

Rev. Dr. Owen B. McGuire

ANGELIC JESTER or ENTERTAINING INSTRUCTOR?

I have been much intrigued by the letter of that Quaker State correspondent. It says much and it suggests more. It opens with this sentence "As we draw near to the feast day of the Angelic Jester," I write to thank you for your two articles on the movement towards his canonization."

The Angelic Jester is G. K. Chesterton and his feast day was the 14th of June, the day on which he died. In fact it was a double feast, for, if my memory does not fail me, it was on the same date Chesterton was received into the Church by Father John O'Connor, the original of "Father Brown."

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With due respect to my correspondent, however, I do not like that appellation of Chesterton. Jester, I think, usually means one who lacks seriousness, and is habitually addicted to making "wise cracks" for the sake of amusing; a joker. There is a distinction made between joker and jester; but I don't know where our college graduates of last June would agree with Crabbe when he says: "One jests in order to make others laugh; one jokes in order to please one's self." But the point here is that Chesterton, in his own light-hearted, jovial and charitable way, had in many parts of his writings, repudiated being called a joker, jester or maker of paradoxes. He does these things to illustrate his argument. The argument is always there though he does not put it in syllogistic form. This reminds me of what one of those Irish intellectuals wrote at the time of Chesterton's death: "Chesterton," he said, "was an emotional rather than a logical writer." On the contrary if there is a logical writer in the English language, it is Gilbert Keith Chesterton. He differs greatly from Belloc; but because he enlivens his logic with pleasantries he had ten readers for Belloc's one.

It will be interesting to see how Chesterton himself defends this characteristic of his style or rather his distinctive manner of presenting his argument. NEVER ABUSE

At one stage of his long journey towards the goal where he finally found peace and certitude and the full development his amazing versatility he was associated with what he calls "The Anglo-Catholic Group." He describes this association in the Autobiography, in the chapter entitled "The Crisis of Orthodoxy." To ameliorate the condition of the working and propertyless class he founded a society called "The Christian Social Union; and parenthetically let me say, the admirable account he gives of his Anglican associates in the Union is another illustration of something I said a few weeks ago—that converts to Catholicism never abuse those they left behind; "A very fine body of men," he describes them, "to which I for one shall always feel a gratitude like that of the blind man in Scripture." He opened his eyes to some of the fundamentals in Christianity.

After describing a speech made by Canon Scott Holland at a meeting of the C. S. Union, he remarks, "From that day to this, I have understood why a solid argument is any less solid because you make the illustrations as entertaining as you can." That one sentence does, I think, explain the abundance and exuberance of Chesterton's pleasantries. They are not jests just "to make others laugh." They are not jokes just "to please one's self." Whether they be called jests, or jokes, or pleasantries they always have a purpose and that purpose is to instruct.

Of course, even good things can be overdone, and I have heard many say that in this matter Chesterton gives us too much of a good thing. The reader can decide for himself. It is certain that Chesterton got a hearing for "solid truths" and "solid argument" in many quarters where he would not have a hearing had he not "Made the illustrations as entertaining as you can."

TIME TO AVOID
There are times and places for jesting and joking and there are times and places where jests and jokes should be avoided. In all Chesterton writings you will, I believe, search in vain for a pleasantry which gave offense to any individual or group.

At the dinner table at St. Bernard's Seminary I once heard Bishop McQuaid give a rule in this matter which has stuck in my mind all these years. "You can never," he said, "you can never safely make jokes about a man's nationality or a woman's virtue." The remark was occasioned by a discussion on a speech made by Mr. Joseph Choate (great lawyer, orator and statesman) at a banquet of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick in New York on the night before. Mr. Choate was at the time President of the Society of St. George and as such represented that Society at the banquet. He gave a humorous description of how the Irish were ousted the English as the English had ousted the Dutch in the government of the great metropolis; and ended

the pleasantry by declaring that the Sons of St. George would rejoice in St. Patrick calling his Sons to come back to Erin. Indeed, they would furnish the ships.
A few weeks ago there appeared a very touching (and instructive) letter in America, from a Negro lady. She was a convert, she said, and had just "witnessed the Mission" and felt greatly relieved, so greatly that she wanted to thank publicly

the preacher. She had made no other mention of which the preacher told fourteen stories about "Markies." She had seen a well-to-do friend whom she wished to invite to accompany her to the Mission. But she lived in dread that the "Markies" stories would be repeated. They were not. Hence her relief.

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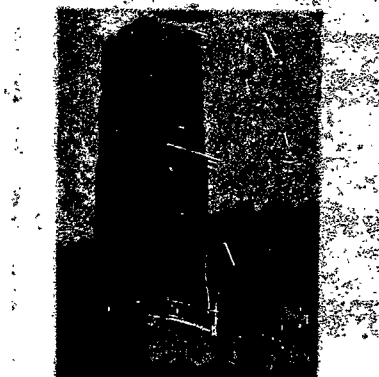
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