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Chesterton

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graphy, were the "best sort of middle-Victorian Liberals" who allowed their children to sample various beliefs and creeds without strictly adhering to any, but who did instill a love of literature and art.

When he started school, Chesterton appeared to faculty and fellow students as slow and eccentric, Pearce observed, noting, "Chesterton, it seems, was seen as a donkey by his fellow pupils and as an intellectual ass by his tutors."

By the time he was an adolescent, however, Chesterton and a group of friends formed the Junior Debating Club. They met weekly to debate and read papers about literary and social topics. In class, meanwhile, his teachers began to realize they had underestimated him. The master of the school later told Chesterton's mother that her son was "six foot of genius."

Chesterton then studied at the Slade School of Art at London University. His years at the university were marked by a growing sense of despair — in his *Autobiography* the chapter covering these years was called "How to be a Lunatic." He was at various times an atheist and an agnostic.

In a later essay, "The Diabolist" he described an incident that he called "by far the most terrible thing that has ever happened to me in my life." Chesterton had begun to reconsider orthodox faith, when he and a fellow student engaged in a debate about morality. The student told him, "what you call evil I call good." Chesterton fled the student and his message of decadence and pessimism — a message that Chesterton found permeated the school. He dropped out of college in 1895.

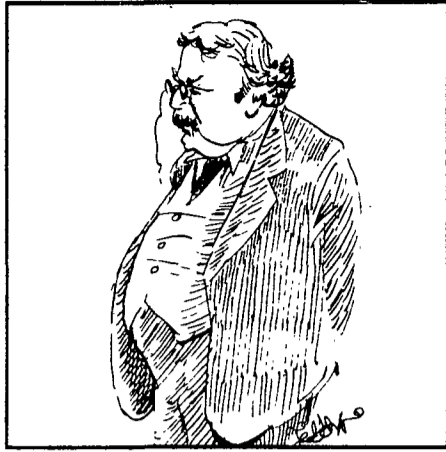
Chesterton worked at publishing companies and wrote at night. By 1901, he was able to support himself as a journalist, publishing essays, reviews and poetry. He also married Frances Blogg, remaining happily married to her until his death.

His first books were collections of poetry (*Greybeards at Play* and *The Wild Knight and Other Poems*, both published in 1900). His first success came in 1901 with a collection of essays, *The Defendant*. From that point on he published nearly a book a year — and often several — until his death.

He also developed a reputation as a debater, dueling in print, on stage and on radio with various foes on religious and social issues. The most famous of the debates were with playwright and socialist reformer George Bernard Shaw. Their public debates attracted huge audiences.

"Shaw was probably the best debater in England, and Chesterton was recognized as the only one who could take on Shaw and be equal to him," Father Hetzler noted.

In 1908, Chesterton published *Orthodoxy*. "Orthodoxy is a book everyone must read," Ahlquist of the American Chester-



ton Society observed. "Every sentence makes you stop and think. He was explaining his spiritual odyssey. He wanted to find the perfect religion, and he was shocked to find out that it already existed. His new religion turned out to be 2,000 years old."

In the book, Chesterton argued, "When once one believes in a creed, one is proud of its complexity, as scientists are proud of the complexity of science. A stick might fit a hole or a stone a hollow by accident. But a key and a lock are both complex. And if a key fits a lock, you know that it is the right key."

But while engaging in these explorations and debates, Chesterton remained warm and open. He was noted for his uproarious laugh and jokes at his own expense. The Chesterton house was invariably filled with guests and children though he and his wife were unable to have children of their own.

Chesterton's spiritual explorations continued, leading to his conversion to Catholicism in 1922. At the time of his death in 1936 he was described by Pope Pius XI as a "Defender of the Catholic Faith."

Paradox and humor

Although he died some 63 years ago, Chesterton still has many avid readers.

Deacon Gregory Sampson of St. Anne Church, Rochester, is one. He encountered Chesterton in 1981 when he came across one of his books at a used book sale. He bought it, having read that Chesterton was one of the great Catholic writers of the 20th century.

He was "hooked." "His major works, I've read and reread," the deacon said.

"The first thing that attracted me was that he obviously had a way with words, and a way of expressing himself," he explained. "A large part of his work was talking to eternal verities, things that in a sense, transcend the passage of time."

"He has a kind of X-ray mind that can go right to the key point of a problem or situation," Father Hetzler said. He especially appreciates the "clarity with which he set forth his ideas, giving many, many concrete analogies that would make a complex concept understandable."

But while sometimes dealing with complex subjects, the writings are filled with jokes, puns and plays on words, and celebrated the simple things in life, the priest acknowledged.

"There was a kind of joy in existence," Father Hetzler said. "He was so positive."

Because of his style and wit, "Chesterton is one of the most quoted men of our age," observed Chris Corkery, executive director of the G.K. Chesterton Institute, located in Meriden, Conn.

Sayings that frequently pops up in conversation and print include:

"The Christian idea has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."

"If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly."

"To have a right to do a thing is not at all the same as to be right in doing it."

Ahlquist, for one, savored Chesterton's writing style from the first time he encountered it in the early 1980s.

"I was absolutely thrilled by the freshness and, I would say, the authority of his writing," said Ahlquist, who at the time was a Baptist. "Chesterton really led me to the door of the Catholic Church."

Chesterton's characteristic use of the literary device, paradox, also became the focus of Ahlquist's master's thesis.

"Paradox," Ahlquist explained, is "two truths that are both true, but contradict each other. Courage is a paradox. It is a strong desire to live accompanied by a readiness to die."

Chesterton, he said, pointed out that "Christ is the ultimate paradox. He is fully God and fully man. They can not be reconciled, but they are reconciled in Christ."

But while he used paradox in his writings, Father Hetzler noted, "He hated to be labeled the man of paradoxes. He'd say he was just pointing out facets of reality that people are oblivious to or in denial about."

One of the other things Deacon Sampson appreciated about Chesterton is that "his writing style is very combative, while never being nasty."

"He was always so upbeat about everything," he continued, "and was able to do battle with people and do it very seriously without taking himself too seriously and without being rancorous about it."

"I think he respected people, and of course, he saw them as brothers and sisters, that we're all children of God," Father Hetzler observed.

Beyond his style, Chesterton's views remain relevant, Father Hetzler noted.

"So much of the things that he fought against in society are still present, if not more so, today," he said.

Indeed, as Sparkes noted in his introduction to his 1997 collection, "our post-Modernist world increasingly resembles that of the early part of the century so that G.K.'s writings now seem prophetic

rather than outdated."

Among the topics, with which he dealt that have resonance today are psychology, feminism, the family, fair distribution of wealth and education.

But he was not simply a conservative, as some critics have contended, argued John Peterson, publisher of *Gilbert!*

"Chesterton's views on things always come as a surprise," Peterson said. "They are not the typical conservative line or the typical liberal take."

"My experience is that Chesterton is a little difficult to categorize as liberal or conservative," Corkery said. "He was critical of big business and big government."

Deacon Sampson, for one, found that contact with Chesterton changed his views, noting, "He's informed the way I think about things. His writings are a good antidote for somebody with right-wing political tendencies, as I had. He is (also) an antidote for people with left-wing tendencies."

The deacon acknowledged, for example, that he had believed in a "reliance on capitalism as an answer to man's woes — he cured me of that notion right off the bat."

Chesterton, the deacon continued, "was a deeply spiritual man without a sort of a gauzy 'deeply spiritual' aura. He was deeply spiritual in the way he argued and conducted his life."

Fans of Chesterton continue to try to get the word out about him.

Ahlquist noted that the Minneapolis-based American Chesterton Society "got started because not only was there interest, but also to create interest. Chesterton is someone who should not be forgotten."

To help encourage that interest, the society holds annual Chesterton conferences. This year's event is scheduled for June 10-12 in Minneapolis.

The Chesterton Institute, meanwhile, publishes both *Gilbert!* and the *Chesterton Review*, sponsors academic conferences, and is now looking into encouraging artistic events. Corkery noted, for example, the institute is working with the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake to stage a recreation of the Chesterton/Shaw debates next year, and is working with playwright and screenwriter Hugh Whitmore ("Best of Friends," "84 Charing Cross Road," the Emmy-award winning "Concealed Enemies") to create a drama about Chesterton.

Still, Chesterton remains undiscovered by many people.

"I've had a number of people ask me about Chesterton," Father Hetzler said. He added that many of those people report, "I went through Catholic high school and a Catholic college, and nobody told me about Chesterton."

And when they do finally read him?

Peterson said the two most common reactions are delight, or anger, accompanied by the demand, "Why was I denied this!"

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