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The Magazine of the Apostolate of Common Sense
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Gilbert! Magazine is published every eight weeks by The Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton, a non-profit corporation established under Paragraph 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Tax Code. Donations to The Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton are tax-deductible in the United States. Your contributions help support the publication of Gilbert! Magazine. Please send your donations to: The Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton, 1320 Mainstreet, Hopkins, MN 55343. The views expressed by Gilbert! Magazine contributors are not necessarily those of the publisher, the editors, or The Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton.
n May the world lost two very different but very important Chesteronians:

Denis Conlon was the editor of several volumes of the Collected Works and two volumes of literary criticism on GKC. He was the author of a major biography, G.K. Chesterton, A Reappraisal. A retired professor of literature, he was the long-time Chairman of the Chesterton Society in England, and was instrumental in tracking down uncollected Chesterton material, including his lost first novel, Basil Howe. A former RAF pilot, Denis refused to fly in an airplane where he could not wear a parachute, and thus, we could never get him to come and speak at a Chesterton Conference in America. So it was when I traveled to England in 2004 for a Chesterton conference in Beaconsfield that I had the privilege of presenting him with the ACS Lifetime Achievement Award. I will miss him terribly. A true gentleman and a scholar.

Ravi Zacharias was a popular Evangelical Christian Apologist. He had a huge following as a writer and speaker, and he never talked, I don’t think, without quoting Chesterton. It had the happy effect of sending hundreds of people searching for more GKC. I had the pleasure of meeting Ravi briefly when we found ourselves on the same airplane. I had hoped to have him as a speaker at a Chesterton conference, but he had persistent scheduling conflicts. He was an on again, off again member of the ACS (renew your membership now), but his office would often contact me to hunt down a GKC quote or the source of a quote. Rest in peace.

Graduating from the University of Notre Dame with a 4.0 grade average is no mean accomplishment. And being the Valedictorian of the class of 2020. And how about being a double major in biology and theology? Fine. But here’s what impressed me about Brady Stiller: for his senior thesis he wrote a 180-page paper on the idea of vocation in G.K. Chesterton. He did much of his research at the Chesterton Library in Oxford, which has now been moved to Notre Dame’s London Gateway campus. His advisor was our own David Fagerberg.

In a recent homily, our friend Cardinal Thomas Collins of Toronto gave a list of books that all Catholics should read:

- The Bible
- The Catechism of the Catholic Church
- Orthodoxy by G.K. Chesterton
- Everlasting Man by G.K. Chesterton
- What to Say and How to Say It by Brandon Vogt
- Just Whatever by Matt Nelson

A good list! One book by God, one by the Catholic Church, two by Chesterton, and one by a board member of the Chesterton Society (We reviewed Brandon Vogt’s book in our May-June issue). But who’s Matt Nelson, you ask? Not surprisingly, he’s a Canadian, and, in fact, Cardinal Collins wrote the foreword to the recommended book, which is on apologetics.

A different sort of tribute to Chesterton can be found in an exclusive group of artists and writers who have regularly met for lunch and discourse in Greenwich, Connecticut, over the last half century. The only way to get into the group is if a current member dies, thereby creating an opening. Among the members have been sculptor (and founder) David Burt, Grammy-winner Robert Miller Jones, novelist Herman Raucher (Summer of ‘42), New Yorker cartoonist Charles Saxon, Gerald Green (creator of the Today show), Alvin Moscow (a speechwriter for Richard Nixon), illustrator John Cullen Murphy (“Prince Valiant”), comic strip artist Jerry Dumas (Beetle Bailey), Time correspondent Roy Rowan, and renown movie poster artist Robert McGinnis (everything from James Bond to The Incredibles). The name of the club? The Men Who Are Thursday.

In August of 1930, an editor of the Nottingham Evening Post made the crackling comment: “We are not all as lucky as Mr. G.K. Chesterton, who has such a marvelous imagination that the anticipation of joys to come quite satisfies all his wants.”

G.K. Chesterton was in typically heavy demand on the summer speaking circuit. On July 1 he addressed the First Anglo-Catholic Congress on “The Church and Social and Industrial Problems.” On July 7, at Oxford, he spoke at the Conference for Rural Teachers on “What Children Read.” On July 14, he was at Caxton Hall in London for the Mothers’ Defence League (founded by his sister-in-law, Ada Chesterton) giving a speech protesting against the proposed Bastardy Bill. The next day he gave a speech at the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. (The only thing reported from this speech is his comment that movies are a waste of time.) And a month later he spoke at St. Anne’s Church in London’s Soho district on “Ideas from the Past.”
The Still, Small Voice

By Dale Ahlquist

GK

Chesterton says that every city is built over a volcano. A perfect metaphor, appropriate on many levels. Besides being perfect, it is poetic. And besides being poetic, it is prophetic.

Volcanoes are a violent and spectacular way of relieving mounting pressure, and the resulting explosion spreads devastation across a wide area. It may be thrilling to watch from a safe distance, but it’s not so much fun if you happen to be right on top of it.

Molten rage was brewing under the City of Minneapolis, and its eruption caused a chain reaction of eruptions of volcanoes under other cities, first across the river in St. Paul, and then across the country and the world. The destruction has been unbelievable and horrifying.

But there was far more to the underlying tension than the strained relations between the races or resentment toward the police. Even the protestors had a hard time maintaining their outrage over the death of George Floyd and attempting to distance themselves from the rioters. The rioters were a combination of colors and causes. But even those in the crowds who just went to watch noted a fury that went deeper than predetermined political agendas.

A large part of the outburst of raw rage came from the fact that everyone was being driven crazy in isolation. Locked in their rooms, physically separated from the world, connected only to the unreality of the screen, which is as unsatisfying as the unreality of porn.

Closed businesses, cancelled events, loss of jobs. Forced distancing, masked faces, being herded back-and-forth to the designated troughs. Prohibited from the normal of every day, but also the special days. No birthday parties, no weddings, no funerals. While many people rediscovered the adventure of home life, the joy of spending extended time with their families, and actually found peace and renewal in the required retreat from the world, many more could not cope with the fractured relations within their families, the inconvenience of having to raise their own children rather than assigning that duty to day care or public school. And many more had no families to go to.

On the first night of rioting in Minneapolis, one of the gentlemen destroying a checkout terminal at Target was heard to say, “The system is broken.”

They were being driven crazy, and then they started acting crazy when they poured out into the streets, violating—among other things—proper social distancing. They were no longer isolated, but they were still very much alone.

Anyone who knows anything of experts will know one thing for certain; that they will always be disturbing our way of living; and therefore we shall always be disputing their right of governing. (G.K.’s Weekly, Feb. 11, 1933)

The more mere science and mere ingenuity develop the more certain it is that the sensible man will be a martyr. (Daily News, Mar. 18, 1907)

Nearly all modern arguments become a quarrel; for a quarrel is the meeting of men who do not agree enough to disagree. (“The Case for Old London,” Wonderful London, 1926)

The ignorant mob, it is said, used to be dangerous by its turbulence; it is now rather dangerous by its apathy. (Illustrated London News, April 27, 1912)

The modern novel has gone through a series of stages, of which the first might be stamped with the general motto of “Boys will be Boys.” Then came the earnest late Victorian novel of emancipation and the ethics of sex; which might bear the motto “Girls will be Boys.” And finally, we are left with the very latest psychological and neurotic sort of novel, which seems to carry the cognizance of “Boys won’t be Boys.” (G.K.’s Weekly, July 12, 1934)

The first fact about our systematic education, especially our state education, is that it assumes that all children are orphans. And the second serious fact about all typically modern schooling is that the schoolmaster is a stranger. (The (NY) Sun, Dec. 9, 1918)

If we are to teach children politics, there arises a very reasonable question about what politics we shall teach. Above all, if we are going to enforce the teaching of politics, people will naturally want to know what politics we are to enforce. (Illustrated London News, June 12, 1920)

It takes a long time to get to heaven. Obstacles on the way to heaven are the romance of spiritual existence. (Bystander, April 6, 1904)
Common sense is the power of getting our real impressions undistorted and intact. (Illustrated London News, Jan. 28, 1922)

- Common sense is a sensibility duly distributed in all normal directions. ("Dickens and America," Charles Dickens)

- Common sense is that extinct branch of psychology. ("The Unpsychological Age," Sidelights)

- That instinct for the probable is what we call common sense. ("Professors and Prehistoric Men," The Everlasting Man)

- Common sense may roughly be defined as the power of preserving our real impressions undistorted and intact. (Daily News, Feb. 18, 1902)

- The first fact of common sense is the common bond of men. ("The Way of the Desert," The New Jerusalem)

- Common sense is the power of getting a general grasp of the tendencies of human experience as a whole. (Illustrated London News, Jan. 12, 1929)

- We call a thing common sense when it suffers from too much evidence in its favor; too much to be formulated or even remembered. (New Witness, Feb. 27, 1920)

- This fallacy of false progress tends to obscure the old common sense of all mankind, which is still the common sense of every man in his own daily dealings: that everything has its place and proportion and proper use, and that it is rational to trust its use and distrust its abuse. Progress, in the good sense, does not consist in looking for a direction in which one can go on indefinitely. For there is no such direction, unless it be in quite transcendental things, like the love of God. It would be far truer to say that true progress consists in looking for the place where we can stop. (Illustrated London News, Jan. 28, 1922)

- Christianity does appeal to a solid truth outside itself; to something which is in that sense external as well as eternal. It does declare that things are really there; or in other words that things are really things. In this Christianity is at one with common sense; but all religious history shows that this common sense perishes except where there is Christianity to preserve it. ("The Demons and the Philosophers," The Everlasting Man)
If there ever was an argument to be made for Distributism, this COVID-19 pandemic, and all future pandemics, should be at the top of the list.

As an old farm kid, I’ve had a front-row seat to the changes that economies-of-scale have compelled in the last 52 years of my old farm kid life. More and more land is run, and owned, by fewer and fewer operators, food processors and manufacturers are consolidating, and on up the supply chain it goes.

The evidence is there to be seen. Now, the story must continue to be told in a compelling manner that makes the trip from the heart to the head … so to speak. Arguing in favor of Distributism wins over many sympathetic sighs and lamentations of how things used to be, but we all walk away without having a clear picture of how to get there.

Luke Bauman
Delano, Minnesota

Commenting on his experience in translating the Bible, Msgr. Ronald Knox pointed out that in the Our Father phrase “lead us not into temptation,” ‘temptation’ was not referring to the usual occasions of sin, but rather specifically to the more extraordinary situations of flood, fire, earthquake, war—and plague. During the past two decades while epidemiologists have been predicting such a pandemic, I have been focused on that meaning of ‘temptation.’

When the local newspaper recommended pandemic readings for the quarantine duration (the usual ebola and Stephen King stuff), I recalled that two of the best written plague novels were Connie Willis’ Doomsday Book (1992) and Michael Flynn’s Eifelheim (2009), both about the Black Death in 1348 (the first in a medieval English village and the second in a German village). I would describe both as ‘Catholic’ novels in how perceptively they portray the Church’s response to the plague at the local parish level.

Although I guess Boccaccio’s Decameron is also a ‘Catholic’ novel about the plague!

I think GK Chesterton would have loved the ‘adventure’ of going around in a mask. Personally I dislike the mask because it gives my neatly waxed handlebar mustache split ends.

Be well.

Pasquale Accardo, M.D.
Richmond, Virginia

The March/April issue of Gilbert spoiled me with its clear writing, humor, and variety. Then the May/June issue arrived. I found myself quite eager to read all of it, especially Chuck Chalberg’s review of John Rodden’s Becoming George Orwell. (Teaching English for nearly four decades can do that to a fellow.) But its first sentence, “What, yet another biography on the life of a literary figure who wanted no biographies written about him?” stopped me in my tracks. A biography on the life of someone? Really? Why did I retire before seeing this wondrous redundancy? It is, in its way, beautiful, perhaps even perfect. Polonius could have used it.

This extraordinary nugget would have been enough for me, but more “gold” followed. In the third paragraph Chalberg writes, about Rodden and Orwell, both of whom can be found in the book “somewhere in the process of becoming George Orwell,” this amazing sentence: “So, just how are each of them doing?” Not “how is each” or “how are both” but “how are each.” (Perhaps Chalberg meant this as a joke? Well, whatever—as some of my students used to say—it sure is a first-rate illustration of subject-verb disagreement.)

Now, rather than examining paragraph six, a marvel in its own right, I’ll just note that the reviewer had a difficult task, perhaps even an unsavory one. His humorous sally about repetition at the end of the paragraph seems to suggest that to be true. Unfortunately, he follows that sentence with the words “That said/stipulated …” (Yes, yes, I know. He wrote “chapters/essays” in the previous line. I was trying to be gentle.) Such expressions remind me of how “he” became “he/she” became “he/she” became “s/he.” If our writing cannot be graceful and powerful, it can and should at least be readable—that is, able to be read aloud.

Mark Albrecht
Ukiah, California

In Henry IV, the great Shakespeare, Wrote “There is A history…” without fear That the article “a” was not an “an” Cut our proofreader slack, you cranky grammarian!

Charlie Reese
Lutz, Florida

The Editor replies
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The Dragon At Hide-And-Seek

By G.K. Chesterton

Once upon a time there was a knight who was an outlaw, that is, a man hiding from the king and everybody else; and one who lived so wild and lawless a life, in being hunted from one hiding-place to another, that he had great difficulty in going to church every Sunday. Although his ordinary way of life was full of fighting, and burning, and breaking down doors, and therefore looked a little careless, he had been very carefully brought up, and it was obviously a very serious thing that he should be late for church. But he was so clever and daring in his way of getting from one place to another without being caught, that he generally managed it somehow. And it was often a considerable disturbance to the congregation when he came with a great crash flying in through the big stained-glass window and smashing it to atoms, having been patiently hanging on a gargoye outside for half an hour; or, when he dropped suddenly out of the belfry, where he had been hiding in one of the big bells, and lighted almost on the heads of the worshippers. Nor were they better pleased when he preferred to dig a hole in the churchyard and crawl under the church-wall, coming up suddenly under a lifted paving-stone in the middle of the nave or the chancel. They were too well-behaved, of course, to notice the incident during the service; and the more just among them admitted that even outlaws must get to church somehow; but it caused a certain amount of talk in the town, and the history of the knight and his wonderful way of hiding everywhere and anywhere was by this time familiar to the whole country-side. At last this knight, who was called Sir Laverok, began to feel so sure of his power of escaping and hiding, whenever he wanted to, that he would come into the market-place in the most impudent manner whenever any great business was being transacted, such as the elections of the guilds, or even to the coronation of the King, to whom he addressed some well-chosen words of advice about his public duties, in a loud voice from the chimney-pot of an adjoining house. Often, when the King and his lords were out hunting, or even when they were in camp during a great war, they would look up and see Sir Laverok perched like a bird on a tree above their heads, and ever ready with friendly counsels and almost fatherly good wishes. But though they pursued him with emotions of uninterrupted rage, lasting over several months, they were never able to discover what were the holes and corners in which he hid himself. They were forced to admit that his talent for disappearing into undiscovered places was of the highest order, and that in a children's game of Hide-and-Seek he would have covered himself with everlasting glory; but they all felt that a fugitive from justice should be strictly forbidden to cultivate genius of this kind.

Now it was just about this time that there fell upon the whole of that country an enormous calamity far worse than any war or pestilence. It was of a kind which we have very few chances of experiencing nowadays; though in the other matter of wars and diseases our opportunities are still wide and varied. There had appeared in the wilderness to the north of that country, a monster of huge size and horrible habits and disposition; a monster who might have been called for the sake of simplicity, a dragon, only he had feet like an elephant, but a hundred times bigger, with which he used to stamp and crush everything to a flat and fine paste before he licked it up with a tongue as long and large as the Great Sea Serpent; and his great jaws opened wide like a whale's, only that they could have swallowed a shoal of whales as if they were whitebait. No weapons or missiles seemed to be of any avail against him; for his skin was plated with iron of incredible thickness. Indeed, some declared that he was entirely composed of iron, and that he had been made out of that material by a magician who lived beyond the wilderness, where such crafts and spells were more seriously studied. Indeed, it was hinted by some that the land of the magicians was in every way in advance of their own, and well worthy of emulation; and that if anyone objected that this marvelous machinery had no apparent effect except in killing people and destroying beautiful things, he should be rebuked as one lacking in enterprise and a larger outlook upon the future. But those who said this, commonly said it before they had actually met the new animal; and it was noticed that after meeting him they seldom uttered these thoughts, or, indeed, any other.

The monster may have been made of iron, and his nerves and muscles may have been, as some said, made like an arrangement of wheels and wires, but he was most unmistakably alive; and proved it by having a hearty appetite and an evident enjoyment of life. He trampled and devoured first, all the fortifications of the frontier, and then the castles and the larger towns of the interior; and by the time that he was marching toward the capital, the King and his courtiers were all climbing to the tops of towers and everybody else to the tops of trees. These precautions proved inadequate in practical experience; in very practical experience. So long as the monster could be seen twenty miles away like a marching mountain, already fantastic in outline, but still blue or purple with distance, and there was no other sign of him except a slight shaking of the houses as in a mild earthquake, these conjectures and expedients could be debated copiously, if not always calmly. But when the creature came near enough for his habits to be closely studied, it was clear that he could tread down trees like grass, and flatten out castles like houses of cards. It became more and more the fashion to
seek out less showy and more secluded country resorts; the whole population, led by magistrates, merchants, and all its natural leaders, fleeing with startling rapidity to the mountains and concealing themselves in holes and caverns, which they blocked behind them with big rocks. Even this was not very successful; the monster proceeded to scale the mountains with the gaiety of a goat, to kick the rocky barricades to pieces, letting in daylight on the cowering company within; and many of them were able to recognize the familiar shape of the long and curling tongue of the intelligent creature, exploring their retreat and coiling and twisting and darting about in a very playful and sportive manner. Those who had not found any hole to crawl into, and who were clinging in crowds to the crags higher up the hill, were at this moment, however, surprised with a sight that almost took their thoughts for an instant off the universal peril. On the highest crag of all, above their heads, had appeared suddenly the figure of Sir Laverok with his old spear in his hand, with his sword girt around his ragged armour, and the wind waving about his wild hair that was the colour of flame. In all that huddling crowd it was only the man in hiding who stood out conspicuous; and only the man fleeing from justice who did not flee.

“I am not afraid,” he said in answer to their wild cries. “You know I have a trick of finding my way to places of safety. And as it happens, I know a castle to which I shall retreat, and to which the dragon can never come.”

“But, my good Sir,” said the Chancellor, pausing in the act of trying to creep into a rabbit-burrow, “the dragon can grind castles to powder with his heel. I regret to say that he showed not the least embarrassment even in approaching the Law Courts.”

“I know of a castle which he cannot reach,” said Sir Laverok.

“The offensive animal,” said the Lord Chamberlain, poking his head for a moment out of a hole in the ground, “actually entered the King’s private chamber without knocking.”

“I know of a private chamber that he cannot enter,” replied the outlaw knight. “It is very doubtful,” came the muffled voice of the Lord High Admiral from somewhere underground, “whether we shall even be safe in any of the caverns.”

“I know a cavern where I shall be safe,” said Sir Laverok.

At the foot of the steep slope to which they clung spread a large plateau like a plain; and over this bare tableland, at the moment, the monster was prowling up and down like a polar bear, considering what he would destroy next. Every time he turned his head towards them, the crowds clambered a little higher up the hill; but they soon saw, to their astonishment, that Sir Laverok was not climbing up, but climbing down. He dropped from the last overhanging rock, and rushed out upon the plain against the monster; when he came within a short distance, the knight gave one wild leap and threw his spear like a thunderbolt.

What happened in the flash of that thunderbolt nobody in the crowd seemed to know. Those who knew them best were of opinion that they all shut their eyes tight, and most probably fell flat on their faces. Others say that the monster stamped his foot upon his enemy with so stunning a shock that a cloud of dust rolled up to the clouds of heaven, and for a moment hid the whole scene. Others, again, explained that the vast immeasurable bulk of the monster had come between them and the victim. Anyhow, it is certain that when the vast bulk turned once more and began swaying and lurching backwards and forwards on its lonely prow, no sign of the victim could be seen. Probably he had been stamped to mire as everything else had been. But if it were conceivable that he had indeed escaped, as he had boasted, it was hard to say where; as there did not seem to be anywhere for him to escape to. And the authorities in the holes and caves could not but regret that they had not condemned him to be burned as a wizard instead of hanged as a rebel, whenever they should have put the final touch to the sentence by carrying it into effect. They comforted themselves in the cave by the reflection that at least no hasty capture or premature execution had yet put it out of their power to rectify the mistake; but for the moment it seemed clear that their chances either of hanging or burning the gentleman were further off than ever.

Just at that moment, however, there was a new interruption. It so happened that the King’s third daughter was standing in the crowd on the slope; for all the elder
members of the royal family were enjoying a temporary and semi-official retirement from the cares of state at the bottom of a dry well on the other side of the mountain range. But she had been unable or unwilling to travel with the extreme rapidity which they had had the presence of mind to exhibit; for she was rather an absent-minded person, wholly without aptitude for practical politics. She was called the Princess Philomel, and was a dreamy sort of person, with long hair and blue eyes that were like the blue of distant horizons, and she was commonly very silent; but she had watched the adventure of the vanishing outlaw with more interest than she commonly showed in anything; and she startled everybody at this stage by breaking her silence and calling out in a clear voice: “Yes; he has found his fairy castle where no dragon can come.” The more dignified Councilors of State were just venturing to put their noses above ground in order to remonstrate respectfully against the breach of etiquette, when everybody’s attention was again distracted to the monster, who was behaving in an even more extraordinary way than usual. Instead of pacing backwards and forwards with a certain pomposity as he had done before, he was bounding to and fro, taking totally unnecessary leaps into the air and clawing in a most uncomfortable and inconsequent fashion.

“What is the matter with him now?” enquired the Master of the Buckhounds, who was something of a student of animal life, and would, under other circumstances, have been much interested in the phenomenon.

“The monster is angry,” replied the Princess Philomel in the same absolute if abstracted fashion. “He is angry because the knight has reached the magic chamber and cannot be found.”

If the monster was indeed exhibiting anger, it would seem that his anger had an element of self-reproach. For he was evidently clawing and scratching at himself rather in the manner of a dog hunting a flea, but much more savagely.

“How can he be killing himself?” asked the Lord Chancellor hopefully. “I am the keeper of the King’s conscience, and not, of course, the keeper of the dragon’s. But it seems possible that his conscience, if once aroused, would find in retrospect some legitimate ground for remorse.”

“Nonsense,” said the Chamberlain, “why should he kill himself?”

“If it comes to that,” answered the other, “why should he fight himself, as he seems to be doing?”

“Because,” answered the Princess, “Sir Laverok has at last reached the cavern where he is safe.”

But even as she spoke, a further and final change seemed to pass over the monster. For a moment it looked as if he had turned into two or three different monsters, for the different parts of him were behaving in different ways. One hind leg rested as calmly on the earth as the column of a temple, while the other was kicking wildly up behind and thrashing the air like the sail of a windmill. One eye was standing out of the head in hideous prominence, and rolling round and round like a catherine-wheel of fury, while the other was already closed with the placid expression of a cow who had gone to sleep. Then the next moment both eyes were closed, and both feet stationary, and the whole monster, with a deprecating expression, turned his back and began to retreat towards the plains at an amiable and ambling trot.

Thus began the last phase of the celebrated Dragon of the Wilderness, which was more of a mystery than his wildest massacres and deeds of destruction. He interfered with nobody; he stood politely on one side for people to pass; he even succeeded, with some signs of reluctance, in becoming a vegetarian and subsisting entirely upon grass. But when the ultimate goal of his pilgrimage was discovered, the surprise was even more general.
The wondering and still doubtful crowds that followed him across that country became gradually convinced of the incredible idea that he intended to go to church. Moreover, he approached the sacred edifice in a far more tactful and unobtrusive and respectful way than Sir Laverok had done in the old days, when he broke windows and tore up pavements in his indiscriminating excess of punctuality. Finally, the monster surprised them most of all by kneeling down and opening his mouth very wide with an ingratiating expression; and the Princess surprised them still more by walking inside.

Something in the way in which she did it revealed to the more thoughtful among them the fact that Sir Laverok had been inside the animal all the time. It is unnecessary to repeat here the explanations which gradually enlightened them about the inner truth of the story or the inner machinery of the dragon. This exact and scientific narrative is also addressed only to the thoughtful. And these will have no difficulty in guessing that a magnificent marriage ceremony took place in the interior of the dragon, which was treated as a temporary chapel while within the precincts of the consecrated building. They may even form some notion of what was meant when the Princess who was given to oracular remarks, said, “The whole world will be-have differently when heroes find their hiding-place in the world.” But it must be confessed that those learned men, the Chancellor and the Chamberlain, could make very little of it. 

From Number Two, Joy Street (1924) in Collected Works, Volume 14

THE TROUBADOURS

The Troubadours on “The Dragon at Hide-and-Seek”

Joseph Pearce

The Dragon at Hide-and-Seek” is truly delightful. In its whimsical tone and subject matter, it reminds us insistently of Tolkien’s Farmer Giles of Ham, further proof, were such need, that the author of The Lord of the Rings was a true kindred spirit of the great GKC. Such affinity is also evident in the fact that Tolkien had also written a story, inspired by his front-line experience of the “animal horror” of World War One and his first encounter with the newly invented tank, about dragons made of metal, conjured into being by Satan himself, “from the greatness of his wealth and his powers of fire.” These were “beasts like snakes and dragons of irresistible might that should over-come the Encircling Hills and lap that plain and its fair city in flame and death.” Tolkien wrote this story, unpublished until after his death, in 1917, seven years before the publication of “The Dragon at Hide-and-Seek,” illustrative of a kinship of spirit, rather than of direct influence.

What is of particular interest about Chesterton’s story is its moral, in which the metallic monster is revealed as being symbolic of the world itself, which is mindlessly destructive unless it can be tamed or civilized by the heroes or saints within it. The moral is that Christians must not run from the monstrous culture of death but must transform it into a culture of life through the heroism of sanctity.

Kevin O’Brien

In his Preface to Nicholas Nickleby, Chesterton writes, “In every romance there must be the twin elements of loving and fighting. In every romance there must be the three characters: there must be the Princess, who is a thing to be loved; there must be the Dragon, who is a thing to be fought; and there must be St. George, who is a thing that both loves and fights.”

One of the ironies of Chesterton’s fairy tale “The Dragon at Hide-and-Seek” is that the St. George who loves and fights in this story is an outlaw, Sir Laverok, who, in addition to loving and fighting, must also hide. But Laverok’s hiding is not the same as the hiding of the story’s politicians and officials, who are cringing, craven, and cowardly (like the politicians and officials in our world). In a society where the men-of-law show their inability to rise to the occasion by literally burying themselves, it is the outlaw whose self-burial is the Night Sea Journey or descent into the underworld which saves the day. The lawmakers hide themselves out of fear, to protect themselves; it is a burial of self akin to the burial of the talent, condemned by Our Lord in the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25. Its goal being mere safety, the darkness that the creepy lawmakers choose to creep away to is self-serv- ing and shameful. It is the opposite of the self-sacrificing act of the outlaw hero, the hiding and hidden hero, who fights and loves unseen, from the inside, and whose self-sacrifice in allowing himself to be swallowed by the dragon co-opts the mechanical monster. Laverok’s descent into the depths, the belly of the beast, leads not to the inside of a dark cave where compromising men are helpless and bickering; but to the inside of the church, a thing much “larger inside than it is outside” and to a marriage, the largest life-giving sacrifice most everyday heroes can make.

Christopher Check

Catholics confronted with the abundant afflictions of our age can find themselves investing disproportionate hope, to say nothing of time and dollars, into politics and its practitioners. That this hope is largely misplaced could not be more obvious than it is in our own time, but Chesterton knew a century ago that human life is much the same under Nero or St. Louis. A smaller group of Catholics, no less earnest, see the culture as irredeemable. They counsel withdrawing from the world. The monastic ideal for whose founder their “option” is named, is something I very much favor. For monks. For the rest of us there is the option I’ll call the “Catholic option.” It is staying where...
The Troubadours

Dan Kerr

In Chesterton’s “The Dragon at Hide-And-Seek,” our hero is Sir Laverok, an “outlaw, that is a man hiding from the king and everybody else.” Although an outlaw, our hero is a man of piety, with a habit of emerging from his hiding spots in the most spectacular of manners, particularly where religion is concerned. His name, Laverok, is well-chosen. “Laverok” is the Scottish name for the lark, a bird known for its ebullient song and well-disguised ground nest with speckled eggs, often hidden in plain sight. Chesterton tips his hand, describing Laverok as “perched like a bird on a tree above their heads, and ever ready with friendly counsels and almost fatherly good wishes.”

For Renaissance painters such as Ghirlandaio, the lark was an apt symbol for Christ who says in John 16:16: “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.” Sir Laverok, too, is clearly a symbol of our Lord, who in the person of the Holy Ghost offers the gift of Counsel and expresses the loving will of the Father (even if we chase him away in outrage). The Incarnation was the ultimate move in the cosmic game of hide-and-seek, with our Lord paradoxically hiding in plain sight as a baby in a hay-crib in order that we may find Him, and so that He could find us. Laverok, like Jonah, enters the belly of the monster, symbol of the world, whose “great jaws opened wide like a whale’s.” In doing so, he brings order to the beast, taming it. Like Jonah who spends three days in the whale, Laverok foreshadows our Lord. Finally, it is in Christ’s sacrifice that we find the perfect fulfillment of the Princess’ oracular remark: “The whole world will behave differently when heroes find their hiding-place in the world.”

William Fahey

There was a time when men would “walk a mile for a camel.” There was a time when men would walk. There was a time when men would ride camels for even better things—perhaps the best things, at least a good thing. It’s hard to ride a camel. Sometimes we must do arduous things to achieve what seems like such a simple good. We are troubled by arduous things these days. We assume that we deserve simple things. We want our mechanized genii to deliver all the simple, simple delights of our simple minds. It is well worth reading the 24th (or 32nd) chapter of Genesis. The camels are at the heart of the matter. Here you will find one of the most romantic scenes conjured from the Bedouin dreaminess of that particular tale: “And Isaac went out, to meditate in the field, at the even-tide: And he lifted his eyes, and saw, and behold, the camels were coming.” What came before and what follows, I leave to you to discover, or discover with new eyes, since I have alluded to the secret of the camel.

GKC often makes us ride the wild camel of his imagination to arrive at a simple point, a point so very simple that we often say, “Damn it, GKC, that was so obvious. Why did I spend a quarter hour reading my way to that point?” This is why Chesterton needed to write so very much: Because we are so very slow to learn the point of imaginative literature, and the point of images in general. The image helps us see what we cannot see but must—whether our blindness comes from pride, fear, or sloth. We would rather not read, and we are rather disturbed by images these days; we pull them down and curse them and try to banish them. Perhaps this is why so many people have such bad dreams. They spend their days running from the images of what is true, good, and beautiful, because they know what the image represents and they know that they must hide in the presence of What an image represents, or recognize how very small they truly are. They think it better not to hide, but make new images which are not true, good, or beautiful. Or just destroy the images—it’s much simpler. This is why Iconoclasts rise up in every age. The safest thing to do in an Age of Iconoclasts is to enter into the icon. If you understand what I mean, then you will enjoy Chesterton’s “The Dragon at Hide-And-Seek.” If you do not know what I mean, you should read Chesterton’s “The Dragon at Hide-And-Seek.” Who knows? Maybe like Rachel you will learn to light off a camel and find your desire. ☺
I Can’t Remember

By David Fagerberg

I am always searching for some point of commonality with Chesterton, since I admire the man so much. I do not have anything in common with his artistic flair, his imagination, his prodigiousness, his deep intellect and ranging intelligence. But I am beginning to find a shared condition: my memory is slipping, and like an old transmission I can’t always get my thoughts in gear.

I was going to begin this essay by saying, "Somewhere Augustine says that it is remarkable that we can remember we have forgotten something." In anticipation of this commencing, I remembered (pun not intended) Chesterton’s reputation for quoting from memory, sometimes inaccurately. A quick word search on my computer—an increasing substitute for memory—reveals repeated passages like: "I am far from books, and I quote from memory, but I think that." And, "It is long since I have sat at the feet of this minstrel; and I quote from memory, but I think ..." And, finally, "It was not he, but another critic, with whom I confused him, who made the particular point against alliteration; and the quotation from him was made from memory; and I have not been able to trace it so as to reproduce the exact order of words, [but] the inaccuracy, if any, does not affect the argument ..."

Maisie Ward says in her biography of Chesterton that "The memory so admirable in literary quotations was not merely unreliable for engagements but even for such matters as street numbers and addresses." I do all right with the latter; besides, we all now carry a map and an address book in our pockets, with a GPS should we need it; it is the former over which I am feeling my kinship to Chesterton.

Sometimes this manifests itself by my not being able to pull down a book from the shelf and go to the page I want. If that was the only problem, it would only be a matter of having forgotten. No, the way this mental malady now manifests as Augustine said: I remember that I have forgotten something. On my cognitive map there is an area once well explored, but now marked terra incognita, like in medieval cartography.

In some ways, this memory problem can be enjoyed.

The symptoms will be different in different people’s cases. In the case of an academic, the symptom presents itself as remembering the author, but forgetting what was great in that author. It’s not that I’ve forgotten the author or a fact; it’s that I remember I’ve forgotten what about the author I found meaningful, appreciated, delicious. It was a momentous encounter: I know so from the amount of scribbling I did on the page. But I can’t seem to carry it around with me. My memory has turned from a watertight pail into a colander.

In some ways, this can be appreciated. Chesterton wrote (I had to look it up) "No one remembers after a really good talk who has said the good things." He is describing comradeship. So perhaps after a really good talk with my comrades on the shelf it is not surprising that I cannot remember who has said the good things. Indeed, I once recognized that if the author has been consequential enough on me, then sometimes my memory carries my thoughts in their words, sometimes their thoughts in my words. (It is almost always this way with Chesterton.)

So, I repeat, in some ways this memory problem can be enjoyed. Paper over the problem with vanity. But it is taking its toll in another direction, the direction of the future. I begin to think that if I will not be able to remember the book I am currently reading, what is the point of reading that book? If I am not going to be able to recall in detail the material for a future published article, why am I struggling to put it into my memory?

You see that this is another case of facing finitude, and if we could learn a lesson from it that lesson might be relevant to our current experience of the disease afflicting our physical body and the disease afflicting our social body, one fatal to health and the other fatal to our civil union. How shall we deal with ephemerality?

Augustine started us off; let us see where Augustine would lead us. He would gently guide us from the everlasting crumbling City of Man to the City of God. We should not expect any of the glories of this world to last, not even the glorious thoughts I write down in articles for dusty library shelves. So maybe such pseudo-posterity is not the reason for having had the thought. But if a saint’s good deeds do not go unnoticed by God, and a monk’s prayers do not go unnoticed, maybe a theologian’s thoughts do not go unnoticed.

I was given an image one day at the end of Mass. There was a cloud of incense left over near the ceiling, and I thought: the grain of incense (inspiration from God) that the coal receives (our mind) eventually burns out. But it has released a cloud of smoke, and that’s all that matters. The purpose of incense is to burn up. The incense flares out (the inspiration is forgotten), and the coal gets cold (death), but the cloud of glory remains in praise of God. That’s all that matters.

Now, who gave me that idea? ☺️

Please donate to THE SOCIETY OF GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON
www.chesterton.org
So wrote G.K. Chesterton in the New Witness in 1920. It explains in part why these essays still ring true today. In these two volumes (one of which is very short), he certainly hits these two notes with a steady rhythm. He says that because our rulers cheat us of what we ought to have, we tend to cheat ourselves of what we want to have. We submit to misrule. We “do things we think anarchical, not because we are in a state of revolt, but on the contrary, because we are in a state of abject obedience.” We “do bad things to oblige a bad government” and “commit abominations because we must tolerate abuses.” It is an amazing description of our present situation, that ironically could be seized upon by either end of the political spectrum during these days of division. Likewise, he says that journalists do not always tell the truth about the politicians, but what is more surprising is “they do not even know the truth about them.”

The tired duel between the Socialist and the Capitalist runs like a serial film where every episode ends without resolution. Under Socialism (or collectivism), all individuals have a relationship with the state but not with each other. Under Capitalism (or individualism), all individuals have a relationship with each other, but not with the state. But Chesterton points out that the conflict is paradoxical.

There is still a vague tradition that what is called Socialism stands for sociability, and what is called Individualism for isolation. Properly understood the case is rather the other way; man in free society can be social, and man in systematised society can easily be solitary. It is possible to have a prison in which a hundred men are lonely, each in solitary confinement. It is possible precisely because the prison is a unified and collective thing. It is practically not possible to have a village in which each villager lives all alone in his house like the convict all alone in his cell. The villagers are free to group themselves, but the prisoners are commanded to separate themselves. Society cannot produce solitude; but organisation can produce solitude.

The conflict is also superficial. Both Socialism and Capitalism lead to over-centralized and over-simplified systems that pre-suppose that the rule will be always right. But wisdom (and Chesterton) show that human schemes will often be wrong. They need the correctives that come from liberty and property. The only alternative is “the security of slavery,” which is where we are, and which is why everyone is so unhappy.

And, as we look ahead to the elections, GKC reminds us: “A politician with a future means a politician with a forgotten past.”

But Chesterton doesn’t just write about politics in these volumes. He also writes about literature and art and the things that one might be expected to study in school. He writes about the bad philosophies that have taken over Education. The names Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud turn up.

Variation On An Air

By G.K. Chesterton

Old King Cole was a merry old soul,
A merry old soul was he;
He called for his pipe,
He called for his bowl,
And he called for his fiddlers three.

AFTER LORD TENNYSON

Cole, that unwearied prince of Colchester,
Growing more gay with age and with long days
Deeper in laughter and desire of life,
As that Virginian climber on our walls
Flames scarlet with the fading of the year;
Where English Raleigh checked the boast of Spain,
And lighting joy with joy, and piling up
Pleasure as crown for pleasure, bade men bring
Those three, the minstrels whose emblazoned coats
Shone with the oyster-shells of Colchester;
And these three played, and playing grew more fain
Of mirth and music; till the heathen came,
And the king slept beside the northern sea.

And this is why everyone is so unhappy.
I am very far indeed from calling the Darwinian a liar; but I shall continue to say that he is not always a logician.

The evolutionists do in their strict material sphere exactly what they blame the devout for doing in their admittedly more mystical sphere. They encourage image-worship at the risk of idolatry. They draw the picture of an ape which acts exactly like the picture of an angel. It is meant to move the imagination and not the reason; and in this case even to move the imagination at the expense of the reason.

Evolution itself is always evolving into something else.

Marx and Nietzsche are of course two of Darwin’s disciples. They poisoned the 20th-century social thinking through schizophrenic professors who emptied the minds and souls of their students, irrationally slaying God for the betterment of humanity and then slaying humanity for the betterment of humanity.

There is no point in championing the poor unless you pity the poor; and Nietzsche was consistent, and refused to do either. There is no point in making an appeal to the people unless you accept the authority of the people; and Nietzsche was consistent, and refused both. But the Nietzschean Bolshevist has no bridge between the two halves of his brain, except the fact that they contradict each other in order to contradict Christian morality; the one calling it too hard and the other too soft.

“Nietzsche was a man who tried to be a mood,” says GKC. And now our whole country is trying to be a mood.

Freud, meantime, was creeping into literature and even Hamlet was being psychoanalysed. Now all literature is psychotic.

But there is light in the midst of the dark subjects and grim warnings in these volumes. First of all, there is GKC’s absolutely brilliant variations of Old King Cole in the styles of Swinburne, Tennyson, Browning, and Walt Whitman. There is also a review of H.G. Wells’ Outline of History, which will eventually prompt Chesterton to write The Everlasting Man.

It is the Everlasting that prevails, though we manage to forget that every day, either by being distracted or distraught. We look for the new instead of the good, and then we look for the newer. “The real case against those who are always rushing after novelties is not merely that we know they are wrong, but that they know they are wrong, about ten minutes after they were certain they were right.”

**Silence**

+ Silence is sometimes a positive and creative thing. Think of the silence of the countryside at night, after the noise of the city: the silence is full and not empty. That house of stars is a possession: and those who possess will defend it. (G.K.’s Weekly, Dec. 15, 1928)

+ I notice there is a great row when men stone the prophets; and a great silence while they build their sepulchres. (Illustrated London News, Aug. 8, 1931)

+ Our resplendent prosperity rests, psychologically speaking, as any theft or seduction rests, upon a confidence in the silence of God. (The Speaker, Oct. 19, 1901)

+ There is [is] the silence of that Greek irony which has made so much of both tragedy and comedy. I mean that deathly silence in which a man goes on calmly saying all the wrong things, without knowing who is listening; only that in comedy it is the police and in tragedy the gods. (New Witness, Mar. 30, 1923)

+ There really are many human occasions when nothing except a quarrel can avoid a fight. Silence is not such a strong and practical thing as Carlyle thought it was. On the contrary, it is in silence that the fears grow, the weaknesses and the delusions. (Illustrated London News, Nov. 16, 1912)

+ Silence is the unbearable repartee. (“The Time of Transition,” Charles Dickens)

+ The idea of the Two Minutes silence is one of a certain real significance and value precisely because it is a reaction, if an unconscious reaction, against the whole trend of events now trumpeted as the triumphant progress of the world. It is the antithesis of advertisement, the suspension of efficiency, the cutting of communications, the dissolution of organisation; some sort of dim subconscious impulse towards those interior deserts where a man may be alone with God. (G.K.’s Weekly, Nov. 14, 1925)

+ We sit perhaps in a starry chamber of silence, while the laughter of the heavens is too loud for us to hear. (Authority and the Adventurer,” Orthodoxy)
Interlude – The Importance of Chesterton’s Approach to Debating

By Chris Chan

Over the past year, I’ve been writing brief profiles of some of Chesterton’s most famous debating partners, the topics they debated, and the tone and style of the debates. In light of recent events and the controversies that have rocked society in recent weeks, I think it is worthwhile to take a quick break from profiling Chesterton’s debates from the past and address the lessons we can learn from Chesterton’s approach to debating hot-button issues, and the way we view and treat those who disagree with us.

It is fair to say that as of this writing at the end of June 2020, the past three and a half months have unfolded in a manner that only the genuinely clairvoyant might have predicted, and the upcoming months could go in countless directions, many of which are far from comforting prospects to many people. Public health issues, economics, race relations, crime, the stability of the government and social order, and international friction have all gained attention recently, and it’s no wonder that anxieties and uncertainties are widespread, as all sorts of comforts and habits and countless minutiae of everyday life that were commonly taken for granted have been whisked away, shattered, or threatened without prior warning.

This essay cannot possibly address everything of importance facing the country, but it will focus on the issues of how our society deals with debating topics that are of increasing importance.

For years, I have been concerned about the effects of the Internet and social media on discussion. It’s one thing to look your debating partner in the eye, it’s quite another to post a pithy remark on Twitter or post a meme on Facebook, where it doesn’t matter if something’s true as long as it allows the poster to declare victory without allowing a response. This has spilled out into the real world where, more and more, people are insisting upon being heard and refusing to let anybody respond, as the first speaker’s views are apparently so perfect that any allowance of views that differ in the slightest would only mean the propagation of wrongness. With people fearing social ostracization and possibly even physical and economic harm, increasingly, people are deciding silence is safer. Fear means we cannot debate pressing issues.

In The Napoleon of Notting Hill, Chesterton’s character Adam Wayne declared:

“Freedom of speech means practically, in our modern civilisation, that we must only talk about unimportant things. We must not talk about religion, for that is illiberal; we must not talk about bread and cheese, for that is talking shop; we must not talk about death, for that is depressing; we must not talk about birth, for that is indelicate. It cannot last. Something must break this strange indifference, this strange dreamy egotism, this strange loneliness of millions in a crowd. Something must break it. Why should it not be you and I? Can you do nothing else but guard relics?”

I keep thinking of a line from Seinfeld, where people with lowbrow tastes declare, “I love that comedy you don’t have to think too much about.” Increasingly, people seem to be embracing a morality they don’t have to think too much about. Don’t think for yourself, don’t ask questions, don’t look to the intellects of the past, just listen to what one loud person has to say, be quiet, and obey. The party line has been drawn, and anyone who crosses it is anathema. It’s easy and seemingly safe to follow these rules. But I do not believe such attitudes are making the world a better place.

As a historian, I am also increasingly disturbed by widespread refusal to try to better understand the complexities and ambiguities of the past. Lately, prominent historical figures have been pilloried, sometimes with good reason, sometimes based on shakier ground. I frequently teach a course on Historiography, where my students are expected to discuss the merits and flaws of various historical events and figures, always being respectful to each other and relying upon genuine historical evidence to support their assertions. I’d like to see more of that today, rather than the increasingly common practice of declaring a certain person to be evil, and refusing to allow further discussion as to how that figure should be judged.

In What’s Wrong With the World, Chesterton wrote:

The modern mind is forced towards the future by a certain sense of fatigue, not unmixed with terror, with which it regards the past. It is propelled towards the coming time; it is, in the exact words of the popular phrase, knocked into the middle of next week. And the goad which drives it on thus eagerly is not an affection for futurity. Futurity does not exist, because it is still future. Rather it is a fear of the past; a fear not merely of the evil in the past, but of the good in the past also … And the upshot of this modern attitude is really this: that men invent new ideals because they dare not attempt old ideals. They look forward with enthusiasm, because they are afraid to look back.

With the trajectory of the nation’s—and the world’s—responses to certain issues and controversies unclear, and a national election looming in a few short months, it’s reasonable to theorize that ideas, opinions, and worldviews will become increasingly inflammatory. But as others have said before me, the cure for speech we don’t like isn’t censorship (especially self-censorship), but rather more speech. We must continue to debate everything that affects us, and we must follow Chesterton’s approach of genuine charity, unfailing good humor, and humble common sense.
fter the riots in Minneapolis had mostly subsided, I had a good long talk with a friend of mine. Patrick Exner helps lead Ascension Catholic Academy, located in north Minneapolis, the epicenter of the violence. Teach for Christ, a Catholic educational ministry in which I am involved, has been sending missionaries into Pat’s school for three years.

Pat has devoted his entire professional life to educating inner-city children. More than 90 percent of the students at Ascension are African American. Only a quarter are Catholic. In most years 100 percent of those who finish eighth grade at Ascension go on to finish high school. Most graduate from four-year colleges.

Pat did not plan a career in education and certainly not among the poor. Thirty years ago he was headed to law school, when a priest, Fr. Greg Tolaas, changed his life.

"Put law school off for a year," said Father. "Go down to Jamaica, where we help run a school, and teach the poor, you know, just for a year."

A few weeks later Pat found himself in Jamaica. Hideous poverty, no text books, barely anything we’d recognize as a school. He did have a box of chalk.

Pat has been teaching the poor ever since.

Even more than most of us lately, Pat has been meditating on race and crime and police and gangs and the horrors we tolerate in our inner cities. As we were talking through the trauma of the last few weeks he told me a story.

"I was 17 years old. My buddies and I had gotten hold of some beers. We were down in the park drinking and not smart enough or sober enough to keep quiet. I’m like in mid-chug, when I hear a deep growl. ‘Exner! What the heck do you think you are doing!’"

"It was Officer Dwight Alberry. He knew me. Even worse he knew my parents. And he dealt out the worst possible punishment. ‘Ok, here is what you are going to do. You are going to walk, not drive, home, right now. I will be right behind you. And then we are going to sit down with your parents and you are going to explain to them how you got this stupid. And you are not going to leave anything out because I’ll be listening.’"

And then Pat looked at me and said: “That’s what policing should be. And it all came down to one thing: Officer Alberry knew me and he knew my family. He was not a stranger.” Two years later they were playing on the same softball team.

I have no sympathy for gangs or local “leaders” of “autonomous zones” wielding AK 47s and Molotov cocktails. They are worse bullies than any cop. But they do have the germ of an idea, and it’s the right idea. Chesterton would have seen it.

In The Napoleon of Notting Hill, Chesterton imagines a country in which every neighborhood is a duchy, a quasi-independent fiefdom with its own regalia and traditions and putatively the power to control its own local affairs. Inevitably that power is challenged by the state and then … well you’ll have to read it. I think it is GKC’s best novel.

The point is that it is a novel about self-government, a government in which the most important resources are not tax receipts but the human heart and the common sense that comes from what we actually hold in common with our neighbors, the common sense of Officer Alberry.

We have given up democracy for...
bureaucracy. We have replaced government of the people, by the people, and for the people, with occasional voting for we know not whom, who proceed to do we know not what, with most of the doing being done by civil servants we never chose and cannot dismiss, following not laws we have made but ‘regulations’ we never hear of until they are enforced upon us.

Our neighborhoods are governed by strangers from far away, and some of those strangers are armed.

Yes, I know the statistics. I know most of what is said about police is unfair. Heather McDonald, the author of The War on Cops, which eviscerates the idea that police departments are systemically racist, is a friend of mine. I agree with her that racism is not the essential problem. And I believe that given the way police departments are organized, they probably do as good a job as could be reasonably expected.

But do they need to be organized as they are?

Imagine an autonomous zone idea, but minus the Molotov mixers and AK 47s. Imagine something more like Chesterton’s Notting Hill:

A well-defined urban neighborhood, probably not less than a thousand families, but not as many as 5000. Everybody either knows everybody or knows somebody who knows them.

The neighborhood has a local constabulary, patrolling the neighborhood on foot, greeting neighbors and shopkeepers and picking up local gossip, hearing about local problems.

The patrolmen are not amateurs. They are professionals, trained at a police academy, employees of the municipal or state force. They are real cops; they can make arrests, issue summonses, all that. But they all understand that getting to know the neighbors is at the core of their job.

Now here is the key point—the patrolmen do not report to downtown. They report to a local official, let’s call him the Sheriff, elected by the families of the neighborhood. If the neighborhood needs other police services—detectives or what not—the sheriff can call them in from the state or municipal police. That is how subsidiarity works.

This is a police force actually governed by the neighborhood. If there is a scandal, it is a local scandal. If there is police brutality, or police laxity, it is on the sheriff and the community that chose the sheriff. If bad officers are not removed, that’s the sheriff’s problem at election time.

Should the patrolmen be armed?

Not our job to decide. The neighborhood decides, either by referendum or by delegating that decision to the sheriff. The consequences of arming the police, or not, lie with the community.

What about drugs? It is often contended that drug arrests are a major source of friction between the police and urban neighborhoods.

Let the neighborhood decide. Kicking drug laws up to the Feds has been a disaster. Trying to stop the traffic ‘at the source’, we engage in para military operations around the globe, shifting the trade to ever more vicious and violent characters who gather ever greater profits into ever bloodier hands. And the drugs keep coming.

Making drugs a local problem would likely mean more officers taking more teens home to their parents to explain how they got so stupid. The drug trade would not pay enough to buy ammunition for the AKs.

Self-government is not a trick to push political responsibility back to the neighborhood and avoid rioting—or make riots seem ridiculous, though it would do that. Self-government is both a product and a source of community. It depends not on docile subjects and strict enforcers but on citizens.

Not merely the riots, but the entire current political crisis, a crisis more likely to pull us apart than any we have seen since the civil war, comes down to this: We have allowed ourselves to be governed by strangers until we have become strangers to each other.
When I last traveled this year, back in February, I visited that desolate shrine of futility, the Branch Davidian Complex outside of Waco. Then the Coronavirus ended my speaking engagements, and, like the rest of us, I started traveling without leaving home, visiting the whole world through my computer screen.

Then the whole world came to my town.

On Memorial Day weekend George Floyd met a tragic end at the hands of four Minneapolis police officers who were unable to arrest him and get him into a squad car without killing him. The whole thing was caught on camera, and it was deeply disturbing. The officers were fired immediately—not merely suspended pending an investigation. There was an odd delay in the public outcry, but the act was universally condemned as the video went viral. Everyone here was disgusted and sickened by this event, but it was not until three days had passed that the public demonstrations began. Although it seemed on the surface to be spontaneous, anyone looking closely could see it was orchestrated. A friend of mine, who lives very close to the scene, reported that he watched packed school buses pulling up and dropping off protesters. But any peaceful protest that might have been planned was utterly submerged by a tidal wave of violence and rioting. Of 500 businesses and public buildings in the Twin Cities were vandalized, looted, or destroyed. Ironically, the first target was Target. The store closest to the site was completely destroyed, but not before rioters helped themselves to some merchandise. One gentleman was seen exiting with a large Star Wars Lego set under each arm. Other Targets across the Twin Cities were looted. At Walgreen’s, people were standing in line to loot. A Minneapolis post office was set on fire. And the mayor ordered the police to abandon one of their precincts rather than defend it, and it was then burned to the ground on the national news. The violence lasted for three days and extended to remote and random spots, and no one felt safe. One of my acquaintances who lives over 25 miles away, across the Wisconsin border, could see the light from the fires.

There was one spot, however, that remained untouched and unviolated: the corner of 38th and Chicago, where George Floyd died. The one truly spontaneous reaction was to turn the intersection into a shrine and protect it. The flowers piled up, a mural was painted, evoking a fresco in a church, candles instead of fires, and everyone who came there was quiet and respectful, while just a few blocks away buildings were being reduced to rubble and ashes.

As everyone knows, the rioting spread to other cities, much more rapidly and intensely than Covid-19. This outbreak has turned out to be much more dramatic than the virus and has been especially deadly for statues. But before all that happened, before the dust had settled in Minneapolis, and while the ruins were still smoldering, I made a trek, or shall we say pilgrimage, to 38th and Chicago, 15 minutes from my home. So for the second time this year, I found...
myself visiting another American religious shrine that caught the attention of the entire world, and I arrived when it was freshly sacred ground. It was already clear that George Floyd was in the process of being canonized, albeit not by the Catholic Church.

There were about 300 people gathered at the intersection, which was filled with flowers and tributes, and blocked off to traffic. This was only a week after his death, but kiosks were already set up, selling food and tee-shirts. We all wore masks, so each of us was lost in the crowd. A stage had been erected, and a black woman was speaking into a microphone with the fervor of a revivalist minister, trying to rev up the crowd, but everyone was subdued. There was a kind of dazed, hangover atmosphere. She was preaching peace and love. "I don't wanna see any more violence! There is a new world order! Love! The only threat is ignorance! The only threat is hatred! No more violence! George wouldn't want that! Now say his name: George Floyd! Say it! George Floyd! George Floyd! George Floyd! Not with anger! With a smile on your face! George Floyd!"

But no one was into it, and, since we were all wearing masks, I couldn't really see any smiles.

Then a line of nine people came marching through the crowd carrying signs. I thought the leader was unusually tall for a woman, and sashaying a bit too provocatively for the setting. Then I read the sign: "Black Trans Matter." Not all of the marchers were black, but I assumed they identified as such. A short black woman next to me watched them go by and shook her head. Her face-covering did not mask the disappointment in her voice: "I guess the whole rainbow showed up."

On the pavement there is a silhouette painted where George Floyd died. A giant painting of his face looks down on the spot. His image is plastered everywhere. Across the street a bus stop is covered with a poster of a black man's face wearing a mask bearing the inscription, "We can't breathe!"

As I walked away, the lady preacher intoned over the loudspeaker: "This is sacred ground! I don't wanna hear any profanity! There are children here! And even if there weren't children, there are old people here! No profanity! Let's respect George Floyd! This is sacred ground! This is sacred ground!"

I got back into my car and drove a few blocks further and beheld the destruction. It was post-apocalyptic. It looked like a bomb had fallen. I never would have believed this was my city. I drove around the "Road Closed" signs (there was nobody around to give traffic tickets), and serpentined my way out through the surrounding neighborhoods. The surviving storefronts were boarded up and covered with spray painted messages, some pleading "Black-owned," and "Apartments with children." A poignant picture of small property in peril.

George Floyd did not deserve to die. Unfortunately, neither did David Koresh and his followers in Waco deserve their horrible deaths. But they were also made into martyrs for an entirely different cause. The world needs saints, and martyrdom is a quick path to sainthood, but they were also made into martyrs for an entirely different cause. The world needs saints, and martyrdom is a quick path to sainthood, but saints need to be saints. Saints are not merely symbols. Saints—especially martyrs—are witnesses to a truth that is larger than themselves. Sacrifice is a holy act and a call to holiness. It is selfless love.

Though we were hearing about love, we were not hearing about forgiveness. We were hearing about justice, but we were not hearing about righteousness.

As I stood at the newest American shrine, I saw something that might have escaped the notice of most everyone else. Across the street from where George Floyd fell is a restaurant called Dragon Wok. Here, I thought, is the new St. George, but the old Dragon is still here and seems to have the upper hand at this moment.

Exactly one hundred years ago, G.K. Chesterton wrote:

Men tend to dismiss old things as if they were all equally old, let alone equally bad or good. The pestilent ineptitude that merely contrasts the progressive with the conservative is still more inept when it merely contrasts the present with the past. To cling to something because it is a survival is as silly as to clutch at something because it is a novelty, when you do not know the origin and therefore the nature of either of them. The only solution is to know the story; to know enough of all the ups and downs of the fight of St. George and the Dragon to know the ancient foot-prints of the saint from the equally ancient trail of the serpent. To appreciate our fathers is not to praise everything they happened to appreciate our fathers is not to praise everything they happened to appreciate our fathers is not to praise every-thing they happened to do; and far less to praise everything they failed to destroy. And this moral needs to be enforced touching many modern celebrations of our national dignity and glory. (New Witness, May 14, 1920)
The Poets Go Mad

CHICAGO—The Poetry Foundation issued a press release in early June with the following announcement:

The Poetry Foundation and Poetry magazine stand in solidarity with the Black community, and denounce injustice and systemic racism. As an organization we recognize that there is much work to be done, and we are committed to engaging in this work to eradicate institutional racism. We acknowledge that real change takes time and dedication, and we are committed to making this a priority. We believe in the strength and power of poetry to uplift in times of despair, and to empower and amplify the voices of this time, this moment.

It took only a few days for some 1,800 poets, identifying themselves as “awardees, fellows, contributors, or collaborators,” to come down on the foundation for the insulting inadequacy of its statement.

For years, your constituents have been calling on the Foundation to redistribute more of its enormous resources to marginalized artists, to make concrete commitments to and change-making efforts in your local community and beyond. We find this statement to be worse than the bare minimum.

As poets, we recognize a piece of writing that meets the urgency of its time with the appropriate fire when we see it—and this is not it. It is an insult to the lives and families of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, and the countless other victims of the racist institution of police and white supremacy …

This is not the first time that the leadership of the Poetry Foundation has revealed itself to be woefully unfit to respond to the crises of our times. Though we can't detail everything within the space of this letter, we refer you to the numerous critiques made in regards to the Foundation's failures to support—or even appropriately acknowledge disparities as they relate to—Black and Indigenous poets, Latinx poets, trans and queer poets, disabled poets, poets of color writ large, and artists struggling economically. As it is clear that the Foundation's leadership is unable to show up responsibly to the demands of this moment, we call for the immediate resignation of both President Henry Bienen and Board of Trustees Chair Willard Bunn, III.

This was followed by a list of five demands, in addition to the above demand for resignations, including:

The President must be replaced by someone with a demonstrated commitment to both the world of poetry and the project of creating a world that is just and affirming for people of color, disabled people, trans people, queer people, and immigrants.

The board was also instructed to write a meaningful statement that details the specific, material ways it plans to “work to eradicate institutional racism” and was given a week to publish “an official, public response.”

The poets quickly got their pound of flesh in the resignations of the two named leaders. The greater redistribution of “its enormous resources to marginalized artists” will, no doubt, follow. One of the demands stated that, “Ultimately, we dream of a world in which the massive wealth hoarding that underlies the Foundation's work would be replaced by the redistribution of every cent to those whose labor amassed those funds.”

We're pretty sure that would mean returning money to the Ruth Lilly estate, among other large donors to the foundation. As to whose labor amassed those funds, Ruth got hers from Eli Lilly and Company, so maybe they want the funds to go back to the pharmaceutical giant.

GKC. What the world wants, what the world is waiting for, is not Modern Poetry or Classical Poetry or Neo-Classical Poetry—but Good Poetry. And the dreadful disreputable doubt, which stirs in my own skeptical mind, is doubt about whether it would really matter much what style a poet chose to write in, in any period, as long as he wrote Good poetry.

Reliable sources have revealed that the foundation's trustees are also looking for leaders who will address the problem of the ongoing mysterious silence of poets on the subject of cheese.

“Have a Nice Pride”

MINNEAPOLIS—In “normal” times, the climax of “Pride Month” in the Twin Cities is the Pride Parade in Minneapolis. Things were not normal in Minneapolis this June. The coronavirus had already moved parade organizers to schedule a virtual parade under the name “Ashley Rukes LGBTQ+ Virtual Pride parade.” But that was put off and organizers posted a statement saying “We do not feel a celebratory Pride Parade is appropriate at this time and the inclusivity of all community members will be the focus of our events moving forward.” Instead, organizers scheduled a “Taking Back Pride” march on Pride Day, in conjunction with multiple local social justice organizations.

Some aspects of the traditional Twin Cities Pride must go on, however. Entertainer Harry Mason, who goes by the drag name Sassha Cassadine, in addition to hosting virtual drag shows, had a number of live performances scheduled in Minneapolis on Pride Weekend. Mason is encouraged to see the local LGBTQ+ community address racial injustice. His experience as a black drag queen has given him first-hand experience of bias. “So many performers of color are so talented, but they are always getting the short end of the stick,” he
stated, adding “We have to sort through the local inequalities together before we can throw an actual Pride again.”

GKC: Pride is the downward drag of all things into an easy solemnity. One “settles down” into a sort of selfish seriousness; but one has to rise to a gay self-forgetfulness.

We’re also wondering when the rest of the deadly sins are going to get their own month, although we don’t suppose anyone will actually, to paraphrase Harry Mason, throw a Sloth.

What’s In a Name?
HOUSTON—The Houston Association of Realtors, which, you’ll be happy to know, rates its own three letter acronym (HAR), has made a change of nomenclature in its online property database. “Master” as in Master Bedroom, is out. That room is now the Primary Bedroom. Needless to say, this applies to the bathroom formerly known as master also. “The MLS Advisory Group regularly reviews the terms and fields used in the MLS to make sure they are consistent with the current market environment,” the HAR said in a release. Currently, no fine will be assessed to realtors who employ the offending word, the HAR also noted.

This news comes on the heels of some other notable recent name changes.

Country music group Lady Antebellum is now Lady A. “(W)e are regretful and embarrassed to say that we did not take into account the associations that weigh down this word,” their statement said. “Lady” is apparently still okay, at least in country music.

Dixie Chicks are now The Chicks; “Chicks” somehow also being fine, maybe because of the genre also.

Ditching some obvious associations with the evil American South in trade names is one thing. Excising “master” from the lexicon is another thing entirely. We would say that we wish our language masters well in the project, but we don’t.

The city name changes already being demanded will be another massive project. Columbus and St. Louis are two that have surfaced as offensive already. The new names in line for many of the cities in the state of California will no doubt usher in a new age of understanding.

GKC: We are perpetually being told that this rising generation is very frank and free, and that its whole social ideal is frankness and freedom. Now I am not at all afraid of frankness. What I am afraid of is fickleness. And there is a truth in the old proverbial connection between what is fickle and what is false. There is in the very titles and terminology of all this sort of thing a pervading element of falsehood. Everything is to be called something that it is not; as in the characteristic example of Companionate Marriage. Everything is to be recommended to the public by some sort of synonym which is really a pseudonym. It is a talent that goes with the time of electioneering and advertisement and newspaper headlines; but whatever else such a time may be, it certainly is not specially a time of truth.
Hanging Around

By Joe Campbell

“Unfavorable mortality experience.”

The actuary’s words stuck in my brain. They indicate one of the reasons the payouts from the pension plan I belong to haven’t kept up with inflation. As a long-time member, I feel responsible. I and others like me have failed to exit the plan at the rate the actuary predicted.

Initially, I thought he meant we were exiting the plan sooner than expected. To me, this seemed a reasonable interpretation of “unfavorable mortality experience.” What, after all, can be more unfavorable than an untimely departure?

When he explained that he meant the exact opposite, I was delighted.

“Although I knew the plan bought me security,” I said. “I had no idea it would buy me time.”

I now see why he didn’t share my elaboration. If our extended membership delights us, it troubles him and the other pensioners.

I don’t blame him if he’s peeved. He has a professional reputation to uphold.

I don’t blame the other pensioners if they resent us. They have bills to pay.

Clearly, we long-time members have overstayed our welcome. No wonder I feel guilty.

But if the more recent pensioners resent my tenacity, they keep it to themselves. In fact, they go out of their way to show that they don’t hold it against me personally. They ply me with food and drink, take me bear hunting, teach me new skills like snake charming, sword swallowing, and fire eating, and encourage me to go stock car racing, white water rafting, mountain climbing, hang gliding, parachute jumping—all the exciting activities I hadn’t time to take part in before retiring.

Why, several of my fellow pensioners say I should pursue a movie career as a senior citizen stunt man and become famous. Apparently some of them think I’m famous already. Every morning they check the local paper to see if I’m featured.

It’s comforting to have so many people concerned about my welfare. When we meet, they never fail to enquire after my health. Some even phone to ask how I’m feeling. They weren’t this solicitous when we worked together. I guess retirement mutes and mellows us.

I was really touched by their solicitude when a medical emergency sent me to the hospital in an ambulance. Several of them emptied a case of champagne toasting my health. I would rather they had said a few prayers for my health, but I wouldn’t think of complaining. After all, the toasts worked. The emergency turned out to be a minor medicinal side effect and I went home in a taxi fit as ever.

For some time afterwards, meetings with fellow retirees were often emotional. Some of them broke down when they saw me. I guess gratitude can do that to you.

When pensioners exit the plan, the remaining members make a big fuss over them. They write up and publish their accomplishments, distribute their photographs, reminisce about the good times, and drink a lot of toasts. What’s more, they ensure that long-term members like me are fully aware of the adulation that’s in store.

With all the solicitude the other pensioners expend on me, I have a good mind to stay indefinitely. ☺
Cold Water Taps

By David Beresford

Existence exists; but it is not sufficiently self-existent; and would never become so merely by going on existing.

—GKC, “THE PERMANENT PHILOSOPHY,”
ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

One of life’s greatest pleasures is splashing cold water from the tap on one’s face when it is hot outside. Having a mountain stream of clean cold water in our homes which we can produce at will is a modern technological miracle. I am told that the ancient Romans had aqueducts that did the same thing. But it was not the same—it was a treat reserved for wealthy Romans only, whereas ours is populist, or if you prefer Greek instead of Latin, democratic. Napoleon did not own a car, nor even one with rust; and Caesar for all his power was harassed by flies coming into his house to defecate and spit on his food at supper time because he did not have screens on his windows.

Splashing cold water on one’s face proves that God exists. I am unmoved by the grandiose in religion—supposedly uplifting pictures of sunlight breaking through dark clouds above a mountainous landscape, usually with some edifying poem printed on it in case you miss the point. The fact that these caricatures of religion leave me cold is another indirect proof of God’s existence. That God exists should be self-evident because we exist—St. Thomas derived five distinct proofs from this simple fact. But if the existence of God is only a human construct, then, like all things human, it would belong more to the most powerful of this world than to the rest of us.

One of the best renovations I ever did was putting in a three-season shower outside in my yard. Conceptually, it is a garden hose slung over a broken branch nailed to the fence that pours water into an old bathtub. For privacy, it is surrounded by short wooden fences of recycled boards. The only modification I made to this basic design was to use two garden hoses hooked up to hot and cold taps in the cellar, and run through the cellar window to a set of taps that controls the water leading to a showerhead above the tub. I also drilled out the flow limiter in the showerhead, which is a small hole in the showerhead designed to save water (which it certainly does!) into a bigger hole so I could get more than a dribble of water.

Drainage can be a problem. I happen to have a slope to my yard so running the water downhill to soak into the lawn (i.e. weeds) works fine. If your yard is not sloped, you can either just let the water run out across the lawn or install a dry well. To make a drywell, dig a hole about as big as one to two bushel baskets, and run a drain pipe from your showerer into this. Then fill the hole with broken bricks, gravel, or rocks, put some boards on top of these, and then cover this with 4–6 inches of topsoil so the grass will grow over it. The soapy water will flow into this, then seep slowly into the ground.

NOTE: This article is for educational purposes only, the author does not advocate anyone doing this because it is illegal. You are allowed to run water from a hose onto your lawn; you are allowed to stand under your hose and get wet while doing this. You are allowed to wash your dog or lawn mower or bikes with soap on your lawn. I do not know if you are allowed to wash yourself with soap standing on the lawn; you are not allowed to wash yourself with soap under a hose in your lawn if it looks like you are having a shower. The reasons the government gets involved in making laws about this has to do with public health. But what these reasons are, nobody knows.

If you do install a three-season shower (total cost < $100), first build a fence area and put up a sign that says WE COMPOST AND RECYCLE. This has just the right mix of holier-than-thou about it that appeals to bureaucrats and busybodies. Leave it there for a month or so, perhaps put in a couple of garbage cans in case a neighbor reports you to City Hall. You can pretend you are being civic minded, hiding unsightly garbage cans—maybe practice saying this in front of a mirror until you can do so without laughing. Then, when it is safe, install a flat rock, patio stone, or old bathtub, and a showerhead on a stick supplied with hot and cold water.

It is not a swimming pool, but you are just as refreshed and invigorated. And unlike a swimming pool, anyone can afford an outdoor shower, which might explain why they are illegal.
What makes a great teacher? The answer is a difficult one in one sense. Great teachers come with an astounding variety of personalities, methods, curricula, and styles. Not every teacher can be great for every kind of student. Even teachers who are great may seem unimpressive on the surface. Such was the Canadian polymath Bernard Lonergan, who gained a devoted following despite his surface characteristics.

A prolific scholar of philosophy, theology, economics, and social sciences, Lonergan was and is respected for his great productivity (his collected works will, when finished, fill twenty-five volumes) and for his brilliance. His books are long, deep, complicated, and, as Harvard Law professor Mary Ann Glendon says, “just plain hard.” Although I’m not a Lonergan scholar, I’ve read enough to think that I ought to read more of him. It’s best to read him with Mark Twain’s comments about the music of Wagner in mind: “It’s better than it sounds.” Or, as Professor Glendon put it, “Although he placed great store by communication, he himself did not excel in that area.”

What is true of his writing was true of his lecturing. Bill Shea, who studied with Lonergan in the 1960s at the Gregorian University in Rome, thought he was a great teacher: “But he was not what one would expect a great teacher to be. He had none of the sense of theatrical drama, no flash, no bamboozle, none of the Great Man aura. He had a monotonous voice; his hands shook distractingly; he looked overweight, not at all prepossessing in his physical appearance, and he had little physical grace.”

Given that students at the Gregorian were treated to complicated Latin lectures in that monotonous Canadian-accented voice, it is not surprising that he had a selective appeal. Shea, however, described the “pleasure” he took in those lectures by the “smartest person I had run into” as connected to Lonergan giving those lectures with great pleasure himself. Richard Liddy, another student of the time, explained the pleasure in the lectures by their content that intimated to the students (mostly priests and seminarians) “how our lives are caught up in the mystery of divine love” and how it is that we can see mathematics, science, economics, philosophy, theology, and our own lives as a coherent whole. Like Chesterton, whom he greatly admired, Lonergan attempted to think about everything together without reducing it all to one thing.

Bernard Joseph Francis Lonergan was born in Buckingham, Quebec on December 17, 1904, to an engineer father and a mother interested in music and arts. After studying at Loyola College in Montreal, he entered the Society of Jesus in 1922. While studying scholastic philosophy at Heythrop College, London, Lonergan sought refuge from the there-dominant thought of Francisco Suarez by reading John Henry Newman. Newman, along with Augustine and later Aquinas, became a guiding light of his own thought.

After a stint teaching in Canada, Lonergan was sent to the Gregorian for a doctorate in theology. Two days before he was scheduled to defend his doctoral thesis in 1940, he was forced to leave Rome because of the war. He taught in Canada again and defended his thesis in 1946. Afterward he taught at Regis College at the University of Toronto for seven years and then spent eleven years giving those lectures at the Gregorian University. A bout of cancer in 1964 interrupted his career, but he returned to teaching at Regis and then Boston College until 1983. In 1970 he spent a year as the Stillman Chair in Catholic Studies at Harvard, the position originally filled by Christopher Dawson. He died on March 26, 1984.

What did Lonergan offer to understanding the whole? First, that true progress was only possible by keeping together the understanding of the past with the new discoveries of the present. His motto was *vetera novis augere et perficiere*: to grow and perfect what is old with what is new. In his early career (and again at the end) he became interested in connecting modern economic theory with old truths. He defended Chesterton’s Distributism at least insofar as he observed that it was not “a vision of Utopia; it proceeds from a desire to emphasize directly and persistently an aspect of human nature that capitalism and communism overlook.”

He focused particularly on how humans take insights, wonder about them, compare them with their own first principles and other views, and then make judgments about how to fit them into a truer picture. He saw Chesterton as a brilliant aid to this: “Democracy is faced with the alternative of teaching thought or meeting its decline and fall,” he wrote in 1931. “Chesterton would undertake this task.” Though he criticized Chesterton’s style, he recognized its power to aid in the task. “A more robust purposiveness stamps his work, makes it not so much an ornament as an instrument of civilization.”

As Liddy noted, Lonergan’s vision was ultimately theological: our thinking and acting is in and ultimately ordered toward divine life. Though he recognized Chesterton’s lack of technical theological understanding, he thought him the kind of theologian who would have been recognized in the eleventh century: “Then he could be ranked with St. Anselm … Then being a theologian was simply a matter of a cast of mind that seizes the fitness and coherence of the faith, that penetrates to its inner order and harmony and unity.”
A Worry Wart, but Not a Gloomy Gus

The Decadent Society
How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success.
By Ross Douthat.
Avid Reader Press
258 pages

Reviewed by Chuck Chalberg

Nearly a century ago G.K. Chesterton pondered the prospect of the decline and fall of western civilization as he pondered Oswald Spengler’s ponderous The Decline of the West. By his own admission Chesterton wasn’t certain that he had succeeded in reading the entire book, but he was quite sure that he understood it and dissented from it.

Were Chesterton with us today he might well have made it all the way through Ross Douthat’s brief and breezy assessment of the current state of an apparently still declining west (or at least the American version thereof). Without question he would have understood it. More than that, he likely would agree with the thrust of it, as well as most of the particulars in it, including Douthat’s selections from the Man Himself.

Published right on the eve of the current pandemic (and now being reviewed in the midst of the shutdown in response to it), Douthat’s entry in the end-of-civilization literary sweepstakes lacks the magisterial sweep and pessimistic determinism of Spengler. In the process this barely fortysomething New York Times columnist reveals himself to be a worry wart, but not a Gloomy Gus.

Perhaps that’s because Douthat seems to have read his Chesterton. In fact, as we shall see, our own GKC does make a few crucial appearances in these pages. But nowhere does Douthat make the stark Chestertonian point that a societal decline is always a choice.

This is not to say that either Chesterton or Douthat is necessarily an optimist when it comes to the future of America in particular or western civilization in general. But it is to say that neither endorses what Chesterton calls a “blind and brainless determinism.”

For Chesterton, all talk about optimism and pessimism was simply additional evidence that people had abandoned the “old talk of right and wrong.” The pessimistic conclusion that our civilization has fallen shouldn’t preclude others from deciding not to get up again.

Chesterton recalled a time when it was common to believe that a nation had “sinned and suffered, like a man.” By his time—and Spengler’s time—the new consensus seemed to be that a nation decays, “like a cheese.”

Though Douthat does not consider Chesterton “the subtlest or most nuanced” of historians, he does not hesitate to borrow Chestertonian truths to bolster what proves to be his Chestertonian case. In fact, he does so not once, but thrice. The first concerns the “five deaths of the faith.” Douthat’s list varies slightly from The Everlasting Man: The first was the fall of Rome. Then came the rise and challenge of Islam followed by the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and Darwinism. Each “death” proved to be something other than fatal, since each alleged “death” led to what Douthat calls “renewals and rebirths.”

Of course, the story of the fall of Rome is not just important to Douthat’s story because of its impact on the Christian story, but because of the possible parallels to the American story. Here again, Chesterton the would-be historian comes into play: “There was nothing left that could conquer Rome, but there was also nothing left that could improve it … It was the end of the world, and the worst of it was that it need never end.”

Then it becomes Douthat’s turn to trace the sources and state of what might be a long and labored Rome-like American decline, not to mention a decline equally lacking in creativity, warmth, and hope. He places little stock in either Obama’s futuristic call to “fundamentally transform” America or Trump’s nostalgic urge to “make America great again.”

The dilemma that Chesterton described is now ours, not Rome’s. This is so whether we are waiting for “Christians or barbarians.”

Like Chesterton, Douthat is primarily an essayist, rather than either a historian or a futurist. He tells us only that we are somewhere along the path, but not necessarily the glide path, of decline. He thinks he knows when to date its onset, but he doesn’t pretend to know how, when, or if it will end.

Douthat’s story begins with his designation of the 1969 moon landing as the high point of American greatness. He then deploys the decline of the space program as a metaphor for a general American decline. The bulk of the book then details material evidence to buttress his case.

His suspects are mainly, but not entirely, the usual ones. The four horsemen of his apocalypse are: stagnation, sterility, sclerosis, and repetition.

More precisely, his “age of deceleration” traces a now decades long stretch of industrial decline in growth and innovation, notwithstanding such tools as the internet and the smartphone. He
Finally, a Bible That Quotes Chesterton

*The Word on Fire Bible – The Gospels*  
Word on Fire Catholic Ministries  
591 pages

Reviewed by Dale Ahlquist

When I pulled it out of the box, I thought it looked like a nice big deluxe leather-bound Bible. Then upon closer examination, I figured out that it contained only the Four Gospels. This is the first volume of what is obviously going to be a monumental project. But what is also obvious is that this Bible, with its spectacular production qualities, is purposefully beautiful. As a theater piece, the set design is on an epic scale, but exquisite in its details, each scene is carefully choreographed, each spotlight drawing the eye to the right place. And the script! The script is the Word of God. The superlatives would be understatements.

Among its many good features is the choice of the translation. It is not the New American Bible, whose clumpy wording sometimes seems intended to be deliberately ugly, artificially inverting familiar phrases to make them sound as unnatural as possible. The editors of *The Word on Fire Bible* realized that you can’t make a beautiful Bible with the New American Bible translation. They have wisely chosen the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, which is both accurate and flowing.

But how do you stretch the Four Gospels into almost 600 pages? With art and commentary. The art consists of masterpieces from across the centuries that creatively bring the text to life. The commentary is drawn from three sources: first and foremost, Bishop Robert Barron; secondly, the Church Fathers; and thirdly, recent authors who have proven to be spiritual masters.

Bishop Barron is taking his place as the Archbishop Fulton Sheen of this generation. He is prolific and profound but completely clear and comprehensible. His reflections on key passages of scripture are not like the kind of Bible Commentary you would find elsewhere. They are more like little homilies, which is fitting because he is one of our greatest

"Sclerosis" refers to an American political system that features what might be termed the three “d”s. The first two are deadlock and demagoguery (of leftist and rightist varieties). The third “d” would be a condition that seems to defy resolution.

Lastly, Douthat, who moonlights as film critic for the *National Review*, devotes a chapter to an entertainment industry and a popular culture stuck on various re-run buttons.

Where all of this is leading—or dumping—us, no one knows. Including Douthat. But he is worried, and justifiably so. His best guess is an extended period of what he terms “sustained decadence.” Which brings us first to Adam Smith and then back to Chesterton. Better than two centuries ago Smith reminded us that “there is a great deal of rot in a nation.”

Just how advanced is the state of rot in America today? Douthat seems to think that the American version is at once pretty far advanced and yet pretty sustainable for the foreseeable future and perhaps much longer than that.

Here he disagrees with those who think that the American collapse, once it really gets rolling, will be pretty rapid. Read Mark Steyn’s *America Alone* for a glimpse into an undouhtian future. With the Roman example in mind, this might be an unchestertonian future as well.

As a believing Christian, Douthat shares something else with Chesterton. After providing a very material account of American decadence Douthat cannot resist reminding himself that he would be a very poor Christian indeed if he did not mention that “no civilization—not ours, not any—has thrived without a confidence that there was more to the human story than the material world as we understand it.”

Douthat then reminds us that the early Christians regarded the rise of Rome as a “necessary precondition” for the birth of Christ. Chesterton, of course, made the same point nearly a century ago. Douthat concedes as much, while adding that Chesterton gave that point a “still-more-interesting wrinkle”: if Rome’s rise prepared the way for Christianity, it was Rome’s decadence that demonstrated the need for a Messiah.

That, of course, is the very argument that Chesterton makes in *The Everlasting Man*. So what else could Douthat do but conclude by giving us a lengthy excerpt from that great book? The essence of that excerpt can be captured in five italicized words: “Man could do no more.”

Douthat might have called it quits right there, but he doesn’t. Worry wart or no, he goes on to assure our highly secular age that he is not predicting the end of the world or the arrival of the millennium or anything as outlandish as all of that. And that is not quite that.

“I’m just saying,” concludes Douthat, “that if this were the age in which some divine intervention happened … there would be, in hindsight, a case that we should have seen it coming.” ···
preachers, and they do what homilies are supposed to do: offer an application of the Gospel reading.

The use of the Church Fathers and recent authors is ingenious, an effective switch on the usual approach to these writers. We read St. John Chrysostom or St. Thomas Aquinas or G.K. Chesterton and see how they quote Scripture to make a point. But here is the reverse. We are reading the Scripture, and a saint jumps in and expounds on it. (In fact, Chesterton is one of the first to make an appearance.) For those who might not get around to reading such Catholic classics as Introduction to the Devout Life by St. Francis de Sales, here are excerpts woven into sacred texts, verses that, familiar or not, are illumined by the most blessed spiritual minds in the history of the Church.

The General Editor of the Word on Fire Bible is Brandon Vogt. He has also written the introduction to the Gospel of Matthew, which means that it is almost the first thing one reads when opening this Bible. Brandon, who in addition to his duties at Word on Fire Ministries, is a faithful member of the Board of Directors of the Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton, admitted to me that he was a bit daunted by the task of writing the opening piece to this monumental edition of Sacred Scripture, considering the possibility that Bibles are handed down several generations, and someone far into the future might read it. It was his intention to write the introduction as if a friend had asked him, “Hey, I’ve never read Matthew before. What should I expect?” Brandon avoids the scholarly questions concerning authorship, dating of manuscripts, and textual criticism, and focuses on the unique way that Jesus Christ is revealed in the Gospel. The authors who introduce the other Gospels take a similar but still distinctive approach. Along with the commentaries by the various contributors are explanations of important Greek words that add great insight without being pedantic.

So who is the audience for this Biblical production? Well, everyone should read the Bible. But The Word on Fire Bible is specifically aimed at an audience that has never read the Bible (which means most of the population, especially Catholics). However, as I said, everyone should read it. It will be more, I hope, than a marvelous gift to Confirmation students or high school graduates (but it will be perfect for that purpose). This is a Bible to be read not just to be referenced. It is a page-turner. Even the most Biblically literate and the well-versed Catholic will derive great benefit from it.

The Word on Fire Bible succeeds in bringing beauty and truth together. We need lots of both these days.

In I Remember G.K. Chesterton, Patrick Braybrooke wrote, “At a christening of the child of a friend of mine I saw Chesterton take part in an amusing scene. It was arranged that family group should be taken by the press photographers who had insisted on being present. Chesterton was given the baby to hold. This difficult feat he accomplished with great skill and all was set for the group to be ‘shot.’ The photograph was duly taken and Chesterton turned to the photographers and said, ‘I suppose the public will realise which is the baby and which is myself!’ At a church a little previously to the taking of the photograph I was walking with Chesterton down the tidy path to the lynch-gate. An elderly and very genial businessman came up to Chesterton and said, ‘And how are you, Mr. Chesterton?’ The famous author was in a mood of banter and replied, ‘I am rather lame and a bit queer in the head; otherwise I am perfectly well.’"
“There really is nothing like The Chesterton Review, and if there ever was, it existed in a bygone Golden Age of journals and magazines. They, however, are all dead. The Review abides.”

—Philip Jenkins, Chronicles Magazine
June 2014
I Have Not Changed—But

By G.K. Chesterton

[Note: This piece was obviously not written by Chesterton but is apparently the transcription of a speech or of an interview.]

I have not discovered the cure for anything. I think I know what is the cure for the unrest of the world. But I did not discover it. All I did was to discover that somebody else had discovered it long ago.

It seems to me that changes happen slowly. We need time to think. And it has struck me as curious that although the modern world insists that we should have leisure to play tennis or to work out crossword puzzles, the modern world does not insist that we should have time to think. And, probably owing to congenital laziness, I have always given myself time to think.

Well, what has happened to me? Was I ever arrested like Paul on his journey to Damascus? I was not. And I have always suspected that Paul must have been thinking a good deal on the subject in debate, or he would have put down the miraculous intervention to a natural phenomenon.

I was brought up in a fairly typical middle-class English family. My father had been prosperous in business, and he had felt that something more than business was needed to square oneself with the universe. He was a Unitarian. There was not a Unitarian tradition in the family. But that was the mode of the age. And I really believed in the sort of thing William Morris pictured, with every craftsman running his own show.

Perhaps the catastrophic event—if you want one—was the South African War. There I saw something which seemed to me to be the meanest kind of financial grab supported by the fine sincere fellows like Stopford Brooke (at whose feet I had sat as a child), York Powell, and the Fabians—apparently merely because the British Empire was big and the Transvaal Republic was little. That stirred me up. Why did all these fine men and women go wrong?

And Echo might have answered: “Yes, it is enough. If you see it. And if you will always see it.” Rather a large mouthful for Echo! But, as a matter of fact, that is what Echo said.

Which brings me to what was an important event in my life, though as I say, thinking led up to it. I got hold of “Leaves of Grass” by Walt Whitman. I called them a revelation. It put in black and white the things that I had always known. The glory and magic of God’s universe—the shows of night and day, and, “in the midst, God’s beautiful right hand:”

Well, very soon I found that those who imitated Whitman’s irregular lines missed out on the magic of the universe and were definitely antagonistic to God’s beautiful right hand. That was disturbing. God was all right, the universe was all right, Whitman was all right. But something had gone wrong.

Then, again, as a very young fellow, I was a Socialist. I think that I always hated the idea of things being done from a centre. I hated bureaucracy. But they told me that if I wanted to get rid of the manifold iniquities of aggressive capital, of interest, I must get rid of private property. And so I believed them. Although what I really believed in was the sort of thing that William Morris pictured, with every craftsman running his own show.

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Again, I have always believed in Liberty. But I noticed that all those who said that they believed in Liberty and nothing else proceeded at once to shackle themselves. But what they did was to adopt an economic creed (which the Russians hold to-day) that everything that happens must happen—that, in fact, nobody can be free. It seemed a poor way to use your freedom. And, mark you, I have noticed that the modern idea of freedom seems to be that you are not to be allowed to bring up your family as you choose, that you are not to be allowed to marry as you choose, that you are not to be allowed to drink as you choose.

I soon came to realise that liberty was a more complicated thing than I imagined and that it seemed to need somebody (perhaps God) standing outside human life as an arbiter.

One of the things that have made a difference to me is owning my own place in the country. I was born and bred a Cockney. I was altogether urban. And then I moved into the country and I bought a field. My own field! My very own! And then I built a studio on it. My very own studio. I could enact my own licence—desperate, sordid licence—or marry as you choose, that you are not to be allowed to drink as you choose.

But I cannot leave out God. For I have seen so many things go wrong when they left out God. Liberty became licence—desperate, sordid licence—or became sheer slavery. Property became monopoly. And the miracle of everyday life became of no account at all.

And so I, who began as a Protestant, remain one, as a Catholic—a Protestant against the destruction of all the material, simple things. I have not changed. God made me; and here I am. Socialism failed me, and I have turned my back on that because it was not social. Protestantism failed me, and I have turned my back on that because it did not protest.

These things endure: life and liberty and the boundless magic of night and day—and what comes after.

(From the Daily Sketch, May 14, 1931)
If the ordinary spectator at the art galleries finds himself, let us say, opposite a picture of a dancing flower-crowned figure in a rose-coloured robe, he feels a definite curiosity to know the title, looks it up in the catalogue, and finds that it is called, let us say, “Hope.” He is immediately satisfied, as he would have been if the title had run “Portrait of Lady Warwick,” or “View of Kilchurn Castle.” It represents a certain definite thing, the word “hope.” But what does the word “hope” represent? It represents only a broken instantaneous glimpse of something that is immeasurably older and wilder than language, that is immeasurably older and wilder than man; a mystery to saints and a reality to wolves. To suppose that such a thing is dealt with by the word “hope,” any more than America is represented by a distant view of Cape Horn, would indeed be ridiculous. It is not merely true that the word itself is, like any other word, arbitrary; that it might as well be “pig” or “parasol”; but it is true that the philosophical meaning of the word, in the conscious mind of man, is merely a part of something immensely larger in the unconscious mind, that the gusty light of language only falls for a moment on a fragment, and that obviously a semi-detached, unfinished fragment of a certain definite pattern on the dark tapestries of reality. It is vain and worse than vain to declaim against the allegoric, for the very word “hope” is an allegory, and the very word “allegory” is an allegory.

Now let us suppose that instead of coming before that hypothetical picture of Hope in conventional flowers and conventional pink robes, the spectator came before another picture. Suppose that he found himself in the presence of a dim canvas with a bowed and stricken and secretive figure cowering over a broken lyre in the twilight. What would he think? His first thought, of course, would be that the picture was called Despair; his second (when he discovered his error in the catalogue), that it has been entered under the wrong number; his third, that the painter was mad. But if we imagine that he overcame these preliminary feelings and that as he stared at that queer twilight picture a dim and powerful sense of meaning began to grow upon him—what would he see? He would see something for which there is neither speech nor language, which has been too vast for any eye to see and too secret for any religion to utter, even as an esoteric doctrine. Standing before that picture, he finds himself in the presence of a great truth. He perceives that there is something in man which is always apparently on the eve of disappearing, but never disappears, an assurance which is always apparently saying farewell and yet illimitably lingers, a string which is always stretched to snapping and yet never snaps. He perceives that the queerest and most delicate thing in us, the most fragile, the most fantastic,
is in truth the backbone and indestructible. He knows a great moral fact: that there never was an age of assurance, that there never was an age of faith. Faith is always at a disadvantage; it is a perpetually defeated thing which survives all its conquerors. The desperate modern talk about dark days and reeling altars, and the end of Gods and angels, is the oldest talk in the world: lamentations over the growth of agnosticism can be found in the monkish sermons of the dark ages; horror at youthful impiety can be found in the Iliad. This is the thing that never deserts men and yet always, with daring diplomacy, threatens to desert them. It has indeed dwelt among and controlled all the kings and crowds, but only with the air of a pilgrim passing by. It has indeed warmed and lit men from the beginning of Eden with an unending glow, but it was the glow of an eternal sunset.

Here, in this dim picture, its trick is almost betrayed. No one can name this picture properly, but Watts, who painted it, has named it Hope. But the point is that this title is not (as those think who call it “literary”) the reality behind the symbol, but another symbol for the same thing, or, to speak yet more strictly, another symbol describing another part or aspect of the same complex reality. Two men felt a swift, violent, invisible thing in the world: one said the word “hope,” the other painted a picture in blue and green paint. The picture is inadequate; the word “hope” is inadequate; but between them, like two angles in the calculation of a distance, they almost locate a mystery, a mystery that for hundreds of ages has been hunted by men and evaded them. And the title is therefore not so much the substance of one of Watts’ pictures, it is rather an epigram upon it. It is merely an approximate attempt to convey, by snatching up the tool of another craftsman, the direction attempted in the painter’s own craft. He calls it Hope, and that is perhaps the best title. It reminds us among other things of a fact which is too little remembered, that faith, hope, and charity, the three mystical virtues of Christianity, are also the gayest of the virtues. Paganism, as I have suggested, is not gay, but rather nobly sad; the spirit of Watts, which is as a rule nobly sad also, here comes nearer perhaps than anywhere else to mysticism in the strict sense; the mysticism which is full of secret passion and belief, like that of Fra Angelico or Blake. But though Watts calls his tremendous reality Hope, we may call it many other things. Call it faith, call it vitality, call it the will to live, call it the religion of to-morrow morning, call it the immortality of man, call it self-love and vanity; it is the thing that explains why man survives all things and why there is no such thing as a pessimist. It cannot be found in any dictionary or rewarded in any commonwealth: there is only one way in which it can even be noticed and recognized. If there be anywhere a man who has really lost it, his face out of a whole crowd of men will strike us like a blow. He may hang himself or become Prime Minister; it matters nothing. The man is dead.

(From G.F. Watts, 1904)
Job 19-29

Job 19:25. For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and in the last day I shall rise out of the earth.

According to the old Victorian almanacs, this [twentieth century] ought to be the time when Peace is most firmly assured, when Parliaments are most universal and popular, when the liberty of every individual citizen is most unhindered, when the order of every civilised city is most undisturbed. Only, if we look, not at the almanac of the nineteenth century, but at the facts of the twentieth century, we find that there is nothing of the sort. We find all the things that our fathers told us they had destroyed: dictatorships, religious persecutions, feuds and private wars, and even men found stabbed in the street, as in the days of Capulet and Montague. Now I do not blame the modern historian like Mr. Wells for having what he would call a vision beyond all these things. I do not blame him for saying as a man and therefore as a mystic, that he still hopes that his scheme of redemption liveth, and that it will appear towards the latter days of the earth. Faith is a thing to be respected, especially when it has no apparent supports but in the soul. I only say that to end up your account of current affairs on that note is not an outline of history. (Illustrated London News, Mar. 1, 1930)

Job 26:7. He stretched out the north over the empty space, and hangeth the earth upon nothing.

But the theory of gravitation has a curiously Hebrew sentiment in it—a sentiment of combined dependence and certainty, a sense of grappling unity, by which all things hang upon one thread. “Thou hast hanged the world upon nothing,” said the author of the Book of Job, and in that sentence wrote the whole appalling poetry of modern astronomy. The sense of the preciousness and fragility of the universe, the sense of being in the hollow of a hand, is one which the round and rolling earth gives in its most thrilling form. (“A Defence of Planets,” The Defendant)

If a man saw the world upside down, with all the trees and towers hanging head downwards as in a pool one effect would be to emphasise the idea of dependence. There is a Latin and literal connection; for the word dependence only means hanging. [Latin: pen- dere, “to hang.”] It would make vivid the Scriptural text which says that God has hung the world upon nothing. If St. Francis had seen, in one of his strange dreams, the town of Assisi upside down, it need not have differed in a single detail from itself except in being entirely the other way round. But the point is this: that whereas to the normal eye the large masonry of its walls or the massive foundations of its watchtowers and its high citadel would make it seem safer and more permanent, the moment it was turned over the very same weight would make it seem more helpless and more in peril. It is but a symbol; but it happens to fit the psychological fact. St. Francis might love his little town as much as before, or more than before; but the nature of the love would be altered even in being increased. He might see and love every tile on the steep roofs or every bird on the battlements; but he would see them all in a new and divine light of eternal danger and dependence. Instead of being merely proud of his strong city because it could not be moved, he would be thankful to God Almighty that it had not been dropped; he would be thankful to God for not dropping the whole cosmos like a vast crystal to be shattered into falling stars. Perhaps St. Peter saw the world so, when he was crucified head downwards. (“Le Jongleur de Dieu,” St. Francis of Assisi)

Job 29:15. I was an eye to the blind, and a foot to the lame.

When a paper announces, “Listening-in to the Launching of a Ship,” it might just as well talk about “Smelling a Famous Statue,” or “Special Seats to View the Taste of Garlic.” It is simply a comic contradiction or inversion of the five senses, not to say the five wits. To listen to the few confused and accidental noises that accompany a great visual spectacle must be about as satisfactory as shutting your eyes and smelling all the oil-paints of the Royal Academy. On the other hand, the more modest plea is a perfectly just and reasonable plea. It is really true that Broadcasting can be used to bring pleasure to those who are hampered in their ordinary movements by age and sickness; and the duty of bringing that pleasure, so far from being merely a modern scientific fad, ought to be recognised as a branch of the very ancient mission of human charity. It belongs to the spirit so nobly noted in one of the oldest books in the world: “Eyes was I to the blind and feet to the lame”; and there is no man in that religious tradition who will say a word against it. (Illustrated London News, May 7, 1927)
Consider the following:

1. It is no part of the normal function of the State to teach.

2. The State is entitled to see that citizens receive due education sufficient to enable them to discharge the duties of citizenship in its various degrees.

3. The State ought, therefore, to encourage every form of sound educational endeavour, and may take means to safeguard the efficiency of education.

4. To parents whose economic means are insufficient to pay for the education of their children, it is the duty of the State to furnish the necessary means, providing from the common funds arising out of the taxation of the whole community. But in so doing the State must not interfere with parental responsibility, nor hamper the reasonable liberty of parents in their choice of a school for their children. Above all, where the people are not all of one creed, there must be no differentiation on the ground of religion.

5. Where there is need of greater school accommodation, the State may, in default of other agencies, intervene to supply it; but it may do so only in default of, and in substitution for, and to the extent of, the responsibility of the parents of the children who need this accommodation.

6. The teacher is always acting in loco parentis ["in the place of the parent"], never in loco civitas ["in the place of the state"], though the State to safeguard its citizenship may take reasonable care to see that teachers are efficient.

7. Thus a teacher never is and never can be a civil servant, and should never regard himself or allow himself to be so regarded. Whatever authority he may possess to teach and control children, and to claim their respect and obedience, comes to him from God, through the parents, and not through the State, except in so far as the State is acting on behalf of the parents.

Fr. Vincent McNabb, the great Dominican and Distributist, said that this “ecclesiastical manifesto … ventures to challenge the first principles of educational State-supremacy.” He called the statement one of the most important social documents of the 20th century, and yet not only did the general press ignore it, the Catholic press ignored it. And it has been ignored since. It’s time to stop ignoring it and start promoting it.

The reason we may have been hesitant to do so is that we find ourselves up against the juggernaut of public education, which is perhaps the largest and most powerful force in our society. It has shaped the modern world more than any other influence and is directly connected to the crisis that is causing our country to crumble.
public education is necessarily devoid of religion, and in not being able to teach the ultimate meaning of things, the basis of morality, and the foundational principles of our civilization, we have effectively emptied the minds of our young people. They don’t know how to think. They don’t know how to use reason. They cannot tell right from wrong. They have only been trained to react to stimuli that barely startles them. The only thing they have in common are some unnatural political and social ideas that make them angry about something. What they don’t have in common is common sense.

Catholic parents have to understand that the public school system is their enemy. And to the extent that Catholic schools consider themselves merely competition for public schools rather than a fundamental and radical alternative, to the extent that Catholic schools are aping the public school curricula, mimicking the latest pedagogical trends, and succumbing to the dictates of not just the Department of Education but all the departments of education that are handing out degrees and establishing the decrees, those Catholic schools are fraternizing with the enemy.

The common criticism against Distributism is that it is not practical; how do you implement it? Well, the first thing you do is pull your children out of the public schools. And if you don’t find the school that serves you as a parent, then you start one. And then you will start to change the world.

Invite Mr. Chesterton to your Parish or School

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God and Literature

Dear Sir,
In a recent article, Mr. Chesterton has made an unscrupulous attack on Atheism, though for some reason he has preferred to stick it into the middle of an article stuffed with all sorts of strange nonsense about literature. What Mr. Chesterton ought to have said is that the defiance of God, the criticism of God, or ridiculing God, can only exist so long as men believe in God.

Signed,
The Freethinker

Dear Sir,
That is also, as it happens, exactly what Mr. Chesterton said, and all that Mr. Chesterton is very much gratified to learn that it is also what he ought to have said. But Mr. Chesterton also said a lot more, on literary and psychological matters of the moment, in which he happens to be interested; and he is now mildly interested in the fact that The Freethinker is not in the least interested in them. The atheist is not interested in anything except attacks on atheism.

Your friend,
G.K. Chesterton
(G.K.'s Weekly, Feb. 18, 1933)

Dear Mr. Chesterton,
We cannot underestimate the greatness of England's first Poet Laureate, John Dryden. We have no reason to doubt the sincerity of Dryden's conversion to Roman Catholicism; but, after all, in the case of so great a man as Dryden, does the question matter very much?

Signed,
Professor of English Literature

Dear Professor,
So far as I understand the argument as an argument, it is this, if John Dryden had been born half-witted, or if he had been a dunce and a dull fellow entirely insignificant in the intellectual and social life of his time—then it would have been frightfully and sensationally important to know whether he was or was not sincere, with a soul-searching sincerity, in his intellectual acceptance of the complete Catholic philosophy. But as he was not a dunce but a poet, as he was not a half-wit but a wit, as he was not a mindless person but a very great mind, then it must be a matter of total indifference whether such an intellect can accept such an intellectual philosophy. Dryden was so great a thinker that it does not matter what he thought; he was almost certainly in search of the truth, but he was so capable of searching for it that nobody can take any interest in whether he found it; and it is only in the case of a small man that we could take a great interest in the great truth that he thought he found. How, I ask you, do people get their minds into a tangle like that? How could a man be sincere in his Catholicism, and yet think himself superior to his Catholicism? How could his greatness be detached from anything so great as a belief in a universal order of life, death, and eternity; if he really had the greatness and really had the belief?

Your friend,
G.K. Chesterton
(G.K.'s Weekly, Aug. 24, 1933)

Dear Shaw,
I entirely agree, but my ruder humanitarianism would incline me to the ritual or formality of killing him first; but that is a matter of detail of procedure which Mr. Shaw and I can settle between us, as we stand leaning on our spades on some moonlight night in that strange private sepulchre. Around us would be the stately tombs of many philosophers, inscribed with neat and cutting epitaphs written by Mr. Shaw. We might, as I say, differ about preliminaries, I suggesting a previous execution, Mr. Shaw shrinking from it as inhumane and likely to arouse the reproaches of Mr. Salt, but we should be agreed about the burying business. The burial of an anti-egalitarian philosopher could not under any circumstances be called premature burial.

Your friend,
G.K. Chesterton
(Daily News, Dec. 10, 1904)
For some time past British society has been brightened by bishops who believe in Darwin and biologists who do not believe in Darwin. I do not know which is the more amusing to watch—the aged Christians abandoning Christianity in the name of the nineteenth century science, or the young scientists abandoning nineteenth century science in the name of a new science that flatly contradicts it. But many are aware that the chief performer in this complicated comedy is the present Bishop of Birmingham, who has recently been saying some rather extraordinary things.

[E.W. Barnes (1874–1953), Anglican Bishop, Modernist, Eugenicist, who wrote “We need to get rid of the slovenly, vicious, idle wasters of the community.”]

In one sense there is nothing startling about them except their staleness; but their staleness is very startling. For instance, he began by saying that ethics are evolutionary, and that sin or wickedness is merely the remains of the beast left in man. That this is nonsense is not the most interesting thing about it.

The most interesting thing about it is that it was thought rather dull about sixty years ago, when it was said very seriously by Lord Tennyson. And after all, to do him justice, he said it in poetry. He said that man must “move upward, working out the brute, and let the ape and tiger die.”

It is surely obvious that the worst men of Tennyson’s own time were not in the least like either apes or tigers. No ape is a hypocrite—at least not in the sense in which a Victorian politician could be a hypocrite. No tiger is a swindler—least of all as a nineteenth century financier could be a swindler. It was the real vice of the Victorian culture that it did give protection to hypocrites and swindlers, while sternly insisting that they should not actually behave in public like apes and tigers.

Hence it was rare for a philanthropist to climb chattering to the top of a tree at one of Queen Victoria’s garden parties.

Hence it was but seldom that any gentleman at a reception in Buckingham Palace suddenly began to roar and rend, and bite big pieces out of other people. The tiger was dead—and the Victorians were so astonishingly ignorant or innocent that they supposed that the devil was dead because the tiger was dead.

Bishop Barnes of Birmingham is obviously the last of the Victorians.

I think the point is worth noting, because this strange stupidity, this piece of nineteenth century nonsense, still hangs about. Many still imagine that there is no sort of badness except beastliness. Whereas it is certain, if anything is certain, that the very worst things in man have never been known in any beast. No beast has spiritual pride; no beast sneers; no beast betrays; no beast has a conscious pleasure in defiling innocence; no beast understands the meaning of blasphemy. These spiritual evils belong to man because he is spiritual; and not because he is animal, even when he is.

The Bishop did indeed go on to say something about the sort of people that used to be called “naturals,” or “innocents”—the slightly defective. He cheerfully called them mud, and charitably observed that they were not fit for the Kingdom of God. Here, perhaps I might admit some kinship with the animal world; for some of the lower animals do abandon a sick creature or hunt a defective deer out of the herd.

From New York American, July 2, 1932.
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