two hearts. It is my only purpose in this chapter to point this out; to show that whenever we feel there is something odd in Christian theology, we shall generally find that there is something odd in the truth⁷⁵.

Since we often come up against the apparent contradictions inherent to natural truths (Chesterton would call them paradoxes), we realize that even in the created order there exist certain, quite definite mysteries, albeit natural. There are two conclusions to be drawn when considering the supernatural mysteries of the faith. *One*, we should not be surprised at the complexity of the supernatural nor at the apparent contradictions found in the formulas of Christian doctrine. Nature itself is complex; the natural truths are, in a way similar to the supernatural truths, difficult to reconcile mutually. This should not be exaggerated; not any doctrine of mystery whatsoever is true, which we can see in the second conclusion. *Two*; it would seem appropriate that the faith, since it is truth, should fit the apparent contradictions or paradoxes of the natural order.

Equilibrium and the Paradoxes of Christianity

With this perspective, we can ask once again: What are man's noblest aspirations and how is it that Christian doctrine enables us to fulfill them?

75. *Orthodoxy*, p. 132.

To begin with, the ideals which really satisfy human nature always present themselves in a cloud of seeming inconsistency. The wisest pagans saw that problem and subsequently reasoned to a kind of equilibrium in the balance of Aristotle.

But granted that we have all to keep a balance, the real interest comes in with the question of how that balance can be kept. That was the problem which Paganism tried to solve: that was the problem which I think Christianity solved and solved in a very strange way. Paganism declared that virtue was in a balance; Christianity declared it was in a conflict: the collision of two passions apparently opposite. Of course they were not really inconsistent; but they were such that it was hard to hold simultaneously ⁷⁶.

What the pagans sought in the idea of balance, the faith accomplishes also with balance but of a different sort than that imagined by the philosophers:

...Christianity got over the problem of combining furious opposites, by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious. ...[the historic Church] has kept them side by side like two strong colours, red and white, like the red and white upon the shield of St. George. It has always has a healthy hatred of pink. It hates that combination of two colours which is the feeble expedient of the philosophers. It hates the evolution of black into white which is the tantamount to a dirty grey ⁷⁷.

An example of this balance of furious opposites is the Christian teaching on humility. There exists on one hand the pagan compromise between mere pride and mere prostration by which a person «would merely say that he was content with himself, but not insolently self-satisfied, that there were many better and many worse, that his deserts were limited but he would see that he got them» ⁷⁸. By Christian doctrine, on the other hand, the humble person recognizes a combination of two

76. *Orthodoxy*, p. 152-3.

77. *Orthodoxy*, p. 157, 161.

78. See *ibidem*, p. 154-57.



opposites, both maintained without dilution: the majesty proper to Man, the image of God, the chief of creatures, and the abject smallness of the creature before his Creator, of the chief of sinners before God.

Therefore, as seen in the above example, by balancing both extremes, Christianity satisfies man's natural desire for composite happiness. Moreover, by balancing yet keeping both extremes in their right proportion, Christianity satisfies not a single ideal while rejecting its apparent opposite, but all man's noble ideals for as mutually contrary as some may seem.

Chesterton supports this argument with many other detailed examples showing how in fact the «paradoxes» of Christianity satisfy and fit the complexity of human nature and man's society. In short (to summarize some of the examples given), the author notes that the pagans, along with the modern heathens, tended toward compromise and dilution of the virtues, social values, and ideals of mankind. The Church, however, provides a plan for being both proud with holy pride and humble with contrite submission; for fighting wars and keeping peace; for being fiercely in favor of virginity and fiercely in favor of marriage, sex, and childbirth; for forgiving criminals while condemning crimes; for being both optimistic with a praise of life and pessimistic in denouncing all evil; for being merciful and also severe, poor in the possession of riches, festive and still penitent, sorrowful without making it impossible to be quite happy⁷⁹.

Chesterton goes as far as to attribute a miraculous character to the way in which the faith maintains these seeming opposites side by side:

The real problem is — Can the lion lie down with the lamb and still retain his royal ferocity? *That* is the problem the Church attempted; *that* is the miracle she achieved. This is what I have called guessin the hidden eccentricities of life. This is knowing that a man's heart is to the left and not in the middle. This is knowing not only that the earth is round, but knowing exactly where

79. See *Orthodoxy*, p. 153-166; see also *Heretics*, p. 155-169 where Chesterton speaks of the paradoxical quality found in other Christian virtues.

it is flat. Christian doctrine detected the oddities of life. It not only discovered the law, but it foresaw the exceptions. Those underrate Christianity who say that it discovered mercy; any one might discover mercy. In fact every one did. But to discover a plan for being merciful and also severe—that was to anticipate a strange need of human nature⁸⁰.

The thing that cannot be explained with a merely natural explanation is how Christians can combine the seemingly contradictory virtues, passions, and ideals in one life and way of living, when the pagans were only able to arrive in their best effort to a sort of compromise in the Aristotelian balance. Furthermore, what distinguishes the miraculous character of the Catholic answer to man's complexity, i. e. of its sublimity of doctrine, from the commonplace altruism of its imitators is that balance of apparent opposites by which all the virtues shall be lived and all the ideals attained. Throughout his apologetic Chesterton points out that there is something simplistic and unilaterally exaggerated about the absolute pacificism of the Quakers, the fiducial faith of Luther, the divine wrath of the Calvinists, the militarism of the Moslems, the optimism of the Liberalists, the divine mercy of the Modernists, etc. As Chesterton sums up in *St. Francis of Assisi*:

Any number of philosophies will repeat the platitudes of Christianity. But it is the ancient Church that can startle the world with the paradoxes of Christianity⁸¹.

The Key and the Lock

Thus in *Orthodoxy* the author simply states not as a deduction, but rather with of his many mental pictures:

A stick might fit a hole or stone a hollow by accident.
But a key and a lock are both complex. And if a key fits a lock, you know it is the right key⁸².

80. *Orthodoxy*, p. 163-4.

81. *St. Francis*, p. 121.

82. *Orthodoxy*, p. 135.



The key fits the lock in that the faith, being truth, fits the apparent contradictions found in the complexity of man's noble aspirations. Man may not have any idea of the intrinsic complications of the key; nor may he completely understand the lock. But according to Chesterton's argument, he should know when the door has been opened.

Chesterton claims that the door has really been opened. He does not so much suggest that the would-be convert try to open it himself as that he first look at those who have opened it.

De Lubac supposedly once declared that the saints are the most effective witnesses of God among men⁸³. If he never said it, the statement is true enough and consequently denotes the apologetic motive for referring to them. But the meaning of the statement is not evident. Contrary to the presumption that the saints are good witnesses for being particularly saintly and supernatural, Chesterton shows, with anecdotes and stories from the lives of St. Joan of Arc, St. Louis the King, St. Catherine of Sienna, St. Thomas More, etc., that the saints are good witnesses —apologetically— because they are particularly manlike and natural. As the author implies in his comment on the sanctity of Francies Bernadone, there is a definite justification for this sort of presentation:

This element of the supernatural did not separate him from the natural; for it was the whole point of his position that it united him more perfectly to the natural⁸⁴.

The Meeting of Extremes

In addition to the line of argumentation so far discussed, that is, the paradoxes of Christianity, Chesterton shows with his historical outline of religion and philosophy in *The Everlasting Man* another way by which Christianity fulfills man's noblest aspirations:

It [paganism] is an attempt to reach the divine reality through the imagination alone; in its own field reason

83. See A. LANG, *Teologia Fundamental*, Vol. I, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

84. *St. Francis*, p. 144.

does not restrain it at all. It is vital to the view of all history that reason is something separate from religion even in the most rational of these civilisations. It is only as an afterthought, when such cults are decadent or on the defensive, that a few Neo-Platonists or a few Brahmins are found trying to rationalise them, and even then only by trying to allegorise them. But in reality the rivers of mythology and philosophy run parallel and do not mingle till they meet in the sea of Christendom. Simple secularists still talk as if the Church had introduced a sort of schism between reason and religion. The truth is that the Church was actually the first thing that ever tried to combine reason and religion ⁸⁵.

Later in the same work, Chesterton makes two quick comparisons as an example to demonstrate the general idea:

What could St. Thomas Aquinas do with the mythology of Brahminism, he who set forth all the science and rationality and even rationalism of Christianity? Yet even if we compare Aquinas with Aristotle, at the other extreme of reason, we shall find the same sense of something added. Aquinas could understand the most logical parts of Aristotle; it is doubtful if Aristotle could have understood the most mystical parts of Aquinas. Even where we can hardly call the Christian greater, we are forced to call him larger ⁸⁶.

This «larger» of which Chesterton speaks and this combination of religion and philosophy in Christianity, consist in a view of the world that only began when the Word of God became flesh, moreover, that was only made possible by that Incarnation.

As we have seen before, the author's basic idea for his case on man's noble aspirations is the combination of extremes. The Birth of the Son of God suggests another instance of it; for

85. *Ever Man*, p. 110; we shall see in more detail later Chesterton's contention that pagan mythology seeks to reach the divine reality through the imagination whereas pagan philosophy tries to attain a purely conceptual knowledge of God through the use of reason.

86. *Ever Man*, p. 110.

«Bethlehem is emphatically a place where extremes meet»⁸⁷. In the doctrinal context, the extremes are obvious:

For orthodox theology has specially insisted that Christ was not a being apart from God and man, like an elf, nor yet a being half human and half not, like a centaur, but both things at once and both things thoroughly, very man and very God⁸⁸.

Yet, at the same time, there is another part of the Christmas story more directly demonstrative of his point.

In the chapter «The God in the Cave» from *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton takes each of the three principal characters surrounding the mystery of Bethlehem (the shepherds, the Magi, and Herod) to show how the Incarnation was «the completion of the incomplete»⁸⁹.

The shepherds were part of that common pre-Christian populace which in its love of the country-side and concrete things had always felt «that holy things could have a habitation and that divinity need not disdain the limits of time and space»⁹⁰.

The three Wise Kings were among those dedicated to the search of wisdom by which man seeks not the fables of the shepherds but the pure truth of things.

Thirdly, the rage of Herod points up a militant element in the union of religion and philosophy. It is one denoting the presence of an often neglected reality. It is the evil ways of the devil and of men; and it is the peril to all man's noblest ideals⁹¹.

Thus, three elements, represented in the three groups of characters, come together in the First Christmas; but not incidentally. Each is the best of a certain mood among men. In the abstract they are man's aspirations for the intellectual (the Wise Kings seeking the truth), the moral (the flight from and fight against the evil King Herod to obtain peace), and the cor-

87. *Ibidem*, p. 169.

88. *Orthodoxy*, p. 152.

89. *Ever. Man*, p. 175.

90. *Ibidem*, p. 173.

91. See *ibidem*, p. 174-181.

poreal (the shepherds' instinct for the consecration of the material). Each of these elements «are three distinct and commonly contrasted things which are nevertheless one thing; but (Catholicism) is the only thing which can make them one»⁹². Every other religion only manages to stress one or two elements, neglecting a second or a third:

This is the trinity of truths symbolised by the three types in the old Christmas story; the shepherds and the kings and that other king who warred upon the children. It is simply not true to say that other religions and philosophies are in this respect its rivals. It is not true to say that any one of them combines these characters; it is not true to say that any one of them pretends to combine them. Buddhism may profess to be equally mystical; it does not even profess to be equally military. Islam may profess to be equally military; it does not even profess to be equally metaphysical and subtle. Confucianism may profess to satisfy the need of the philosophers for order and reason; it does not even profess to satisfy the need of the mystics for miracle and sacrament and the consecration of concrete things⁹³

The Nobel Materialism of the Christian Ideal

The combination itself, however, is only part of the marvel encountered in the First Christmas. What stands out in the memory, idea, and reality of the Incarnation is the first element taken alone; namely, that sort of «materialism» sought by the shepherds. According to Chesterton, Christianity has provided for a basic yet seldom remembered aspiration which undeniably exists in men. It may seem contrary to everything concluded up to this point with all that insistence that man was made for a higher good than found in the material world, that man seeks a spiritual end in the Supreme Good. Yet paradoxically, man's ideals and desires, no matter how spiritual, can not or at least should not be disjoined from his corporeal nature. Man should

93. *Ibidem*, p. 182-3.

reach God not only in spirit but also in some way through his senses because man's body is as much a part of human nature as his soul.

The Incarnation was the beginning and cause of a special materialism. The ultimate content of this reality by which the Word was made flesh is undoubtedly supernatural; and likewise with those other realities of the divine plan for Salvation as manifested in the Sacraments, the liturgy, and the visibility of the Church. Even so, the supernatural, while lifting man up beyond his natural desires, fulfills at the same time the natural ideal of uniting the spiritual and the corporeal, of materializing, concretizing, in short, of reaching the spiritual through the senses⁹⁴.

In *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chesterton continues the same idea in a new light. So much is it that Christianity satisfies the human desire for this materialization that in the history of Christendom men found it ever more difficult to accept and live the faith as the preaching and presentation of it was gradually spiritualized by the influence of Platonist philosophies. With his Aristotelian Revolution, St. Thomas wanted to bring back the materialism of the Incarnation for the sake of the faithful and those who might receive the faith⁹⁵. For he understood that the Incarnation and all the sacramentality of Christianity are an attraction which the faith holds for man. If God had provided for a natural inclination in a supernatural and gratuitous manner in order that

94. St. Thomas Aquinas, demonstrating the convenience of the institution of the Sacraments, gives three arguments of which we highlight the following parts: 1) «Quarum [rationum] prima sumenda est ex conditione humanae naturae, cuius proprium est ut per corporalia et sensibilia in spiritualia et intelligibilia deducatur. ...2) Secunda ratio sumenda est ex statu hominis, qui peccando se subdidit per affectum corporalibus rebus. ... Si spiritualia nuda ei [homini] proponerentur, eius animus applicari non potest, corporalibus deditus. 3) Tertia ratio sumenda est ex studio actionis humanae, quae praecipue circa corporalia versatur. ...» (see *Summa Theologia*, III, q. 61, art. 1). Chesterton is using the same logic with an apologetic end. St. Thomas, seeing on one hand what is proper to human nature and on the other what is not proper yet in fact present because of the Fall, argues for the convenience of the sacraments. Chesterton, seeing the same, argues that all the multifaceted sacramentality in Christianity—rooted in and derived from the Incarnation—shows the perfection of the faith. And it shows this because the faith has satisfied something in man which before Christ was sought but never completely satisfied.

95. See *St. Thomas*, p. 31-32, 64-67.

man reach an unhopod for happiness, St. Thomas thought it a great loss to foresake this means:

The Body was no longer what it was when Plato and Porphyry and the old mystics had left it for dead. It had hung upon a gibbet. It had risen from a tomb. It was no longer possible for the soul to despise the senses, which had been the organs of something that was more than man. Plato might despise the flesh; but God had not despised it. The senses had truly become sanctified; as they are blessed one by one at a Catholic baptism. «Seeing is believing» was no longer the platitude of a mere idiot, or common individual, as in Plato's world; it was mixed up with real conditions of real belief. Those revolving mirrors that send messages to the brain of man, that light that breaks upon the brain, these had truly revealed to God himself the path to Bethany or the light on the high rock of Jerusalem. These ears that resound with common noises had reported also to the secret knowledge of God the noise of the crowd that strewed palms and the crowd that cried for Crucifixion. After the Incarnation had become the idea that is central in our civilisation, it was inevitable that there should be a return to materialism; in the sense of the serious value of matter and the making of the body⁹⁶.

There is one last point to which we now turn in order to complete this «materialistic» element in Chesterton's argument. Following still along the lines of the Incarnation, the author notes what for him was the constant attraction of the faith in this sense of fulfillment of a human inclination. It is not an idea, but rather the person he speaks of in «Mary and the Convert» from *The Well and the Shallows*:

God is God, Maker of all things visible and invisible; the Mother of God is in a rather special sense connected with things visible; since she is of this earth, and through her bodily being God was revealed to the senses. In the presence of God, we must remember what is

96. *St. Thomas*, p. 94.

invisible, even in the sense of what is merely intellectual; the abstractions and the absolute laws of thought; the love of truth, and the respect for right reason and honourable logic in things, which God himself has respected. For, as St. Thomas Aquinas insists, God himself does not contradict the law of contradiction. But Our Lady, reminding us especially of God Incarnate, does in some degree gather up and embody all those elements of the heart and the higher instincts, which are the legitimate short cuts to the love of God⁹⁷.

Here Chesterton's remark strikes again the apologetic note of the sublimity of the faith as especially perceived in what man captures by beginning with the senses and the material world. For those elements of the heart and higher instincts are embodied —literally given flesh— in Holy Mary, Our Lady the Mother of God; and in such a way that we reach God more easily, as Chesterton implies when referring to the «short cut». Again we could say with the words from *Orthodoxy*: «That was to anticipate a strange need of human nature»⁹⁸.

97. *Well and Shallows*, p. 174.

98. *Orthodoxy*, p. 164; with respect to this final note concerning Our Lady and the convert, there is an objection made to Chesterton's argument which I found pencilled in on the margin of my copy of *Well and Shallows*. The objection —prevalent enough today as to merit special attention— was: «But Jesus does this for us quite well», i.e. Christ as man makes God more accessible to men. Chesterton's point is that Our Lady reminds us especially of God Incarnate, making His humanity all the more evident. Thus the author writes in *The Everlasting Man*: «Here begins, it is needless to say, another mighty influence for the humanisation of Christendom. If the world wanted what is called a non-controversial aspect of Christianity, it would probably select Christmas. Yet it is obviously bound up with what is supposed to be a controversial aspect (I could never at any stage of my opinions imagine why); the respect paid to the Blessed Virgin. When I was a boy a more Puritan generation objected to a statue upon my parish church representing the Virgin and Child. After much controversy, they compromised by taking away the Child. One would think that this was even more corrupted with Mariolatry, unless the mother was counted less dangerous when deprived of a sort of weapon. But the practical difficulty is also a parable. You cannot chip away the statue of a mother from all round that of a newborn child. You cannot suspend the new-born child in mid-air; indeed you cannot really have a statue of a newborn child at all. Similarly, you cannot suspend the idea of a new-born child in the void or think of him without thinking of his mother. You cannot visit the child without visiting the mother; you cannot in common human life approach the child except through the mother». (p. 169-70) Chesterton speaks frequently of Our Lady, the Mother of God because this insistence is a concrete way of awakening the dispositions for

Summary

Ending here with Chesterton's argument on the noble aspirations of man, a summary can be given in two points: 1) In contrast to the limited ideals proposed by other religions and philosophies, Christian doctrine provides for all of man's noble aspirations —intellectual, moral, and what is most striking, material or corporeal—. The idea of this material aspiration does not at first seem especially noble, which is perhaps why no one has taken special care to account for it (except the materialists in a degrading manner). 2) What is both the attraction of the faith and a sign of its divine origin is the natural perfection of Christian doctrine. It is an attraction because a person is moved to be more of a man even if he understand neither the need to be a saint nor God's invitation to the supernatural. It is a motive of credibility because the saints the most manlike among men, and the natural is found most perfect where the supernatural is present. Chesterton's argument follows the traditional apologetic logic. Men do not in act for whatever reason (which reason we know to be the Fall) live completely in accord with their human nature, That some men who have the benefit of a supposedly revealed doctrine do live as such cannot be explained entirely by the normal circumstances and events of the world. It could theoretically be explained because men should be able to live as men; for this reason the argument is not necessarily conclusive. Yet, the fact is that men do not, except where we find in the saints examples of the best that we could have imagined to be in man.

4. Progress and Social Order

The argument on progress and social order constitutes for Chesterton the principle element of his entire consideration of the so-called modern values. Although the treatment of each of the values so far discussed, i. e. happiness, liberty, and man's

the faith in the would-be convert. Not to speak of Our Lady is a deformation of the faith and a weakness in the apologetic argument. Again, take away the supernatural doctrine and you are left with something unnatural. You are suspending the child in the air; you are making Christ appear not less divine but —what is equally detractive— less human.

noble aspirations, retains its proper place and apologetic worth, the author directs the conclusions from each of these previously elaborated arguments to the support of this one. At least, this is the general tendency, and not at all a surprising one if we recall Chesterton's life-long struggle against the social injustices of his age.

The logic of the argument is somewhat involved. For this reason we shall try to summarize it beforehand so as to understand its subsequent development without a lengthy exposition. Chesterton argues —mainly in *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy*, but also in later works— *first*) that one can gather a general idea of the requirements necessary for progress and social order; *second*) that in Christian doctrine we find these requirements, on one hand better defined even according to merely human reason, on the other hand, best fulfilled in comparison to other religious or philosophical schemes. This fulfillment of the requirements supposes something more than human ingenuity and prowess working for the betterment of man since man has shown himself deficient not only in producing a plan to fulfill the requirements but even in determining them clearly.

In short, Chesterton's argument follows along the lines of Cardinal Newman's idea mentioned in *Grammar of Assent*: Christianity's «very divination of our needs is in itself a proof that it is really the supply of them»⁹⁹.

The Requirements for Progress

In detail, then Chesterton reasons that anyone with common sense, regardless of whatever belief or philosophy he may adhere to, would agree that man is seeking a better world. In every age of history, man has been faced with some kind of social disorder. Man is consequently in perpetual search of a Utopia and continually making a call for progress. With this premise, the author outlines the requirements for true social progress in four points:

99. J. H. NEWMAN, *An Essay in Aid to a Grammar of Assent* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1955) p. 376; we shall refer to this work hereafter as *Grammar of Assent*.

First:

The ideal towards which progress is directed must be fixed¹⁰⁰. «Progress should mean that we are always changing the world to suit the vision». Not that we are always changing the vision¹⁰¹.

The reason for this requirement is that without a fixed goal there is no such thing as progress.

We are fond of talking about «progress»; that is a dodge to avoid discussing what is good. ... [The modern man] says, «Away with your old moral formulae; I am for progress». This, logically stated means, «Let us not settle what is good; but let us settle whether we are getting more of it»¹⁰².

Fixing the goal in turn implies fixing a direction:

Nobody has any business to use the word «progress» unless he has a definite creed and a cast-iron code of morals. Nobody can be progressive without being doctrinal; I might almost say that nobody can be progressive without being infallible — at any rate, without believing in some infallibility. For progress by its very name indicates a direction; and the moment we are in the least doubtful about the direction, we become in the same degree doubtful about the progress¹⁰³.

Having defined the first requirement, Chesterton passes on to consider the second.

Second:

The ideal must be composite such as to combine all possible goods and not «the mere victory of some one thing swallowing up everything else, love or pride or peace or adventure...»¹⁰⁴.

100. See *Orthodoxy*, p. 181.

101. *Ibidem*, p. 177; see p. 176-185 for Chesterton's discussion of the first requirement.

102. *Heretics*, p. 25-6.

103. *Heretics*, p. 28; see also p. 52, 287ff; *Common Man*, p. 173; *Well and Shallows*, p. 32-33, 88; *St. Thomas*, p. 20; and *What's*, p. 17-18.

104. *Orthodoxy*, p. 192; see p. 185-193 for complete discussion.



As was argued before, man being the complex being that he is, no solution which ignores the complicated intellectual, moral, or material aspirations of man will completely satisfy him. The progress must be one «towards a complete city of virtues and dominations». The social order «must be a definite picture composed of these elements in their best proportion and relation». Moreover, «if this composite happiness is fixed for us, it must be fixed by some mind; for only a mind can place the exact proportions of a composite happiness»¹⁰⁵.

Third:

For true progress, «we need watchfulness even in Utopia», because «the only real reason for being a progressive is that things naturally tend to grow worse»¹⁰⁶.

Here again, we recall that part of the argument presented in *Heretics*. In this case, Chesterton notes, with special reference to H. G. Wells' plan for Utopia, a shortcoming evident in all such schemes:

...he does not sufficiently allow for the stuff or material of men. In his new Utopia he says, for instance, that a chief point of the Utopia will be a disbelief in original sin. If he had begun with the human soul—that is, if he had begun on himself—he would have found original sin almost the first thing to be believed in. He would have found, to put the matter shortly, that a permanent possibility of selfishness arises from the mere fact of having a self, and not from any accidents of education or illtreatment. And the weakness of all Utopias is this, that they take the greatest difficulty of man and assume it to be overcome, and then give an elaborate account of the overcoming of the smaller ones. They first assume that no man will want more than his share, and then are very ingenious in explaining whether his share will be delivered by motor-car or balloon¹⁰⁷.

One does not have to understand nor even accept the

105. *Ibidem*, p. 192; see also *Well and Shallows*, p. 241; *What's* p. 81; and *St. Thomas*, p. 140-1.

106. *Orthodoxy*, p. 193-4; see p. 193-207 for further detail the third requirement.

107. *Heretics*, p. 73-4.

Church's doctrine on Original Sin; but given what history has shown us and what we see in ourselves, we need take into account man's propensity for selfishness. «In the best Utopia I must be prepared for the moral fall of any man in any position at any moment; especially for my fall from my position at this moment»¹⁰⁸.

Having reviewed the third requirement, Chesterton defines «the last of the things that I should ask, and ask imperatively, of any social paradise».

Fourth:

Man must have the freedom of making a final decision and have his oaths and engagements taken seriously¹⁰⁹. «The perils, rewards, punishments, and fulfillments of an adventure must be *real*, or the adventure is only a shifting and heartless nightmare»¹¹⁰.

This last requirement is based on the notion of freedom which we have already discussed above. Simply stated, without responsibility there is no true freedom.

The Requirements and Christian Doctrine

Given these requirements, Chesterton shows at each stage of the discussion how various Christian doctrines best fulfill each of the four. In *Orthodoxy* he does not make an explicit identity between Christianity and Catholicism in this particular argument. Yet from the general context of the work and the specific application of doctrines, the identification appears at least implicitly as will be noticed in the following summary of the way in which Christian teachings meet the stated requirements:

1) Only Christianity proposes an ideal which is fixed. It is fixed not arbitrarily but according to what is good, according to the needs of human nature. Only the Church, because of its unchanging doctrine, has remained loyal to this fixed vision instead of giving in as so

108. *Orthodoxy*, p. 201.

109. See *Orthodoxy*, p. 208-210 for full discussion.

110. *Ibidem*, p. 209.

many others have to the fashions and fads of the various ages in man's history.

2) The ideal proposed by Christianity has that composite quality corresponding to man's complex needs.

3) Christianity inspires men to be vigilant; the doctrine of the Fall confirms, as no other philosophy or religion has, that something is wrong not in the social order as much as in man himself. Apart from the theological considerations and the supernatural mystery within it contained, the doctrine at least urges the more obvious reality that men easily fall into the ways of injustice and moral disorder.

4) The doctrine on heaven and hell, even as generalized in the idea of reward and punishment after death, rests on the natural truth of the divine justice of the Creator. Besides pointing out the need for vigilance, Christianity thus reminds men just how much they are bound by their decisions ¹¹¹.

To all of this, one might object that if the Church has determined the requirements for progress and social order with sufficient clarity, even according to what is humanly reasonable, and further still presented a plan for the fulfillment of these requirements such that men of their own free will may put it into effect, why hasn't man reached at least a modest attainment of the proposed ideal? Why does there still abound the social disorder which we face today in spite of man's many efforts to overcome it?

In a work dedicated to the social question, *What's Wrong with the World*, Chesterton suggests in response that men have attempted the ideal yet failed to carry it out with courage and the necessary conviction: «The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried» ¹¹². The reader may only see here a piece of clever

111. For the author's consideration of the four points here resumed, see the chapters «The Eternal Revolution» and «The Romance of Orthodoxy» in *Orthodoxy*.

112. *What's*, p. 29.

rhetoric; yet the author makes a case for his claim in more detail within the sociological argument of the book referred to ¹¹³.

More to the apologetic concern here intended, Chesterton continually points out in his various works the historical evidence indicative of how much Catholic doctrine does promote progress and social order. Admittedly, the Church appears somewhat arbitrary about its definitions on progress, social relations, and particularly anything touching on the family. This is a problem at first, though in the end a support of the argument for anyone who wants to see it. As the author affirms, he does not mean that the Catholic Church is arbitrary in the sense of never giving reasons to justify her teaching. Rather that even when men did not always agree with the reason, the world has survived to see that the teachings were reasonable in comparison to the contrary solutions proposed by the opponents of the Church ¹¹⁴. A review of history would show, then, that the revolutionary force of the world is the Catholic Church. Declaring her doctrines and resolutions on matters of the purely natural order, often in defiance of the mood of the times, the Church is attacked for being behind the times. And yet, claims Chesterton, the Church, in such matters, «condemned nothing but what we ourselves should have come to condemn, though we might have condemned it too late» ¹¹⁵.

While this is the principle line of argumentation, Chesterton adds other considerations to support his case, as much in *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy* as in subsequent apologetic writings, notably, *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, *The Thing*, and *The Well and the Shallows* ¹¹⁶. It would require a lengthy summary to expound the numerous ideas which he summons up to defend his case; yet for our purposes the preceding outline reflects well his main point.

113. It is not worthwhile reviewing here in detail the author's argument in *What's Wrong with the World*, because the work is not strictly apologetic in that it mixes in much of his own personal opinion in social questions not defined by Catholic teaching.

114. See *C.C. and C.*, p. 83.

115. See *C.C. and C.*, p. 83.

116. See for example «Concluding Remarks on the Importance of Orthodoxy» in *Heretics*; «The Romance of Orthodoxy» in *Orthodoxy*; «The World Inside Out» and «The Exception Proves the Rule» in *C.C. and C.*; «When the World Turned Back», «The Last Turn», «A Century of Emancipation» and others in *Well and Shallows*.



5. *Authenticity of the Faith*

We have reviewed so far the various aspects of Chesterton's apologetic argument based on the sublimity of Christian doctrine. Each aspect, be it that of happiness, freedom, man's noble aspirations, or progress and the social order, has its own conclusion. The conclusions show the credibility of the faith, but as the author often implies and occasionally states, only to a certain degree. More than to prove definitively the credibility of the faith, the argument serves the purpose of awakening dispositions for belief, of demonstrating the attractiveness and even convenience of the faith which Christianity holds for every man who wants to be truly man.

The Crucial Question

Chesterton admits, then, the shortcoming of the argument. Christian doctrine demands not only that we be men but that we become saints. The Church not only teaches doctrines limited to the natural order but mysteries proper to an order completely exceeding the desires and capacities of mere human nature.

And now we come to the crucial question which truly concludes the whole matter. A reasonable agnostic, if he has happened to agree with me so far, may justly turn round and say, «You have found a practical philosophy in the doctrine of the Fall; very well. ...You have found a truth in the doctrine of hell; I congratulate you. ... But even supposing that those doctrines do include those truths, why cannot you take the truths and leave the doctrines? Granted that all modern society is trusting the rich too much because it does not allow for human weakness; ... why cannot you simply allow for human weakness without believing in the Fall? ... why cannot you simply take what is good in Christianity, what you can define as valuable, what you can comprehend, and leave all the rest all the absolute dogmas that are in their nature incomprehensible?»¹¹⁷.

117. *Orthodoxy*, p. 242-3.

This is Chesterton's crucial question; it is in general terms the ultimate question to be answered in any apologetic.

The author poses the question in the last chapter of *Orthodoxy* and there gives several answers. The question is the same which Chesterton will address throughout the apologetic works he publishes after his conversion to the Catholic Church. And in each of these subsequent works, again many answers are proposed.

Some of the answers given are supportive of the arguments on happiness, liberty, etc., as we have already seen from the references to these «Catholic» works. Some of the answers correspond to the traditional apologetic arguments (e.g. miracles) and with those we shall deal in the following chapter.

Nevertheless, as much in *Orthodoxy* as in his later works, there is one answer to the crucial question which stands out among the rest. After referring to several reasons for his belief and after speaking in particular of the miracles as sure criteria of credibility, Chesterton states in *Orthodoxy* an argument which he will expand on especially in *The Everlasting Man*:

I will not pretend that this curt discussion is my real reason for accepting Christianity instead of taking the moral good of Christianity as I should take it out of Confucianism. I have another far more solid and central ground for submitting to it as a faith, instead of merely picking up hints from it as a scheme. And that is this: that the Christian Church in its practical relation to my soul is a living teacher, not a dead one. It not only certainly taught me yesterday, but will almost certainly teach me to-morrow. ...This, therefore, is, in conclusion, my reason for accepting the religion and not merely the scattered and secular truths out of the religion. I do it because the thing has not merely told this truth or that truth, but has revealed itself as a truth-telling thing¹¹⁸.

When the author states his foundation for belief adducing the reason that the living Church reveals itself as a «truth-telling thing», he is in effect referring to three reasons at once; the Church reveals herself as such 1) because of her loyalty or faithfulness to natural truths and common sense, 2) because of

118. *Orthodoxy*, p. 266,270.

the stability of the Church, 3) because of the authenticity of the Church in the faith.

The first reason recalls all that Chesterton already argues for when considering the paradoxes of Christianity and the fulfillment of man's noble aspirations. This we have already seen in detail. The second reason we have yet to consider and will do so in its proper context when dealing with the traditional aspects of Chesterton's apologetic. The third is that which interests us at the present moment.

Pre-Christian religion and Religious Tendencies

In *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton offers the principal part of his argument on the authenticity of the Catholic belief. In short, the argument consists in a contrast between the authenticity of the Christian belief in supernatural mysteries and the pre-Christian religious beliefs and tendencies. He reviews the latter under four headings in order to show subsequently that we find nothing in pre-Christian religion comparable to the authenticity of the Christian belief.

1. *Monotheism*: A belief in the one Almighty God constitutes the essential element of man's true natural religion. If we can speak of an evolution in religious belief, the evolutionary tendency (as seen in the historical studies and even as seen from what can be gathered from a summary review of history) is a tendency toward complication, toward a mythology ever more polytheistic and imaginative. Apart from the especial and separate case of the Judaic religion, the point here is that the «pagan» monotheism was an authentic belief in God yet at the same time founded in a simple, even if sometimes ritualized, understanding of the Being who created all things —a sort of «old truism» or «old tradition», that «ancient light of simplicity» rooted in common sense ¹¹⁹.

119. See *Ever. Man*, p. 83-99. The point here being authenticity, and for the sake of getting to the point, we have reduced a long argument worthy of two further clarifications: 1) Chesterton distinguishes between the natural monotheism among pre-Christian pagans and the supernatural monotheism of the Judaic religion. In both cases, we can find historically an authentic belief in God; even so, Judaism is a distinct case. 2) With respect to Israel's monotheism, it suffices to note here that Chesterton relates its ultimate connection

2. *Polytheism and pagan mythology*: The accounts of the pagan myths have an element of mystery, in the loose sense of the word; i. e. certain non-evident affirmations which cannot be demonstrated to be true. Yet the attitude of the pagans toward these myths does not indicate authenticity in belief:

In these pagan cults there is every shade of sincerity — and insincerity. In what sense does a child really think that he ought to step on every alternate paving stone? ...This does not mean that there was no reality or even no religious sentiment in such a mood. ...There are degrees of seriousness in the most natural make believe. ...In a word, mythology is a *search*. ...They [the myths] differed from reality not in what they looked like but in what they were. A picture may look like a landscape; it may look in every detail exactly like a landscape. The only detail in which it differs is that it is not a landscape. ...Anybody who has felt and fed on the atmosphere of these myths will know what I mean, when I say that in one sense they did not really profess to be realities¹²⁰.

3. *Demon-worship and cannibalism*: Here we find a certain perverse authenticity in belief and worship, in a conviction of the reality evil spiritus:

Superstition of the lighter sort toys with the idea that some trifle, some small gesture such as throwing the salt, may touch the hidden spring that works the mysterious machinery of the world. ...But with the appeal to the lower spirits comes the horrible notion that the gesture must not only be very small but very low. ...It is felt that the extreme of evil will extort a sort of attention or answer from the evil powers under the surface

(its «mission») with the coming of Christ, showing how Israel's monotheism cannot be explained naturally. The one clear consequence, «humanly speaking», is «that the world owes God to the Jews». (p. 94-5) The author thus says in conclusion: «The more we really understand the ancient conditions that contributed to the final culture of the Faith, the more we shall have a real and even a realistic reverence for the greatness of the Prophets of Israel. As it was, while the whole world melted into this mass of confused mythology, this Deity who is called tribal and narrow, precisely because he was what is called tribal and narrow, preserved the primary religion of all mankind. He was tribal enough to be universal. He was as narrow as the universe». (p. 96).

120. *Ever. Man*, p. 106-113.

of the world. This is the meaning of most of the cannibalism in the world. For most cannibalism is not a primitive or even a bestial habit. ...Men do not do it because they do not think it horrible; but, on the contrary, because they do think it horrible. That is why it is often found that rude races like the Australian natives are not cannibals; while much more refined and intelligent races, like the New Zealand Maories, occasionally are. They are refined and intelligent enough to indulge sometimes in a self-conscious diabolism. ...They are not doing it because they do not think it wrong, but precisely because they do think it wrong¹²¹.

There was a tendency in those hungry for practical results, apart from the poetical results, to call upon spirits of terror and compulsion... There is always a sort of dim idea that these darker powers will really do things, with no nonsense about it¹²².

4. *The philosophers*: Some men, quite apart from the spirit of any of the former convictions or sentiments, dedicated themselves to the ideal of man's intellectual search for the ultimate truth; and the truth discovered in the best of the Greek philosophy lead to an authentic conviction. But there was no element of revelation nor of the supernatural. Furthermore, the philosophers took care to separate their intellectual world from that of the mythologies of their contemporaries:

He (the philosopher) very seldom thought of pitting his nature of the gods against the gods of nature. ... Aristotle, with his colossal common sense, was perhaps the greatest of all philosophers; certainly the most practical of all philosophers. But Aristotle would no more have set up the Absolute side by side with the Apollo of Delphi, as a similar or rival religion, than Archimedes would have thought of setting up the Lever as a sort of idol...¹²³

121. *Ever. Man*, p. 119.

122. *Ibidem*, p. 144.

123. *Ever. Man*, p. 125.

The Contrast of Christianity

Against this background of man's religious attitudes, Chesterton then brings into contrast the faith of the first Christians such as their pagan equals stumbled over it in the years and circumstances of the Roman Empire:

A convenient compromise had been made between all the multitudinous myths and religions of the Empire; that each group should worship freely and merely give a sort of official flourish of thanks to the tolerant Emperor, by tossing a little incense to him under his official title of Divus. Naturally there was no difficulty about that; or rather it was a long time before the world realised that there ever had been even a trivial difficulty anywhere. The members of some Eastern sect or secret society or other seemed to have made a scene somewhere; nobody could imagine why. The incident occurred once or twice again and began to arouse irritation out of proportion to its insignificance. It was not exactly what these provincials said; though of course it sounded queer enough.

They seemed to be saying that God was dead and that they themselves had seen him die. This might be one of the many manias produced by the despair of the age; only they did not seem particularly despairing. They seemed quite unnaturally joyful about it, and gave the reason that the death of God had allowed them to eat him and drink his blood. According to other accounts God was not exactly dead after all; there trailed through the bewildered imagination some sort of fantastic procession of the funeral of God, at which the sun turned black, but which ended with the dead omnipotence breaking out of the tomb and rising again like the sun¹²⁴.

The doctrines and teachings of the first Christians, the whole of the story that they began to spread around the Roman Empire, certainly had nothing in common with a philosophy in the manner of the Greek systems of thought. It was very much

124. *Ever. Man*, p. 164-5.

a story; and, at that, a strange and mysterious story. It was not merely the revival of a monotheistic religious belief nor simply a continuation of the Judaic tradition. The tenets of the faith resembled, if anything, the formulation of another new myth. There was something peculiar about the story itself, just as there had always been something peculiar about the myths. Yet, even then, there was something even more peculiar about the story-tellers.

The peculiar tenets of the Christian faith are not in themselves the proof of their veracity. Because of their internal coherence, their compatibility with the natural order, the sublimity of Christian doctrine, we can make a case for the credibility of the faith, as in fact Chesterton has argued already. In this respect, we could demonstrate the essential difference between the Christian mysteries and the pagan myths.

Here, however, Chesterton takes a different approach in comparing the faith with the myths: «Polytheism ... was never to the pagan what Catholicism is to the Catholic»¹²⁵. «I do not mean merely that I myself believe that one is true and the other is not. I mean that one was never meant to be true in the same sense as the other»¹²⁶. Aside from what can be judged from the faith in itself as a doctrine compared with the myths in themselves as a human invention, Chesterton notes the difference in the *attitude* of the Christian toward the faith, as contrary to the pagan attitude toward the myths.

A light is cast, therefore, on the attitude of the first Christians towards their own faith:

It was not the strange story to which anybody paid any particular attention; people in that world had seen queer religions enough to fill a madhouse. It was something in the tone of the madmen and their type of formation. They were a scratch company of barbarians and slaves and poor and unimportant people; but their formation was military; they moved together and were very absolute about who and what was really a part of their little system; and about what they said, however mildly, there was a ring like iron. Men used to many mythologies and moralities could make no analysis of the mystery,

125. *Ever. Man*, p. 124.

126. *Ibidem*, p. 114.

except the curious conjecture that they meant what they said. All attempts to make them see reason in the perfectly simple matter of the Emperor's statue seemed to be spoken to deaf men. It was as if a new meteoric metal had fallen on the earth; it was a difference of substance to the touch. Those who touched their foundation fancied they had struck a rock ¹²⁷.

The faith, as it first breaks into the history of man, appears with a distinguishing quality. The quality is authenticity: that «ringing note of the creed» ¹²⁸ sounded by the first Christians who really meant what they said, who stated a strange story not as a story but as a fact.

While this was the authenticity of the first Christians, Chesterton makes the same case for the Catholic Church. «It is the only thing that talks as if it were the truth; as if it were a real messenger refusing to tamper with a real message» ¹²⁹. As the author says in *The Everlasting Man*, we discover authenticity in the Church because we run up against —not a meaningless mountain of dogmas and definitions— but a message formulated in the dogmas and definitions preached by messengers:

What puzzles the world, and its wise philosophers and fanciful pagan poets, about the priests and people of the Catholic Church is that they still behave as if they were messengers. A messenger does not dream about what his message might be, or argue about that it probably would be; he delivers it as it is ¹³⁰.

This puzzling adherence to a message appears again as the stability of the Church when we see authenticity extended through twenty centuries of history. But at any moment in that history, it is still as puzzling that the Church refuses to tamper with a message which humanly speaking does not explain itself.

127. *Ever. Man*, p. 165.

128. *Ibidem*, p. 177.

129. From «The Reason Why», a separate essay published jointly with the Burns & Oates' 1960 edition of *C.C. and C.*; see p. 103. This essay was originally published as Chesterton's contribution to an apologetic anthology of various authors: *Twelve Modern Apostles and Their Creeds* (New York, 1926).

130. *Ever. Man*, p. 266-7.

6. *The Modern Values and Authenticity: Coming to a Conclusion*

In the case of Chesterton's argument on authenticity, there are many other details which could be examined more fully. Just as we have seen that one of the basic arguments in *The Everlasting Man* consists in an argument on comparative religion —authenticity being the quality which Chesterton compares— so too, his *Autobiography* expresses anecdotally the authenticity which he found in the Catholic faith during the process of his conversion¹³¹.

Instead of seeking out the finer points of the argument, however, the most useful for us at this stage would be to glance back briefly at the whole of Chesterton's use of modern values and thereby point out their mutual relation.

As with the arguments on happiness, liberty, man's noble aspirations, and progress, Chesterton's argument on authenticity fails to give the definitive demonstration of the credibility of the faith. We could not clearly conclude the divine origin of the faith, at least not with the clarity proper of an apologetic demonstration. Yet never is it the author's intention to offer a scientific proof. Instead he is stating the reasons that led him to see the credibility of the faith, expressly leaving the exact theological demonstration for authorities better versed than himself in the apologetic science¹³². He does hope, nevertheless, to have provided a series of arguments, if never useful to the theologians, useful to the would-be convert.

131. With respect to the subject of authenticity in Chesterton's *Autobiography*, see the series of anecdotes in the chapter «The Crime of Orthodoxy», e. g. the Staton Coit incident (p. 171-76), The *Clarion* dinner party with R. Baltchford (p. 178-181); see also the dispute concerning the cross and the crucifix in the Beaconsfield War Memorial event narrated in «The Shadow of the Sword» (p. 237-244). The author's recollection of his meeting with Lord Hugh Cecil in «Some Political Celebrities» (p. 261-4) is a more subtle account, though pertinent and telling if the reader take care to understand «the revolt against the Reformation» (p. 263) in the light of Chesterton's discussion of the Reformation in *The Well and the Shallows*.

132. Chesterton makes this comment on two occasions; see the Preface to *Orthodoxy* (only included in later editions) and the opening sentences of Appendix I in *The Everlasting Man*. The comments are of special importance since they appear precisely in the two works thought to be the most systematic in his apologetic.

At the same time, not to sell Chesterton short, there is a final point to be made which reinforces the whole of his case for the Christian faith developed from the idea of the sublimity fo Christian doctrine.

The argument on authenticity brings out a feature of the Catholic belief perhaps slightly shocking to the would-be convert. Within the development of the argument, Chesterton shows himself in his own belief as what some have called «triumphalist». He is not at all triumphalist; he merely states a reality. And yet the very fact that he might appear as such lends all the more force to this claim of the authenticity of the faith. The Church admits no error in any of her dogmas; no change in the meaning or content of her definitions. She claims to possess the whole of a truth which God revealed; no one but the Church, she says of herself, can reliably safeguard, teach, and interpret it. The Church need not consult any other religion in search of some forgotten truth revealed by God. She is effectively a messenger refusing to tamper with a message.

Chesterton cannot be called a triumphalist in the heretical sense of the term; he is triumphant and states his reason for communicating that to the would-be convert: «I think it a piece of plain justice to all unbelievers to insist upon the audacity of the act of faith that is demanded of them»¹³³. The authenticity of the faith, far from hindering an acceptance of Catholicism, is a sign of its credibility. Not only is it that the faith can be believed; Catholics do actually believe it.

Chesterton calls this authenticity and this messenger-like property of the Church «puzzling». He does not call it unexplainable. Eccentricity, insanity, or stagnation; the irrelevance of the message to the happiness of man in this life and the next, or the narrowness and mediocrity of the message; superstition, credulity, simple error, fanaticism or whatever else of the sort might explain it. But against these possibilities stands out the glaring contradiction of the Church's defense of and provision for man's greatest hopes, ideals, and desires: happiness, liberty, nobility, progress, innovation, social order, virtues, the uplifting of the mind and will, and last but not least, the conse-

133. *Ever. Man*, p. 268.



cration of all the concrete, material and seemingly worthless things.

For this is the last proof of the miracle; that something so supernatural should have become so natural. ... I have not minimised the scale of the miracle, as some of our milder theologians think it wise to do.

...The mystery is how anything so startling should have remained defiant and dogmatic and yet become perfectly normal and natural.

... This madness has remained sane. The madness has remained sane when everything else went mad. The madhouse has been a house to which, age after age, men are continually coming back as to a home. That is the riddle that remains; that anything so abrupt and abnormal should still be found a habitable and hospitable thing. ... For it was the soul of Christendom that came forth from the incredible Christ; and the soul of it was common sense. Though we dared not look on His face we could look on His fruits; and by His fruits we should know Him ¹³⁴.

CONCLUSIONS

Having examined the details of Chesterton's arguments there are several conclusions which we may consequently formulate in the way of a more succinct summary and final analysis of the author's apologetic.

1. Although Chesterton relies heavily on the experience of his own conversion and on the humor, the descriptive style, the imagery and the paradox of his apologetic, he does have a method, that is, a *via demonstrationis*. There is a definite logic in his argumentation and that argumentation leads to the conclusion that the faith has a rational foundation.

2. His apologetic argument is not in the strict sense a proof

134. *Ever. Man*, p. 268-270.

which rigorously and scientifically evidences the credibility of the faith. His argument serves rather as a spontaneous demonstration. For this reason, as the author himself states, the reader does need to consult other apologetics which provide a complete, systematic, and precise study of the questions involved.

3. Chesterton's method follows the basic logic of the classic apologetic method. He combines the historical (or «progressive») and the empirical (or «regressive») variations of the traditional argument.

a) His line of argumentation, like that of the progressive method, begins in a *demonstratio religiosa* and ends in a *demonstratio catholica*.

b) His main argument, like that of the regressive method, is based on the miraculous quality of the history and life of the Catholic Church.

c) The comparative scheme given in the Appendix points out the similarities and contrasts.

4. In order to show the rational foundation of the faith Chesterton argues as follows:

a) We have a basic understanding, more or less correct, of the natural order. Christianity clarifies that understanding. We strive after ideals, more or less satisfying. Christianity proposes those ideals in their proper proportion and balance so that we recognize the natural perfection of the Christian proposal. This does not in the strict sense constitute a motive of credibility nor does it justify and acceptance of the Catholic faith because it does not justify a belief in supernatural mysteries. Still, we also notice that the Catholic Church has had to defend not only the supernatural mysteries of the faith but also the natural truths and human ideals against false attempts to accommodate Christian doctrine to difficult social circumstances and against the rationalizations resulting from a narrow and incomplete vision of man and his ultimate end. We thus find that, historically, the natural perfection of Christian doctrine is inseparably connected to a Church which also insists on the need for a belief in supernatural mysteries.



b) The sublimity of *Catholic* doctrine, as seen historically, can be taken as a sign of the credibility of the faith because the Church's continual defense of natural truths is unprecedented and unexplainable according to the common and constant tendency towards a compromise with the demands of the changing fashions and moods of the world, according to the human tendency towards a compromise of those truths with the seemingly reasonable yet false notions of liberty, progress and social order.

c) This argument on the sublimity of doctrine requires an acceptance or comprehension of natural truths not so readily admitted to; in effect, the argument can be judged inconclusive. But a definitive and clear sign of the credibility of the faith is found in the traditional apologetic arguments. The miracles provide a solid ground of belief, in that they are possible and are historically verifiable. An impartial reading of the Gospels — even one which concentrates on the human aspects of Our Lord's life and doctrines— shows that we cannot reasonably conclude that He was merely the greatest man among men. Likewise, we conclude that He founded a Church, entrusting a message, a doctrine, to the Apostles and the early Christians. The unity, universality, and sanctity of the Catholic Church are signs of her unique character in comparison to the other religious institutions. The authenticity of the early Christians in their belief of humanly incomprehensible mysteries is unique in history; the Church manifests age after age that same authenticity, being ever loyal to the original Christian doctrine. The stability of the Church, and especially her doctrinal stability, has no natural explanation, above all if we consider the intricacy of her supernatural doctrine and the sublimity of her teaching.

5. Chesterton's apologetic makes accessible to the non-believer those internal motives of credibility which are useful for awakening the necessary dispositions for belief.

a) He is effective as a humorist; he manages to communicate the objective element within his own personal

experience of conversion from agnosticism to a firm Catholic belief. He is able to relate something of the emancipation, joy, and cheerfulness which accompanied that conversion.

b) Again relying on the fact of his own conversion, the author proposes another internal motive of credibility — in this case one that the non-believer would experience not after but before an acceptance of the faith; namely, the fear which a man may feel before demands of the Catholic faith when he realizes that the rational justification for the faith is objectively convincing and every bit rational.

6. Because in practical apologetics the awakening of the dispositions for belief presents an ample range of approaches and emphases, the apologist cannot be expected to exhaust the many and various possibilities. While Chesterton covers few of the possibilities, he has included some of the more essential ones.

a) In an argument intended for a somewhat skeptical readership influenced by the subjectivist and rationalist trends in modern literature and journalism, Chesterton singles out the problem which man faces in accepting the apparent contradictions in natural and supernatural truths. Consequently, he tries to show the reasonableness of accepting truths which, in themselves are intelligible or credible, yet, in relation to each other, remain difficult to reconcile mutually. Elucidating the role of the will in the cognitive act and the assent to truth, he argues for a return to common sense as a necessary step towards religious belief, but stressing primarily the importance of personal decision and humility.

b) Nevertheless, we think that the author could have gained considerable persuasive force in this point by also taking other factors into account. Though provocative and accurate in his discussion of common sense, and likewise correct for insisting on the need for personal decision, he fails to deal adequately with the equally important need for a contrite conversion of the heart and mind to God.

c) He convincingly shows the relation between freedom and the forgiveness of sin, the relation between freedom and moral responsibility, describing the ultimate human tragedy as man's separation from God.

d) In this same respect, Chesterton's *demonstratio religiosa* begins and ends in a spontaneous and well-formulated demonstration of the existence of God. While the emphasis on common sense and the use of suggestive argumentation constitute the strength of the author's consideration of this point, and though he stresses man's need for gratitude and admiration towards the Creator and Giver of all things, he does not enter into the corresponding religious *obligations* of man towards God. This, however, is understandable and even justified, given that the author sees as the primary obstacle to the faith the lack of an elementary recognition of man's dependence on God, that recognition being the grounds or further argument.

7. With respect to Chesterton's concern to awaken the dispositions for belief, we find that the author's entire apologetic is meant to be, in one way or another, an attempt to reach the reader, described as the «sympathetic outsider», so as to lead him as far as possible toward a better understanding of the Christian faith and the Catholic Church. The author tries to achieve this goal not as much by addressing the supernatural depth of the faith and the Church as by exhibiting the natural dimensions and characteristics of the Catholic belief.

a) In his consideration of happiness, the author answers the question of man's ultimate end, also laying the foundations for an understanding of the Christian doctrine of the Cross.

b) Because he underscores the reasonableness of the Christian answer to the paradoxical and intricate question of the proper balance and proportion of virtue and man's noble aspirations, he justifies a well-founded admiration of the Church's teaching of natural truths.

c) His arguments on freedom and the dignity of man, on progress and social order, in short, his whole case for the human excellence of Christian doctrine, consti-

tute the effective strength and persuasive force of his apologetic; first, because of their focus on the natural desires and aspirations proper to man; second, because of the appeal which these values have for modern man; and third, because the argument lies more within the immediate reach of a natural intelligence of human nature.

d) Adding further cause for admiration of the Church's teaching, the author also draws attention to the timeliness of Christian doctrine. The ideals, or modern values which we so much esteem as those which society needs today, are found to be the timeless and traditional ideals of the Christian religion.

e) The crucial logical step in the demonstration of the sublimity of Catholic doctrine consisting in an argumentation which relates Christian doctrine specifically to the Church and which offers a clear sign of credibility for a belief in supernatural as well as natural truths, Chesterton relies mainly on an historical review of the Church's defense of the fundamental natural truths. Arguing for the uniqueness of the Church's historical position, he consequently points out the fact of the Church's loyalty to the moral and ontological truths of human nature.

f) But the argument fails to provide a *definitive* conclusion for same reason that the Church has had to defend not only supernatural mysteries but also the basic ethical and philosophical principles. Human reason does not always distinguish clearly and completely between truth and fallacy except when man has the healing grace of God and the light of the faith to do so. Above all, man seeks a solid and sure justification for an acceptance of the supernatural mysteries of the faith.

8. Chesterton recognizes the weakness of an argument which requires the acceptance of the key natural truths contemplated in a discussion of liberty, progress, happiness, etc. He counts his argument on the sublimity of Catholic doctrine only as a first attraction, both intellectual and moral, to consider seriously the more easily comprehended proofs of the credibility of the faith.

9. Therefore, even though the argument on sublimity be judged inconclusive, or the logic wanting of further elaboration,

Chesterton completes his defense of the faith by showing the divine origin of the Church as seen in the notes of the Church, the foundation of the Church by Christ, the miracles, the uniqueness of the Church in human history, and above all the authenticity of the Catholic belief and the doctrinal stability of the Church.

a) The author therefore correctly emphasizes the importance of the miracles as a sure motive of credibility. His treatment of the miracles, however, lacks the necessary completeness in that he restricts his argument principally to a defensive consideration of the possibility of miracles and their historical verification. He never mentions *exactly* which miracles can be accepted as supernatural occurrence testifying to the divine origin of Christian doctrine.

b) In his argument from the Gospels, the author offers a convincing case showing the humanly unexplainable quality of Christ's claim to divinity, His life, and His doctrine. Chesterton's focus on the human side of Our Lord's life and death, and his intentional neglect of those parts of the Gospel story more clearly indicative of Christ's divine mission, should be completed by a fuller explanation of the miracle of the Resurrection than the author gives. Still, he does address the non-believer with an effective argument, provocative of that fuller consideration, precisely because he turns to those aspects of the Gospel accounts which are more readily understood and accepted.

c) Likewise, the author presents those aspects of the Church's admirable life which the non-believer can perceive without a lengthy exposition of historical fact. His argument touches on some of the key points of the traditional argument. His emphasis on the authenticity of the Catholic belief and the doctrinal stability of the Church provides an argument whose strength lies in the evident fact of the Church's steadfast and constant refusal to change dogmas formulated in the different historical and cultural circumstances of centuries past. Here again, however, we find that the arguments proposed serve more as an introductory consideration of the tra-

ditional arguments than as a complete exposition of the *demonstratio catholica*.

d) As to the argument presented by Chesterton, the objection may arise that the doctrinal stability of the Church lacks the certainty necessary for a sure motive of credibility. (In effect, although Chesterton gives more importance to his case on the Church than to the miracles, the miracles worked by Our Lord have more demonstrative force). Here we should recall, nonetheless, that the author stresses the historical case for the Church only to place equal emphasis on the sublimity of Catholic doctrine, showing, by the relation of these two ideas, that the Church's «dogmatism» cannot be simply explained as a merely human form of blind or fanatic intransigence.

e) Again considering Chesterton's emphasis on doctrinal stability, we find a possible weakness. We say possible because the weakness is not in the logic but rather in the effectiveness which such an emphasis may have or not have for the readership addressed. On one hand, the emphasis is valuable because the argument is reasonable and because the author presents positively the one aspect of Catholicism which the non-believer may likely consider the shortcoming of the Church. On the other hand, the present-day problems within the Church (e. g. the lack of unity among some of the clergy, the abandonment of the sacraments by not a few Catholics, the public questioning of key Catholic teachings by some theologians, etc.) may be interpreted by the non-believer as being the sign of the final historic moment in which the twentieth century will see what the Arian fourth century, the paganized ninth century, the reformist sixteenth century, the Liberalist nineteenth century had all expected to see but did not. This is the major difficulty in every apologetic based on an exposition of the notes of the Church; the human defects of the Catholics themselves present a definite obstacle, introduce a certain confusion in man's vision of Christ's Church.

f) Even so, we should remember that Chesterton only stresses the authenticity of the Catholic belief and the Church's doctrinal stability. It is not his whole argu-

ment. The author has effectively combined as extensive and noteworthy examination of the sublimity of Catholic doctrine and an equally detailed exposition of an argument from the Gospels.

10. Chesterton's originality is found in the mode of exposition of his justification of the Catholic faith. His apologetic testifies to one singular yet not readily evident fact. In order to argue efficaciously to the men and women who live in the confused and somewhat skeptical society of today, the apologist need not discover an ingenious apologetic logic nor a new series of values to win the hearts and souls of humanity. He can argue from the basic ideals of man and from the traditional elements of apologetic science. He need but have a talent for expressing them in words and images which clarify the classic notions and demonstrations.

11. This last point about the relative importance of logic, demonstration, and method in a practical apologetic for the sympathetic outsider should not be overlooked too readily. It is not as much a question of method; there is a far more difficult obstacle that every aspiring apologist must overcome if he ever hopes to be effective. It is clear that Chesterton's apologetic is in the final analysis at best an introduction; it is clear that the critical non-believer will eventually require a more exacting and complete argument. But all the more clear are those words with which we began this study: «Those who need an introduction are in their nature strangers. With them the object is to get them to listen at all». And here we draw our final and most important conclusion: Chesterton is an apologist whose works can attract, can capture the necessary interest, can dispose the non-believer to an acceptance of the faith because the author overcomes with his humor, clarity, suggestiveness, and vitality the obstacles of the will to listen. This is Chesterton's achievement.





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