

PREFACE

G. K. Chesterton
1874–1936

It is perhaps the chief suggestion of this book that Saint Francis walked the world like the Pardon of God. I mean that his appearance marked the moment when men could be reconciled not only to God but to nature and, most difficult of all, to themselves. For it marked the moment when all the stale paganism that had poisoned the ancient world was at last worked out of the social system. He opened the gates of the Dark Ages as of a prison of purgatory, where men had cleansed themselves as hermits in the desert or heroes in the barbarian wars. It was in fact his whole function to tell men to start afresh . . .

—G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Francis*

He stood six foot, three inches tall and weighed in at around three hundred pounds. He had a signature look that featured a distinctive mustache, a pair of glasses perched on his nose, all topped off with a cape, a jaunty hat, a walking stick, and as likely as not, a long cigar. His name was Gilbert Keith Chesterton, and he was one of the twentieth century's most remarkable Christian voices. He can count among his progeny a remarkable list of folks who count him a spiritual mentor, folks like C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, T. S. Eliot, Ronald Knox, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and Mahatma Gandhi. He's a man

whose name everyone seems to know, but nobody really knows why. And most likely, they know him because of something he wrote.

Whatever else may be said about G. K. Chesterton, he was first and foremost a writer. According to one estimate, he wrote one hundred books and contributed to hundreds more; he penned five novels, five plays, hundreds of poems, and two hundred short stories, including the popular tales of the priest-who-would-be-detective, Father Brown. He enjoyed considerable success from his books, but at heart he was a journalist. His output included thirteen years of weekly columns for the *Daily News* plus thirty years of weekly columns for the *Illustrated London News*. On top of this, he edited his own newspaper, *G. K.'s Weekly*. If you're counting, that's over four thousand newspaper essays.

Whatever he wrote about, whether politics, philosophy, history, or theology, his style was distinctive, always full of wit, humility, paradox, and wonder. Chesterton had full command of the medium, the utter respect of his audience—and most importantly, he controlled the conversation. His prominence and influence could perhaps be compared to that of a daily news anchor today—yet Chesterton wrote all his own material!

Most memorable, perhaps, is his humor. Chesterton found fun in life, and it shows in his writing. He loved telling stories on himself, and others enjoyed telling stories on him.

One famous story has him wiring his wife, saying, “Am at Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?” “Home,” she wired back. All who knew him, whether they agreed with his beliefs or not, found him fun-loving, engaging, fearless, confident without being judgmental, and most of all, a friend.

Chesterton was born in 1874, in the Kensington section of London, into a family who had for several generations operated a successful real estate business. Though his family saw that he was baptized into the

Church of England, their beliefs tended more toward Unitarian rather than traditional Christianity. Like other middle-class families of the time, their values were distinctly post-Christian. Anything perceived as traditional or classical was set aside in favor of progress, that is, whatever was new and modern. Traditional beliefs and institutions—religious, social, artistic, scientific, philosophical—were rejected in favor of personal experience, perceptions, thought, and belief. Good was no longer measured through external absolutes, but rather in what was new and modern and progressive. Whatever was new was also deemed good and beautiful.

Chesterton's childhood, though largely non-religious, was nonetheless a childhood that he remembered as filled with fun, a quality he enjoyed his entire life. He was educated at Saint Paul's, but rather than attend university, he enrolled in the Slade School of Art in 1892. It was here that he had his crisis of faith, or more accurately, his crisis of non-faith, which he later called "my period of madness." Oddly enough, this depression was triggered by the current school of painting, Impressionism, long considered a significant aspect of Modernism. Chesterton explains in his *Autobiography*,

I think there was a spiritual significance in Impressionism, in connection with this age as the age of skepticism. I mean that it illustrated skepticism in the sense of subjectivism Whatever may be the merits of this as a method of art, there is obviously something highly subjective and skeptical about it as a method of thought. It naturally lends itself to the metaphysical suggestion that things only exist as we perceive them, or that things do not exist at all.

As a remedy to the rampant skepticism with which he struggled, he began to read authors like Robert Browning, Robert Louis Stevenson,

and Walt Whitman, who affirmed existence and its basic goodness. He also began to nurture gratitude for life and a sense of wonder for the creation itself. To a culture immersed in skepticism, these ideas represented an almost radical approach to life, and for Chesterton, they became his healing.

In 1895, Chesterton left the Slade School, but a career in art was not for him. He went directly to Fleet Street to work as a journalist, where he honed his craft by writing weekly columns for the *Daily News*, developing his ideas and building an audience. Columnists were given considerable freedom in their choices of subjects, and Chesterton became one of the *Daily News*' star writers, a feat all the more remarkable because he challenged the modernism his readers held close, while endorsing traditional beliefs they held suspect.

Chesterton's journey toward faith took another major turn in 1896, when he met Frances Blogg, who would become his wife. Frances was a devout Anglican, and by the time of their marriage in 1901, Chesterton had journeyed away from his few remaining Unitarian beliefs toward Anglicanism. Though moving into Christianity, he was acutely aware of the weaknesses in the Anglican communion, specifically its unwillingness to stand against modernism.

Ultimately, Chesterton's journey led him through the Anglo-Catholic tradition and on to Rome; he was received into the Catholic Church in 1922, after many years of struggle, both within himself and also with his family, especially his wife, Frances. For Chesterton, the move was a natural culmination of a life spent upholding Christian belief in the face of corrosive modern thought and culture. Indeed, for him the Catholic Church was orthodoxy, and other churches, especially the Church of England, were not.

A few years later, Frances joined the Roman Church as well, much to Chesterton's joy. The two never had children, but they were a team who enjoyed and esteemed one another. Frances above all kept his life

in order, and served as his spiritual barometer and guide, as well as his chief literary critic. Their marriage lasted thirty-five years, until his death in 1936.

In contrast to many writers who are content to let their published words be the end of the story, Chesterton found life exciting. He was not afraid to confront, whether in print or in person. He debated the noted intellectuals of the day, men like George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, and Clarence Darrow. He was one of the founding members and first president of London's Detection Club, a group that included mystery greats like Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Freeman Wills Crofts, and Ronald Knox. He was an enthusiastic traveler, along with Frances, visiting Jerusalem (Palestine), the Continent, and North America.

Chesterton's voice is still powerful, still fresh, still relevant. Two world wars, nuclear weapons, the Cold War, and countless other conflicts, genocides, epidemics, and social upheavals should have laid to rest by now the humanistic theology that Chesterton confronted his entire career, but like kudzu, it seems never to go away. What Chesterton deplored in the Church of England—specifically their willingness to bend doctrine, to abandon orthodoxy—is evident still today. And though modernity may have been superseded by the postmodern, every aspect of Western culture and life today is drenched in the residual legacy of skepticism, materialism, relativism, and socialism—including, of course, the Church itself.

Chesterton's works still enjoy a loyal and enthusiastic readership. *Orthodoxy*, *Heresy*, and *The Everlasting Man* remain his most essential religious titles. His Father Brown mysteries are considered classics, even making the enviable transition from print into PBS mystery programs. And his biographies of Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Francis of Assisi provide a singular perspective on two men who exerted profound influence on Christian thought and practice.

Written soon after his baptism into the Roman Church, *Saint Francis of Assisi* is Chesterton's compelling narrative the life of a humble man who was more legend than person in the minds of most, a loving examination of all the parts that made up the whole: Francis as soldier and warrior, visionary and builder, troubadour, poet, and mystic. That Chesterton was a fan is apparent. Just consider his lyrical descriptions of the saint:

He was a poet whose whole life was a poem. He was not so much a minstrel merely singing his own songs as a dramatist capable of acting the whole of his own play. The things he said were more imaginative than the things he wrote. The things he did were more imaginative than the things he said. (Chapter 6.)

Or this:

Saint Francis is the mirror of Christ rather as the moon is the mirror of the sun. The moon is much smaller than the sun, but it is also much nearer to us; and being less vivid it is more visible. Exactly in the same sense Saint Francis is nearer to us, and being a mere man like ourselves is in that sense more imaginable. (Chapter 8.)

Under Chesterton's masterful pen, Saint Francis becomes human. And it is in becoming human that he becomes a saint—that is, a man of God.