



FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

1986 | Vol. XII, No. 3, 4

G.K.C. AS R.C.

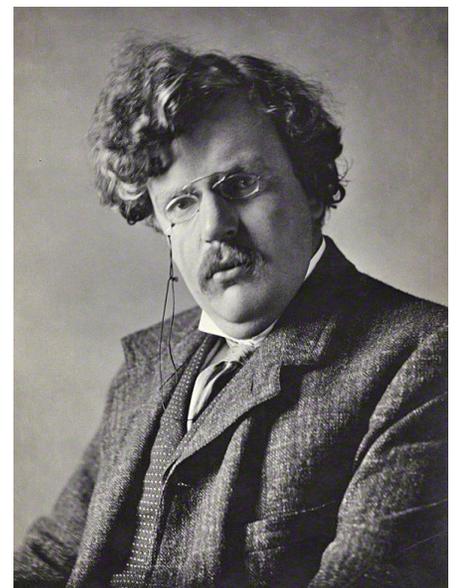
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PAST MASTER OF PARADOXES, CHESTERTON DEFINED THEIR PURPOSE AS A MEANS to awaken the mind.¹ His own personal life provided at least one big paradox which keeps haunting the minds enthralled by his ever-alive massive literary output. The paradox in question is the long delay -- almost ten, perhaps as long as twenty years -- which it took for him to match his crusade for Catholic orthodoxy of dogma and morals with his becoming a convert to the Catholic Church. He did so on June 30, 1922, the Feast of Corpus Christi. His death, on June 14, 1936, fell on Sunday within the Octave of that most Roman Catholic Feast.

In Chesterton's classic biography by Maisie Ward, in which Chesterton's conversion is discussed and documented at great length, three reasons are given for that delay: Chesterton's notorious impracticability, his perpetual state of overwork, and his sensitivity to the distress which his conversion might cause to his wife and parents.² As a devout Catholic, Maisie Ward was fully appreciative of a major facet of converting to the Catholic Church even when, as was the case with Chesterton, the conversion did not imply the espousal by the prospective convert of dogmas not already held for many years. The facet in question is a totally new approach to the reality of sin and to the way of obtaining its remission. In the Catholic Church sins are defined specifically and their list includes a large number of actions which are strictly personal, in fact at times purely mental. The contrast could hardly be greater with the "responsible" *carte blanche* which mainline Protestant churches, including the Anglican church, have for the past hundred years ever more systematically given with regard to the use of sex, both in private and in marital life.³ Millions of Roman Catholics have in vain hoped even in the notably liberal sixties and seventies for a similar *carte blanche* from their supreme pastors, one of whom, Paul VI of *Humanae vitae* fame, earned unstinting praises from none other than Karl Barth for his courage to face "heroic isolation."⁴ Millions of Catholics who developed the habit of regularly going to communion over long periods of time without entering the confessional are today regularly reminded by their supreme pastor that confession is an integral part of the means whereby forgiveness of sins can be obtained.⁵

Chesterton himself emphatically and repeatedly stated that his reason for becoming a Catholic was to receive the kind of forgiveness which only the sacramental absolution given in the confessional can provide. His Autobiography ends with a reference to the fulfillment which the benefits he derived from sacramental confession brought to the very earliest memory of his childhood. It was his having seen, in a peep show, a "young man walking across a bridge" which arched over a perilous chasm from a cliff to the upper part of a castle tower. The man, who walked toward a young lady looking out the sole window of the tower, "carried in his hands a disproportionately large key of a shining yellow metal." The scene left



young Gilbert with the conviction that there was one key that could unlock all doors. He finally found that key for real in the hands of the “Pontifex, or Builder of Bridges” who “is also called Claviger, the Bearer of the Key; and that such keys were given him to bind and loose when he was a poor fisherman in a far province, beside a small and almost secret sea.”⁶

Two pages earlier in that concluding chapter, tellingly entitled “God with the golden Key,” of his *Autobiography*, Chesterton spoke of the various groups which had lately come to recommend the practice of confession. But he added: “None of those groups, so far as I know, professes to provide the minor advantage of Absolution.”⁷ Earlier in that concluding chapter, Chesterton spoke of the Sacrament of Penance as a “source of new life and a reconciliation of man to all living, though not in the manner in which the optimists, the hedonists and the heathen preachers of happiness” offer the same supreme commodity. In that sacrament “the gift is given at a price, and is conditioned by a confession,” which he defined as a channel to Truth and Reality.⁸ A page or so earlier, Chesterton spoke again of forgiveness through sacramental confession and absolution as the reason for his having become a Catholic: “When people ask me, or indeed anybody else, ‘Why 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 peoples’ sins.”⁹

Forgiveness of his sins was for Chesterton the restoration of the innocence experienced in his childhood years. Not surprisingly, his account of his years of adolescence begins with a confession that would strike a chord with any sensitive and sincere individual: “I deal here with the darkest and most difficult part of my task; the period of youth which is full of doubts and morbidities and temptations; and which, though in my case mainly subjective, has left in my mind for ever a certitude upon the objective solidity of sin.”¹⁰ Such was his introductory reply to the “wise and prudent” who bemoaned his “reckless course in becoming a Christian, an orthodox Christian, and finally a Catholic in the sense of a Roman Catholic.”¹¹ Once more he gave as the touchstone for his being a Catholic his unreserved appreciation of sacramental confession, anchored ultimately in papal authority: “I am very proud of being orthodox about the mysteries of Trinity or the Mass; I am proud of believing in the Confessional, I am proud of believing in the

Papacy.”¹² He did not finish the subject without chiding those who take the act of going to confession for a sign of cowardice, and at the same time are not courageous enough to confess their sins.

None of these statements were retrospective exaggeration on the part of a man sensing his life ebbing away as he raced time to finish his *Autobiography*, whose publication in 1936 postdated his death by a few months. In 1929 he published *The Thing*, a series of outspoken articles in defense of the Catholic Church against various charges offered by Protestants and non-Christians. There in the chapter, “Why I am a Catholic,” he presented his early realization of the historical and logical fallacy of those charges as being his first prompting toward the Catholic Church. He brought his discourse to a climax with the advice that Protestants and others had better find out through practice about the true nature of the Catholic confessional box: “It is enough to say that those who know the Catholic practice find it not only right, but always right when everything else is wrong; making the Confessional the very throne of candour where the world outside talks nonsense about it as a sort of conspiracy; upholding humility when everybody is praising pride; charged with sentimental charity when the world is talking a brutal utilitarianism; charged with dogmatic harshness when the world is loud and loose with vulgar sentimentalism -- as it is today.”¹³

Three years earlier, in 1926, it was again the confessional which was at the center stage of the chapter, “The Real Obstacles,” in his *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, a book obviously written with his own conversion in mind. The real obstacle to conversion was, Chesterton argued, a counterfeit form of realism, especially with respect to sin: “Realism is really a rock of offense; it is not at all unnatural to shrink from it; and most realist only manage to like it because they are careful to be realistic about other people.” The only remedy consisted in finding out for oneself about confession and absolution:

It will be enough to say that this act of confessing and receiving absolution is perhaps the supreme example of the fact that the Faith is a paradox that measures more within than without. If that be true of the smallest church, it is truer still of the yet smaller confessional-box, that is like a church within a church. It is almost a good thing that nobody outside should know what gigantic generosity, and even geniality, can be locked up in a box, as the legendary casket held the heart of a

giant. It is a satisfaction, and almost a joke, that it is only in a dark corner and a cramped space that any man can discover that mountain of magnanimity.¹⁴

As he regularly forced his bulky figure into the makeshift confessional box of Beaconsfield's Roman Catholic Church, a wooden shed with corrugated roof attached to the Railway Hotel, Chesterton could not help thinking of a tasteless line in the letter which Bernard Shaw wrote to him on February 16th 1923: "You will have to go to confession next Easter; and I find the spectacle - the box, your portly kneeling figure, the poor devil inside wishing you had become a Fireworshiper instead of coming there to shake his sould with a sense of his ridiculousness and yours - all incredible, montrous, comic, though, of coure, I can put a perfect literary complexion on it in a brace of shakes."¹⁵

Needless to say it was not to "realists" of Bernard Shaw's type that Chesterton disclosed the aspect of his conversion which most really cuts into flesh and blood, indeed cut through his very human fallen nature. The recipient of the revelation "that by converting I began to wear the iron ring of Catholic [moral] responsibilities," was Father Ronald Arbuthnot Knox, possibly the most famous English convert, beside Chesterton, in the 20th century. The insertion of the word 'moral' should seem justified by his admission, immediately preceding his reference to that iron ring, that until he began to wear it "I have been a rottenly irresponsible person."¹⁶

The phrase, "iron ring of Catholic responsibilities" is one of the most powerful ever coined by Chesterton, never at a loss for coming up with forceful phrases. Had he been prompted to elaborate on it, he, a creature of gripping analogies, would have probably spoken of the hair shirt worn by medieval penitents or of the belt studded with nails that mortified their bellies and loins. About the loins of Chesterton one should keep a manly reserve, especially in an age that has taken titillating Freudian disclosures for depth and sincerity. An age with so dirty a mind finds it all to natural to soil with innuendos all those who denounce its shame. So much for the rumors that Chesterton was for a while a homosexual. If he was, he certainly recognized that "lifestyle" as a gravest sin. He may have reached sexual maturity with some delay but again all his references to chastity are unconditional praises of that virtue, nowadays despised by "creative" Catholic moral theologians and conveniently written off by their Protestant counterparts. As to marriage,

its sacredness remained always in Chestertons' focus.

His weakness for food and drink was notorious. His fondness for port, whisky, and sausages could but help trigger that still not completely diagnosed coma in which he lay, with some lucid intervals, from Christmas Eve of 1914 (hardly an abstemious day for Englishmen) until the Easter of 1915. It was during that illness that Mrs. Chesterton once tested whether her husband was conscious by asking him: "Who is looking for you?" The answer -God- given both clearly and gravely, made Mrs. Chesterton feel terribly small. A little later she talked to Maisie Ward's mother, telling her that Gilbert had spoken about his wish to join the Catholic Church. Shortly afterwards Mrs. Chesterton became apprehensive lest her husband's wish become public and be attributed to his weakened condition. She hastened to advise Maisie Ward's mother:

I think I would rather you did not tell anyone just yet of what I told you regarding my husband and the Catholic Church. Not that I doubt for a moment that he meant it and knew what he was saying and was relieved at saying it, but I don't want the world at large to be able to say that he came to this decision when he was weak and unlike himself. He will ratify it no doubt when his complete manhood is restored. I know it was not weakness that made him say it, but you will understand my scruples. I know in God's good time he will make his confession of faith -- and if death comes near him again I shall know how to act. Thanks for all your sympathy. I did enjoy seeing you.¹⁷



This letter is quoted here in full partly because of Alzina S. Dale's effort to take the pro-Roman sting out of it in her book, *The Outline of Sanity: A Biography of G.K. Chesterton*, published in 1982 and hailed as a "critical" work.¹⁸ Without reproducing a single line from that all-important letter, Dale makes much of the fact that Mrs. Ward, before receiving Mrs. Chesterton's letter, had already sent word to Father O'Connor who came right away, but was not allowed by Mrs. Chesterton to see her husband. In the same context Dale chides the Wards' "more than evangelical zeal," and suggests that Father

O'Connor may have been wrong in claiming that Chesterton had told him in 1911 or so about his wish to become a Catholic. Most revealingly Dale claims that in 1914 only those dogmas mattered to Chesterton that Anglo-Catholics and Roman Catholics held in common: "The differences that he cared about lay primarily in matters of daily discipline and habits."¹⁹ This extraordinary appraisal of Chesterton's state of mind and of the respective nature of Anglo-Catholic and Roman Catholic dogmas is cannily left by Dale in its stupefying primitive vagueness. Finally, she deplores the fact that from that time on Roman Catholic literary and social leaders began to count Chesterton as one of their own.

Dale's biography of Chesterton is a critical work mainly in the sense that she is unable to remain non-critical even in a single instance of Chesterton's Roman Catholicism, whether in its actuality or in its genesis. Her repeated claims that Chesterton's Roman Catholicism was very Chestertonian²⁰ are suggestive of some non-Romanism in him even after his conversion. In fact, Chesterton sounded time and again very Roman Catholic long before he took that most momentous step. Particularly relevant is the fact that in his Autobiography he singled out neither 1922, the year of his conversion, nor 1901, the year of his marrying Frances Blogg, but 1903 as a "landmark" in his life.²¹ That year saw him both catapulted to fame and written off by powerful arbiters of public acclaim. Fame came to him partly because *The Daily News* and *The Illustrated London News* invited regular weekly contributions from him, and partly because of his series of rebuttals of the philosophy of Robert Blatchford.²²

The author of books that around 1900 sold in millions of copies, Blatchford preached a naive scientific determinism. To expose its selfdefeating inconsistencies was hardly a feat for Chesterton. Mental sanity, unimaginable without robust confidence in the freedom of one's will and in the responsibility which goes with it, was certainly a major point in Chesterton's anti-Blatchford articles. But Alzina Dale, who rightly held high the importance of sanity in Chesterton's thought, passed over in silence that already in those anti-Blatchford articles he tied sanity to a resounding declaration of Christ's divinity and to the reality of miracles.²³ Clearly, in two years of married life, prior to which he was an agnostic liberal attached to the cultural trimmings of the Church of England, Chesterton learned much about the sacramental, supernatural character of Christian faith from his wife whom he explicitly credited on that score.²⁴ But for an-

other twenty years, Chesterton left entirely to his wife the practice of going to the local Anglican parish church on Sundays. He became a churchgoer only when he became a Roman Catholic.

To be sure, the Chestertons were developing closer and closer ties with their Anglo-Catholic friends. But Anglo-Catholicism was more a liturgical fashion than a dogmatic stance. It was more a strong resentment of the liberalism prevailing among Anglican clergy than a firm vote on behalf of the papacy. Even within Anglo-Catholic realms there remained a partly subconscious Protestant veneration for the Bible as the ultimate form of truth and a readiness, no less Protestant, to accept the papal office as an esthetic symbol of Christian unity rather than its authoritative guarantee. It was also a Protestant strain in Anglo-Catholicism to accept biblical miracles but look with some diffidence on the steady continuation of miracles without which the veneration of saints in the Roman Catholic Church is inconceivable.

In Chesterton's tying the sanity of human nature to the divinity of Christ there was nothing specifically Roman Catholic. However, in view of the circumlocutions made on that point by many Anglican bishops and divines, a resounding affirmation of Christ's divinity had an implied Romanist thrust. This alone explains the startled reaction of that member, not identified by Chesterton, of the "establishment" who in the wake of the Blatchford-controversy invited Chesterton for a dinner and asked him point blank if he believed in Christ and in miracles. On hearing Chesterton reply with a resounding "yes", he returned an astonished "oh", enough to convey his dismay and disbelief that a writer of Chesterton's talents could be so bigoted. The reaction of that "grey eminence" was symbolic of the subsequent reception of Chesterton's writings: polite applause for the brilliant writer, possibly the greatest master of the English prose ever, and an undisguised hostility toward his message which took an ever clearer Romanist touch. Hence Chesterton's characterization of 1903 as his Landmark Year.

In fact in 1903 he put himself unequivocally on record in *The Daily News* with an interpretation of the relation between Bible and Church that was anything but Protestant:

Protestant Christianity believes that there is Divine record in a book; that everyone ought to have free access to that book; that everyone who gets hold of it can save his soul by it, whether he finds

it in a library or picks it off a dustcart. Catholic Christianity believes that there is a Divine army or league upon earth called the Church; that all men should be induced to join it; that any man who joins it can save his soul by it without ever opening any of the old books of the Church at all. The Bible is only one of the institutions of Catholicism, like its rites or its priesthood; it thinks the Bible only efficient when taken as part of the Church.²⁵

Two years later, in his *Heretics*, he closed his essay on Bernard Shaw with a rebuttal of the superman in terms of a Christ who alone can account for the survival value of a particular weak man on whom he founded his Church.²⁶ Contrary to Alzina Dale,²⁷ Chesterton did not say that Christ established his church on weak man, let alone on man's weakness, but on a single weak man. That Chesterton meant Peter was also clear from his reference to Paul and John. And that Peter was meant by Chesterton in a distinctly Roman Catholic sense was also clear from the complete absence in the entire passage of even the faintest invocation of the Protestant cliché, namely, that it was Peter's faith and not Peter himself that Christ called Rock.

Then came *Orthodoxy* with its paean of the indefectible Christian Church "thundering through the ages" as if it were "a heavenly chariot, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect."²⁸ Such is the ending of the immortal chapter, "Paradoxes of Christianity." Immediately preceding it is the denunciation of modernism, just at a time when Protestant churches and the Church of England were gloating over the superstitiousness of the anti-modernist oath imposed by Pius X. Six years later, Chesterton recalled the death of that saintly pope in words that distanced him not only from all Protestants, orthodox or liberal, but also from all liberal Roman Catholics of our times who prefer not to remember Pius X:

As has been pointed out, with subtle power and all proper delicacy, in numberless liberal and large-minded journals, the great and good priest now dead had all the prejudices of a peasant. He had a prejudice to the effect that the mystical word "Yes" should be distinguished from the equally unfathomable expression "No" ... The pope never pretended to have an extraordinary intellect; but he professed to be right-- and he was. All honest atheists, all honest Calvinists, all honest men who

mean anything or believe anything or deny anything, will have reason to thank their stars (a heathen habit) for the peasant in that high place. He left people to agree with his creed or disagree with it; but not free to misrepresent it. It was exactly what any peasant taken from any of our hills and plains would have said. But there was something more in him that would not have been in the ordinary peasant. For all this time he had wept for our tears; and he broke his heart for our bloodshed.²⁹

But to return to the chapter, "Paradoxes of Christianity." It contains a recommendation of the historic church insofar as it tried, what Protestants declared to be un-Christian -- just think of Reinhold Niebuhr -- namely, the direct involvement in political and cultural life and the maintenance of a posture of intransigence: "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".³⁰ Only to non-Roman eyes will there be therefore any paradox in the beginning of that chapter where the concrete divine truth is endorsed in terms of the always very specific key.

The passage did not contain a reference to Mt 16:18 (I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven). Possibly, Chesterton felt that a mere suggestion at a crucial juncture was far more effective than a plain declaration. Another reason may be looked for in Chesterton's account of a meeting he had with Lord Hugh Cecil, who had just written a long review of *Orthodoxy*. Sir Hugh was that rare embodiment of traditional Protestantism which included commitment to all dogmatic tenets of the Reformers. Chesterton characterized the rarity of such a case as one that shocked contemporary Englishmen more than the conversion of any one of them to the Roman Catholic Church. At any rate, discussing religion at length with Lord Hugh convinced Chesterton that although "I may have been still a thousand miles from being a Catholic, Lord Hugh fully revealed to me that I was no longer a Protestant."³¹

As far as the intellectual side of being a Roman Catholic was concerned, Chesterton was at most inches away from the Church of Rome at that time. On being asked by the T.P.'s *Weekly* to draw up a list of basic religious reading he suggested Butler's *Analogy*, Coleridge's *Confessions of an Enquiring Spirit*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Thomas Aquinas' *Summa* and, of all things, Newman's

Apologia pro vita sua. That he meant Newman in a most serious way was very clear from his endorsement of Newman's idea of doctrinal development in his controversy with the Anglican cleric, R.J. Campbell, at about the same time.³²

It was therefore only natural that suspicions among Protestants and expectations among Catholics were rising about Chesterton's impending conversion. Following a lecture he gave to a group of Anglicans in Coventry in 1910, two priests saw him at the railway bookstand and asked him whether the rumor about his coming into the Catholic Church was true. He replied: "It's a matter that is giving me a great deal of agony of mind, and I'd be very grateful if you would pray for me."³³ It was about that time that he and Mrs. Chesterton met in Yorkshire Father John O'Connor who was immediately taken into Mrs. Chesterton's confidence. Chesterton himself was greatly impressed by the down-to-earth wisdom and unpretentious piety of a man on whom he was to model the famed Father Brown, the masterful tracer of all natural puzzles to their supernatural origins. According to Alzina Dale, Father O'Connor impressed Chesterton with his wide knowledge of human depravity, a knowledge acquired through hearing confession.³⁴ Was she suggesting thereby that Father O'Connor spoke readily about matters, even though not mentioning names, he heard in confessions? Did it occur to her that Chesterton would have hardly developed a lifelong friendship with a priest taking any liberty whatsoever with others' most sacred confidence? That underlying her interpretation of Chesterton's first meeting with Father O'Connor lies the telltale unfamiliarity of a Protestant with the Roman Catholic sacrament of confession can easily be inferred from her description of Chesterton's own first confession. In recalling that beside Father O'Connor, who received Chesterton into the Church, Father Ignatius Rice too was present, she adds: "Frances waited outside while they heard Chesterton's confession."³⁵ That such a ghastly boner passed through three editors at Eerdmans, a prominent Protestant publishing house, may be of no great surprise. It was Father O'Connor, and he alone, who heard Chesterton's first confession.

Father Rice's presence at Chesterton's conversion -- though not at his first confession - is important to note for reasons that, tellingly enough, did not seem worth mentioning to Alzina Dale. As Father Rice told, years later, Mr. Sheed, Maisie Ward's husband, Chesterton "was in brilliant form for the rest of the day, quoting poetry

and jesting in the highest spirits." With this in mind, it should be easy to understand why Chesterton spoke unreservedly in that small group about the deepest source of his exultation. He now found himself at the triumphal end of a long and often very painful course the supreme goal of which was, and here Father Rice seems to have quoted Chesterton's very words, "to restore my innocence."³⁶ In and through that first confession of his that restoration came with the exhilarating suddenness with which a piece of iron finds itself suddenly united to a magnet, the image he repeatedly used to describe the final phase of conversion.³⁷

Shortly after his conversion, Chesterton wrote the plain truth to his mother that "for years" before his conversion he had not talked to any of his Catholic friends about it.³⁸ He struggled through the intellectual and moral considerations preceding his conversion in practical solitude. Even his wife knew about his being in the grip of a momentous decision only from his growing increasingly restless. It was the uneasiness of an "Anglo-Catholic" who in 1920 chose to address an Anglo-Catholic meeting on a strictly non-religious subject. The reason for this was that by then he realized the fallacy of Anglo-Catholicism. Or, as he wrote to Maurice Baring, himself a convert: "I used to think one could be an Anglo-Catholic and really inside it; but if that was (to use an excellent phrase of your own) only a Porch, I do not think I want a Porch, and certainly not a Porch standing some way from the building."³⁹ It was also to Baring that he disclosed the crucial issue: as an Anglo-Catholic he would still have to accept decisions and views formulated by the Lambeth conferences of Anglican bishops who spoke more and more as worldly philosophers.⁴⁰ But for Chesterton the Church was a Church only if it represented God. And this was precisely the point that finally overruled his sensitivity as to the blow which his conversion might cause to his dearly beloved wife and mother. His letter, written shortly before his conversion, to Father Ronald Knox, goes to the heart of the matter: "I could not explain what I mean about my wife without saying much more. I see in principle it is not on the same level as the true Church; for nothing can be on the same level as God."⁴¹ It is this equation, with however important qualifications, of Church and God, which only a Roman Catholic is able to see as something not blasphemous but most reasonable.

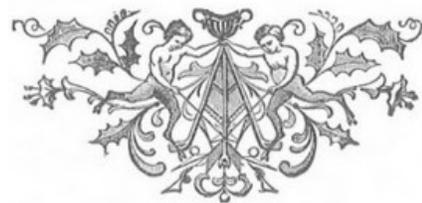
Chesterton's conversion to the Roman Catholic Church was, apart from his readiness to "wear the iron

ring of Catholic responsibilities,” a fully articulated intellectual perception of the full range of truth as understood by the Catholic Church. He did not join it because it “satisfied” his needs, but because of his conviction that it alone could satisfy the needs of any and all. It should also be recalled that in 1922 the Roman Catholic Church was at the midpoint of an extraordinarily coherent phase of about eighty years of her history. Unlike fifty years later, in 1922 no prospective convert was given the illusion that he or she could have reservations about crystal-clear papal teaching, however ordinary, and continue sinning “responsibly.”⁴² Certainly at that time there was no Benedictine Archbishop to complain about Rome’s suppressing “creative” moral theologians having for their chief aim the defense of that kind of responsibility.⁴³ Nor was there yet around the kind of Jesuit provincial who gives his subjects the guideline: “Jesuits have always been on the cutting edge and the Pope does not expect us to repeat his mind; he expects us to challenge it.”⁴⁴ The Church Chesterton entered was a remarkably coherent house even in its porch and yard.

Though always ready to take up any challenge and to challenge anything, Chesterton never challenged Church or Pope. He did not because he saw the Church he entered as the House of God in which the voice of God was heard through the voice of man. Of course, Chesterton was greatly helped by the fact that whatever idealist or nominalist philosophy he may have imbibed from his broad Anglican cultural background, he parted with it at an early stage. It was no problem for him, the voluble realist, to appreciate Thomas Aquinas. In his *Saint Thomas Aquinas* he gave an appreciation of his teaching that made Etienne Gilson, a prince of 20th-century Thomists, speak repeatedly over a period of thirty years of that book as one that made him despair of the usefulness of his own most scholarly work.⁴⁵ Gilson’s was a supreme vote, not only on behalf of Chesterton the thinker, but also of the genuinely Roman Catholic nature of his philosophical stance. Those who still remember Karl Barth’s inveighing against the Thomist doctrine of the analogy of being as the invention of the Antichrist,⁴⁶ need no further comment. Any further comment would, of course, be wasted on the author of *Outline of Sanity* who spoke of Gilson as “a Thomist theologian” and dismissed Chesterton’s Thomism as something not to be taken seriously.⁴⁷

Fortunately, Dale gave away her distinctly Protestant reasons for downplaying Chesterton the Thomist.

Toward the end of the *Outline of Sanity* she cast Chesterton the thinker into a framework which Chesterton would have decried as the insanity of the Protestant understanding of the relation of reason and faith. “Chesterton,” Dale wrote, “was torn between feeling and reason, because reason too, is fallacious and must be completed by faith. The result is a central tension between order and emotion that can be seen in all his writing. To Chesterton it appeared that this kind of restriction, or tension, was what is meant by the Anglican Prayer Book phrase about God -- ‘Whose Service is Perfect Freedom’”⁴⁸ But Chesterton whose views of knowledge were anything but fideist, did not endorse that Book about which Newman taught him that it kept injecting ever since its composition the Lutheran blood of fideism into Anglican Christendom. In dealing with Thomas, Chesterton did not miss in him the great Catholic mystic. But it was in his second great work postdating his conversion, the one dealing with Saint Francis of Assisi, that Chesterton came to grips, and in a manner of a thoroughbred Roman Catholic, with the relation of intense spirituality and Church authority. In the conflict of Franciscan zealots with papal authority, Chesterton saw but one case of many similar ones. He also knew that conflagration was in store whenever the zealots refused to heed the point which the Pope alone had the authority to settle. The point was whether Christendom should absorb Francis or Francis Christendom. This was for him also the point when it came to Marcion, Arius, Berengarius, Hus, Luther, Calvin, and Jansenius. “But it is the ancient Church that can again startle the world with the paradoxes of Christianity: Ubi Petrus, ibi Franciscus.”⁴⁹



The third greatest book written by Chesterton after his conversion, perhaps the greatest book he ever wrote, was *The Everlasting Man*, a book no less Roman Catholic than the two others. His sense of unreserved catholicity helped him move straight from primitive to post-modern man, and find the explanation of the marvel tying them together in Christ and Church. Chesterton was prompted to write *The Everlasting Man* to answer H.G. Wells’ *Outline of History* in which Christ, professedly the most important figure of history, was given far less space than the Persians’ campaign against Greece.⁵⁰ Christ was once more inseparable from the visible

Church. The fourth chapter of Part Two, "The Witness of the Heretics," begins with a recall of Christ's words in which Peter is called a rock and is given the keys of the kingdom. Chesterton's point is not a biblical exegesis but the concreteness of the specificity of a key with which dogmatic Christianity acted in human history. That Chesterton meant historic Roman Catholic Church by concrete Christendom is clear also from the conclusion of the next chapter, entitled, "Escape from Paganism," where he declares: "We are Christians and Catholics not because we worship a key, but because we have passed a door; and felt the wind that is the trumpet of liberty blow over the land of the living."⁵¹

Chesterton wrote three books specifically relating to his conversions during the dozen or so years he was allowed to live after that event. They were *The Catholic Church and Conversion* (1926), *The Thing, or Why I am a Catholic* (1929), and *The Well and the Shallows* (1935). None of them would particularly appeal to non-Catholic Chestertonians. While they write off with relative ease these volumes as somewhat tiresome controversy or apologetic, they have no such easy time doing so with the three others, especially *The Everlasting Man*. Their usual tactic is the claim that Chesterton's style lost some of its freshness after he became a Catholic. With those aware of the fact that style can hardly be separated from content, the tactic will be rather transparent. But the roundabout slighting of *The Everlasting Man* carries with it another and rather scholarly burden. It is a book in whose first two chapters Chesterton deals with the significance of the art of prehistoric man. Those chapters, which reverberate with his phrase, "Art is the signature of man,"⁵² are the first incisive presentation of the argument that man's power to construct symbols, artistic and other, is the chief mark of his infinite superiority over the higher apes. This is not to suggest that most 20th-century philosophers writing on that subject would have followed Chesterton to that point. They have, however, followed one another in seeing the importance of that point and in giving no credit to Chesterton. The story is of conspiratorial monumentality and illustrates Chesterton's phrase about some great Catholic discoverers: "Catholics first and to be forgotten."⁵³

The tactic is part of that cultural thievery which wants to deprive the Roman Catholic Church of due credit for her gigantic contributions to human culture. To those fond of that tactic -- a continuation of the Sacco di Roma- it should appear an unbearable tragedy that a genius like Chesterton most emphatically wants to be

claimed by that Church. Then the only thing for them to do is to downplay the Roman Catholic ingredient in Chesterton's life and work, an ingredient nothing short of being the marrow of his bones and the blood of his veins. So much for Alzina Dale's repeated remarks that the Roman Catholicism of Chesterton was more Chestertonian than Roman, and her innuendo that Chesterton "would burst out of the ark which his co-religionists have locked him."⁵⁴ Clearly, G. K. C. the R. C. keeps hurting.

Innuendos of that type are far more effective than open resentment of Chesterton the Catholic.⁵⁵ But no less destructively effective is the apologetic tone of some Catholic Chestertonians about Chesterton the Roman Catholic. A recent case in point is the introduction by the poet, J. P. Kavanagh, to his *Chesterton Anthology* where he ascribes Chesterton's conversion not to his desire to get rid of his sins (hardly a most popular topic in the 1970s and 1980s) through sacramental absolution (a most unpopular topic), but to a culturally more respectable reason, namely, that society in order to survive needs the Catholic Church.⁵⁶ In that anthology, nothing is offered from *Catholic Church and Conversion* and its two sequels.

Were Chesterton alive today, nothing would hurt him more than finding instances of sheepish embarrassment about his having converted to the Roman Catholic Church, and having done so with an extraordinary measure of reflection, perceptiveness, and commitment. He would readily diagnose that cleverly concealed embarrassment as a symptom which is taken by nervous Nellys for a courageous opening to the world, whereas the world takes it for a failure of nerve. Yet, as the 1980s show, the spine of the Roman Catholic Church can stiffen most unexpectedly. Thus John Paul II could not be ignored by Alzina Dale, who admits that Chesterton today would find himself on the side of the Polish Pope.⁵⁷ One wonders what she thinks now of the precipitous decline of the popularity of Hans Küng whom she pitted in 1982 as a Superman against John Paul II⁵⁸ Or is human memory, and unfortunately the memory of some non-Catholics, perennially short about the perennial vigor of the Roman Catholic Church? Chesterton would not be surprised, but only because he knew -- his *Resurrection of Rome* is a witness - that the Roman Catholic Church is able to rise again and again to the challenge of ever new times as the only true Phoenix of human history. It was this fact above all other facts that Chesterton wanted to drive home with his paradoxes and awaken his reader's minds.

NOTES

1 *St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1933), p. 176.

2 M. Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1944), pp. 379-80.

3 In the last of three lectures delivered in the Liverpool Cathedral on 31 October 1963, the Anglican Bishop John A. T. Robinson, of Honest to God fame, declared that in the case of his own children he “would much rather give them the built-in moral values to use the [newly prevailing pre-marital sexual] freedom creatively for themselves than to shelter them from it.” *Christian Morals Today* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), p. 44. He was not taken to task on that score by any Lambeth Conference, nor was Dr. James Pyke denied promotion to the Anglican bishopric of San Francisco because of his public support of the “redeeming” value of the pornographic movie, *Baby Doll*.

4 See Karl Barth *Letters 1961-1968*, edited by J. Fangmeier and H. Stoevesandt, translated and edited by G. W. Bromily (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 314.

5 John Paul II did so most recently during his visit to Ars (October 1986) to venerate the tomb of Saint John Vianney, whom he had in June presented as the ideal of modern priests partly because of his zeal in hearing confessions.

6 *Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1936), p. 31 and 343.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 341.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 330.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 329.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

13 *The Thing* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1929), p. 77.

14 *The Catholic Church and Conversion* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1926), PP • 53-54.

15 Quoted by M. Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, p. 417.

16 Quoted *ibid.*, p. 391.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 330.

18 Grand Rapids, Michigan, W.B. Eerdmans, W.B. Eerdmans. the book’s jacket carries four endorsements, one of them a praise of its critical quality.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 234 and 273-74. Dale’s anti-Roman Catholic tactic is at times self-destructive even from the purely logical point of view. Thus she claims that not all of Chesterton’s venerate he (p. 119). Many or at least some therefore do mean Her if that negative reconstruction means anything.

21 *Autobiography*, p. 178.

22 For further details, see my article, “Chesterton’s Landmark Year: The Blatchford-Chesterton Debate of 1903-1904,” *The Chesterton Review* 10 (1984); 490-423.

23 Chesterton’s third anti-Blatchford essay had for its title, “Miracles and Modern Civilization.” It ended with a powerful emphasis on the divinity of Christ, the very miracle which alone makes all miracles possible and meaningful: “The Romans were quote willing to admit that Christ was a God. What they denied was that He was the God - the highest truth of the cosmos. And this is the only point worth discussing about Christianity.”

24 M. Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, p. 391. “She gave me my first respect for sacramental Christianity.”

25 Quoted *ibid.*, p. 249.

26 *Heretics*, (London: John Lane, 1905), p. 67.

27 A.S. Dale, *The Outline of Sanity*, p. 300. With the same Protestant fear of the specter of Peter, Dale presented (p. 234) Chesterton’s reference to Peter as the Claviger or Key-bearer as a reference to Christ. For the passage in question see footnote 6 above.

28 *Orthodoxy* (London: John Lane, 1908), pp. 184-185.

29 See *A Selection from the Uncollected Writings of G.K. Chesterton*, arranged and edited by A.L. Maycock (London: Dennis Dobson, 1963), p. 107.

30 *Orthodoxy*, p. 179.

31 *Autobiography*, p. 179.

32 M. Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, pp. 170-171.

33 Quoted *ibid.*, p. 242. This may have been one of the six times when Chesterton, according to his own recollections, found himself in a situation in which he “should have certainly become a Catholic.” See *The Well and the Shallows* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), p. 245.

34 A.S. Dale, *The Outline of Sanity*, p. 94. “In their first walk across the moors, Father O’Connor did fascinate Chesterton by telling him tales of incredible evil and depravity that he had heard in confession.”

35 *Ibid.*, p. 234. Compare with the recollection of Mr. Ward of his conversion with Father Rice concerning Chesterton’s conversion: “While G.K. was making his confession the Father O’Connor, Frances and Father Rice went out of the chapel and sat on the yokel’s bench in the bar in the inn.” Quoted in M. Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, p. 393.

36 *Ibid.*, 396. The extent to which Chesterton saw the act of his conversion in the light of a most serious spiritual concern can easily be gathered from his reminiscing on it a dozen years later: “I was myself received into the Catholic Church in a small tin shed, painted brick-red, which stood among the sculleries and outhouses of a Railway Hotel. That represents, with great exactitude, the precise extent to which I was or am influenced by exquisite architecture or alluring music, or storied windows richly dight, casting a dim religious light.” *The Resurrection of Rome* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1934), p. 291.

37 *The Catholic Church and Conversion* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1926), pp. 61 and 65.

38 M. Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, p. 397.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 384.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 388.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 391.

42 I am, of course, referring to the principal thrust of Father Charles E. Curran’s teaching on sexual ethics.

43 See the report by *The New York Times* (Oct. 9, 1986, p. A22, cols 1-2) about the news conference given by The Most Reverend Rembert G. Weakland, Archbishop of Milwaukee.

44 See *The New York Times*, Oct. 22, 1986, p. 18, cols 4-6.

45 For texts and documentation, see my Chesterton, *A Seer of Science* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 19 and 127.

46 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Vol. I *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Part I, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p. xiii.

47 A. S. Dale, *The Outline of Sanity*, pp. 290-91.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 291. Dale implies that Chesterton was a philosophical fideist, a point which I opposed with quotations from Orthodoxy in my book, Chesterton, A Seer of Science, p. 123. While a slanted presentation such as Dale’s of Chesterton’s religious odyssey gives itself away by its details and phrasings, the unadvised reader can easily fall victim to Lawrence J. Clipper’s flat declaration, “Chesterton was an AngloCatholic much of his life (i.e. until 1922) and a Roman Catholic thereafter,” in his Introduction to *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*. Volume XXVII. The Illustrated London News (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 29.

49 *St. Francis of Assisi* (1928; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1952), p. 121.

50 For details see my article, “Chesterton’s Landmark Year,” quoted above in note 22.

51 *The Everlasting Man* (1925; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), p. 248.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

53 *The Thing* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1929), p. 100.

54 A S. Dale, *The Outline of Sanity*, p. 300.

55 “Although I regret that Chesterton became a Catholic as much as I regret that Wells became an atheist. . .” writes M. Gardner in his *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener* (New York: William Morrow, p. 1983), p. 361. No less revealing should seem the hardly concealed satisfaction of L. J. Clipper as he notes in his Introduction (p. 29, see note 48 above) to Chesterton’s essays in *The Illustrated London News* that in those essays Chesterton rarely refers directly to his faith and “never in a spirit of proselytization” and that therefore “true believers and dogmatists are understandably put off by the highly attenuated fashion in which Chesterton’s faith comes through.” The implicit dichotomy between true believers and dogmatists flies in the face of practically all Chesterton wrote on religion.

56 “It is important to recognize that it was his practical political concerns that led him [Chesterton] to Roman Catholicism,” opines Kavanagh on p. xvi of his Introduction.

57A. S. Dale, *The Outline of Sanity*, p. 300.

58Ibid. Contrary to all expectations that decline was achieved by Rome’s mere declaration that Hans Kung was no longer a Roman Catholic theologian. This outcome, so baffling to journalistic biographers, would not have surprised at all Chesterton who closed his account of his audience with Pope Pius XI with the following words: “Then he [the Pope] made a motion and we all knelt; and in the words that followed I understood for the first time something that was once meant by the ceremonial use of the plural, and in a flash I saw the sense of something that had always seemed to me a senseless custom of kings. With a new strong voice, that was hardly even like his own, he began ‘Nous vous bénissons,’ and I knew that something stood there infinitely greater than an individual; I knew that it was indeed ‘We’; We, Peter and Gregory and Hildebrand and all the dynasty that does not die.” *The Resurrection of Rome*, p. 293.