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**CHESTERTON**  
Y LA EVANGELIZACIÓN DE LA CULTURA

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**The Fiction of Chesterton**

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Social reform is primarily a religious work. To awaken and to preserve a religious sense of wonder is its most important task. To lose or to neglect the exercise of this faculty of awe and thanksgiving is the most serious weakness which can afflict a people. Even death may be interpreted in these terms. **"Death,"** Chesterton writes, **"is precisely the breakdown of our mortal powers of praise: that when we cease to wonder we die; that we have to be dipped once more into darkness, before we can see the sun once more."** (The Literature of Death, 16 March, 1901, p. 656.) The same is true of a society:

**"Unless we can make daybreak and daily bread and the creative secrets of labour interesting in themselves, there will fall on our civilization a fatigue, which is the one disease from which civilizations do not recover. So died the great Pagan civilization, of bread and circuses and forgetfulness of the household gods."** ("Seven Days' Hard," Listener, 31 January, 1934, p. 192)

Chesterton's Distributist programme of social reform represents an attempt to awaken such a sense of wonder. All his writings on the social question are efforts to teach his readers to see the religious meaning of ordinary life and ordinary people. **"If things deceive us,"** he writes in Thomas Aquinas, **"it is by being more real than they seem."** In his Autobiography, he reverses the title of a Yeats' play *Where There Is Nothing There Is God*, and explains that his own philosophy might be summarized in the remark that when there is anything there is God. (Autobiography, London, 1936, p. 150.) Chesterton's social thinking is based on the conviction that God, who is the ultimate reality, is present in human society and human history.

Although God's modes of presence are various, the central and most important mode is his presence in the Incarnation. It is in this context that one must interpret Chesterton's apparent romanticizing of the common man. His belief in a Distributist social order is derived not from illusions about the common man, but from a conviction that the ordinary man is sacred with a sacredness derived directly from the mystery of the Incarnation. **"The Incarnation,"** he writes in Thomas Aquinas, **"has become the central idea in our civilization."** (Thomas Aquinas, London, 1933, p. ) Over and over again, Chesterton returns to the importance of this doctrine. **"It is the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense and cannot see things as they are,"** Father Brown explains in one of his stories **"and all because you are frightened of four words: 'He was made man.'"** (The Oracle of the Dog," The Incredulity of Father Brown, London, 1966, p. ) The Incarnation of Christ brings about a radical reversal of human values. This reversal demands a radical new social order. In the words of Abbe Yves Denis,

**Man's metaphysical and moral value is to be found only within the sphere of his being and not of his having... the truly Christian, and therefore truly Human society is designed and built for its smallest and least-considered Members.** ("The Theological Background," The Chesterton Review, Vol. 8, No. 1, p.67.)

This truth becomes most evident in the family and in the small community. That is why the family and the Small community are of such importance in Chesterton's sociology. The ordinary human being is valued not for sentimental reasons, but because he is the clearest and most luminous sign of Christ's presence. The more weak and helpless the individual, the more radiant he is with the power of God. "**The basis of Christianity as well as of Democracy,**" he writes, "**is that man is sacred.**" (Vox Populi, Vox Dei, 16 March, 1905, p. ) And in the same essay, he quotes the text from St. Matthew's Gospel about the Church being founded on St. Peter who is the rock (Matthew 16:18) Chesterton interprets this text as meaning that Christianity is based on the ordinary man: "**the man chosen as the corner stone was a weak man, in other words he was an ordinary man.**" (Ibid.)

The doctrine of the Incarnation also explains Chesterton's insistence on the need for property. The dignity of the ordinary human being requires that he be able to exercise the liberty which is, in Chesterton's view, the highest gift of God. In an essay written for a book entitled "Have We Lost God" (London, 1933.), Chesterton writes that property is "**the essential insignia of freedom.**" (p.42) Man requires a sphere of action in which he can act creatively and freely. Without property, he is unable to exercise his own will and control his own business. Property provides the incarnational character which is essential to human liberty. In a talk to the students at the Heretics Club in Cambridge, Chesterton explained the religious meaning of such freedom. "**God desired**", Chesterton said, "**to make his creatures creative in their turn, responsible for the world they created.**" (The Future of Religion," Cambridge Daily News, 18 November, 1911, p. 13.) "**Liberty,**" Chesterton writes, "**was itself a supreme and sacred thing.**" (Ibid.) Property is therefore closely connected with the mystery of the Incarnation:

**Property is the sacramental solidification of liberty. Property is to liberty what arithmetic is to algebra, what art is to beauty or, if I may use the highest example what Christ is to God. It is an embodiment which is in some sense a limitation; as every Christmas carol contains the suggestion that the Incarnation itself is a sort of colossal limitation ... Liberty without property is aimlessness ... property is simply the achievement of its aim. It is narrow in the sense that all creation is narrow; as all art is limitation because it is selection. In this sense it is not unnatural that those Utopians who are communist in politics are generally pantheist in philosophy, while the Utopia of Christendom has been the Distributist State.** ("Prohibition and Property," New Witness, October 7, 1921, p. 198)

The Distributist programme, therefore, requires a change in man's material environment. The distribution of property is necessary in order to express the inner radiance of ordinary life and ordinary people. "**When things are simplified to single ownership,**" Chesterton writes, "**there is some tendency for them to be significant. What is the matter with modern towns and houses is not that they are not beautiful; but that they do not signify the people who live in them.**" ("The Artistic Side," G.K.'s Weekly, 29 November, 1930, p. 133) And again, in the same essay, he writes, "**beautiful things ought to mean beautiful things and the case for simpler conditions is that on the whole they do.**" (Ibid.)

But the ownership of property has another and even more important religious significance. Not only does it express the divine dignity of man, but it also teaches man other important theological truths. To explain the moral education which is provided by the ownership of property, Chesterton cites a Messianic Psalm which speaks of the royal king who wields power in his right hand. In this passage, Chesterton again identifies Christ with the ordinary man. He describes Distributism in terms of the shock which comes with **"a sharper contact with the making, the growing, and the handling of real objects."** (G.K.'S weekly, 16 March, 1933, p.24. See Psalm 45:4.)

**"There are,"** he writes, **"mysteries of material, and manual subtlety and mastery, which carry in themselves an entirely different moral education, liberating the mind from all recent mechanical and servile education; and suggesting the meaning of that mystical text which tells the master that his right hand shall teach him terrible thing.** (Ibid., P.24.)

Chesterton's social philosophy may, therefore, be summarized under two heading. The first is concerned with the recovery of the sense of God. The second is concerned with the consequences of the loss of God. In an early essay, which was first read as a paper to the Christian Social Union, Chesterton quotes the saying from the Book of Proverbs **"where there is no vision, the people perish."** (Proverbs ) He argues that the destiny of every society is determined by its peculiar religious vision or lack of vision. **"The people who follow wicked visions, fallacious visions, wrong visions, end in great disaster and terrible punishments, but the people who do not follow any vision at all do not exist or cannot exist for long."** ("The Citizen, Gentleman and the Savage," 30 March, 1905, p. ) To have the wrong vision is what Chesterton calls **"heresy"** or **"idolatry."** To have no vision is to be trapped in the private and subjective world of the self and its fantasies. To have a true vision is to discover God in the world of material things which God created.

A sense of dread at the possibility of a godless society provides an important element in Chesterton's social thinking. Here again the theme is Biblical. There is within every human being a weakness which makes it possible for him to forget God. Chesterton discusses this age-old problem with insights gained from the Book of Proverbs. He sees the Fool of the Book of Proverbs as the symbol of the man without God.

**The type is fierce and terrible; something almost like a demoniac... and this is Due to a really deep philosophical cause which the Bible also grasped, that he Does not, au fond, believe there is any right or wrong in things at all. He feels that his habits shall prevail over the habits of other animals. He has extinguished that magic-lantern in the brain by which we realize the many-coloured world without. The Fool hath said in his heart 'there is no God.'"** (Passage from G.K.'s Weekly in the possession of Mr. George Heseltine. See Psalm 14: 1)

Chesterton also quotes the Book of Proverbs in order to describe the "**indescribable idea of obstruction and obsession**" which is characteristic of the godless man and the godless society: "**Better had a bear robbed of her whelps meet a man [rather] than a Fool in his folly.**" (Proverbs 17:12.)

Distributism is, therefore, based partly at least, on the Biblical doctrine of original sin. One of the arguments for the distribution of property which occurs frequently in Chesterton's writings is the need to protect man from his own inner weakness. Chesterton's warnings about the dangers of wealth and power are closely connected with this theme. His fundamental criticism of Monopolistic Capitalism is that it isolates people within the prisons of their own egos. In a letter to the Nation magazine, he criticizes John D. Rockefeller as a voracious trust-magnate; "**Avarice**" he writes, "**is a sin of Christians; it is the ideal of individualist.**" (Nation, 3 July, 1909, p. 494.) In an article in the New Witness, he makes the same point and underlines the close connection between human greed and social injustice: "**Every man gets his economics from his religion. The heaven of the atheist makes the earth of the atheist, as much as the heaven of the saint makes the earth of the saint.**" ("The Ugliness of Utopia," New Witness, 9 December, 1921, p. 341.) Wealth, and the power which wealth brings make it possible for men to forget God. This is true even when the wealth and power belong to an entire people. Writing in 1918, in answer to a Guild Socialist Scheme for giving control of society to workers, Chesterton writes:

**"there happen to be some sins that go with power and prosperity. It is the basis of our arguments, therefore, that whoever holds power will have some motives for abusing it; and that the only safeguard is to see that power is not omnipotence. We must have in society other and varied elements that can resist tyranny even when society itself is the tyranny.**" ("The Peasants and the Guilds," 30 August, 1918, p.349.)

In the end, however, Distributism celebrates the presence of God far more than it warns about the dangers of godlessness. It is God's presence in the world which is the ultimate reality. Compared to God, human beings are of little consequence. All human value is derived from God. Chesterton quotes Isaiah in order to underline this truth. **In comparison to God**, he writes, human beings "**have something of the vagueness, the unreason, and the vagrancy of beasts that perish: 'it is he that sitteth above the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are grasshoppers.'**" ("Introduction" Book of Job, London, 1916, p.xv. See Isaiah) From this point of view the failure of Distributism and one sense of helplessness in the struggle against powerful foes are of little consequence. In fact, the hopelessness provides a paradoxical reason for hope. Chesterton's final confidence is in God rather than man. Whatever happens, God is the Lord of history, and He is able to direct human affairs and to protect the poor. Thus in an essay in the Daily News in which Chesterton comments about the arrogance of collectivist social reformer, he confesses his helplessness to combat such an attitude. But he does so by an appeal to God in the words of Scripture. Describing the modern social problem as the fiery furnace of the Book of Daniel, he writes "**and what shall we answer? I confess I can only answer... that if our God**

**be God he can deliver us out of the furnace, but if not, will not worship a golden image that such men have set up.**" ("The Schism in Social Reform," Daily News, 25 January, n.d.. See also Daniel 3:17 -18.)

Distributism does demand hard work and hard though. Chesterton is concerned with the training of his reader's power of vision so that he may **adopt "God's own viewpoint and see things in general, and man in particular, as God sees them."** (Abbe Yves Denis, "The Theological Background," The Chesterton Review, vol.8, no. 1, p.58.) Once that perspective is achieved, the Distributist Social Reform will follow. Yet neither the acquiring of this perspective, nor the implementing of the programme of reform based on it, is easy. To see the hidden virtue in ordinary humanity requires hard work: **"It is not"** Chesterton writes,

**a merely sentimental or even a merely emotional thing; as Blake said very truly, a tear is an intellectual thing. The Christian has to use his brain to see the hidden good of humanity; just as much as the detective has to use his brain to see the hidden evil of humanity... to see good is to see God; and seeing God is not a casual affair; a very paradoxical homily has even required for it a certain purity of heart.** (Listener, 4 January, 1933, p.29.)

The final outcome of the struggle for a more just society will depend on whether or not human beings turn to God for help. Chesterton is convinced that God does intervene in human history. He intervenes either to punish or to save. Chesterton's comments on the Russian Revolution are influenced by his conviction that events sometimes represent a judgment from God. **"Bolshevism is not justice,"** he writes, **"but it is judgment. It is not what we desire, but it is not far from what we deserve. Considered as a paradise, it is absurd, but considered as a deluge it has its serious and even its moral Side."** ("Starting Afresh," Is It a New World", August- September, 1920, Daily Telegraph, p. .) Such a revolution carries with it a stern moral warning. To those who hope to build a world without God and see themselves as leading humanity **"step by step to the New Jerusalem fitted with filtered water and electric lamps,"** Chesterton quotes what he calls a passage of dark irony from the prophet Amos: **"Woe unto you that you should desire the day of the Lord. Wherefore should you desire the day of the Lord" It is darkness and not light."** (Amos, 5:18)

Nonetheless, Chesterton's optimism remains unshaken. In another comment made at the beginning of the Russian Revolution, he refers to the New Testament parable that speaks of a faith which can move mountains. In this passage, he underlines with great force his belief that social reform will become possible as soon as ordinary human beings make use of the Divine power which is within them: It is not an accident that in speaking of the possibility (of radical social reform),

In 1927, when G. K. Chesterton was invited to give a lecture for the centenary of the University of London , he chose to speak on the subject of **"Culture and the Coming Peril"**. He defined

the future peril in a curious phrase: he called it **“standardisation by a low standard.”**

Seventy years later, the prophetic character of what he had to say about the ways in which a low standard can imperil a culture is obvious, for we live in the age in which his prophesy concerning a crisis in social and moral standards has been fulfilled. The nature of the crisis he predicted is made manifest in our daily lives in a hundred unmistakable ways which range from a loss of stability in family and religious life, to a debasement of both the urban and rural environment, and, most seriously of all, in a poisoning of the moral environment in which most people have to live. This consumerist ethos is fuelled by a pornographic popular culture which treats people as mere units in a system in which possessing and enjoying are the only interests. In such a world, the sense of the transcendent is weakened, or even destroyed, with the result that for the first time in history entire civilizations are living a life in which God has no place. 2

At a memorial service held in London “s Westminster Cathedral shortly after Chesterton’s death on St. Basil’s day (June 14, 1936). Ronald Knox spoke about the prophetic quality of his writing. **“He will almost certainly be remembered”**, Father Knox said, **“as a prophet in an age of false prophets”** Instances of Chesterton’s ability to describe a problem before it had fully developed are easy to cite. Those who live in a later and more dangerous phase of the crisis he predicted with such assurance should have no difficulty in recognizing the truth of what he had to say, even though his sayings must have seemed fantastically improbable to the people who first read them long ago in the newspapers and journals of a seemingly stable and at least nominally religious age. As early as February 18th, 1905, he wrote the following prediction in a newspaper column which was read chiefly by middle-class Liberal Nonconformist who would likely be convinced that the new century offered them the hope of continuing peace and limitless progress: **“The earnest freethinkers need not worry themselves so much about the persecutions of the past”**, Chesterton wrote, **“Before the Liberal idea is dead or triumphant, we shall see wars and persecutions the like of which the world has not seen, They need not reserve their tears their for the victims of Bonner or Claverhouse. They may weep for themselves and for their children”** In another article, published in an early issue of his own magazine, he made this comment about the exact nature of the coming crisis: **“The next great heresy is going to be simply an attack on morality; and especially on sexual morality... I say that the man who cannot see this cannot see the signs of the times; cannot see even the sky-signs in the street that are the new sort of signs in heaven. The madness of tomorrow is not in Moscow , but much more in Manhattan”** but most of what was in Broadway is already in Picadilly.

This prophetic quality in Chesterton’s writing gives it an unusual power and places him in the tradition of Carlyle and Ruskin and the other Victorian sages who wrote in order to teach a people who were bewildered by intellectual and social changes with which they could scarcely cope. In his valuable Introduction to a selection of Chesterton’s journalistic writings, *The Man Who Was Orthodox*, A. L. Maycock cites a passage from Ruskin in which that author says that for a hundred people who can feel there is only one who can think, and that for ten thousand who can think there is only one who can see. Applying this comment to both Ruskin himself and

to Chesterton, Maycock describes them as authors who possess a poet's gift, **"a rare power of intuition which is called in scripture the gift of wisdom, an immediate apprehension of truth that outstrips the exercise of reason, coming like a sudden blaze of light and with a quality of revelation"**. Maycock then goes on to provide a few examples from Chesterton's writings that possess this visionary quality. **"The meanest man is immortal and the mightiest movement is temporal, not to say temporary"**, and, on the subject of suffering, **"The King may be conferring a decoration when he pins the man on the cross, as much as when he pins the cross on the man"**, and again, on the connection between moral anarchy and modern bureaucratic state, **"When you break the big laws, you do not get liberty; you do not even get anarchy. You get the small laws."** Maycock's comment on this sort of writing provides an excellent summary of the aim which Chesterton sought to achieve in all his writing: **"A man might remember his first readings of such passages as decisive events in his life. They produce precisely that effect of shock or surprise which, as Chesterton repeatedly insisted, is necessary to awaken us to see things as they really are, to see the world with a proper astonishment and a proper gratitude"**.

Though the prophet as the man of letters was a familiar phenomenon in Victorian and Edwardian times, Chesterton differed from the other prophetic writers of his day by the nature of the teaching which he provided. It is difficult to describe this teaching briefly, but the quality which distinguishes it most sharply from that of the contemporary secular prophets such as H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw is its strong commitment to Christian orthodoxy. Even though much of his writing may seem at first to have no obvious religious content, everything he wrote was directed towards a strong defense of Catholic ideas. A convention had developed during the Victorian age that latterly figures should be silent in the subject of religion. Chesterton is most notable for the way in which he broke this convention. **"During the silence"**, he writes, **"at one time, it really did happen that numberless young men passed over from religion to irreligion. During the silence it has since happened that numberless young men passed back from irreligion to religion. I happened to be among them, and I believe that the time has come to talk about it."** So effective was his defense of orthodoxy that when he died, T.S. Elliot was able to assert that in time it was Chesterton's writing that has kept the Christian minority alive.

This defense of Christian orthodoxy was boldly directed at the evangelization of an entire culture. In his writings, Chesterton set out to interpret the whole of human life and human history in the light of the Gospels and of the Sacraments. He was interested not only in man's relation to God and his neighbor, but also in his relation to his surroundings and to the society in which he lived. Always fundamentally Catholic in his thinking, even during the many years when he was not yet in full communion with the church, he saw the Christian life as being essentially corporate. Consequently, he believed that it was of little use to evangelize individuals unless ways were also found for evangelizing the world in which individuals lived. With this sort of social theology, it is not surprising that he felt a strong sense of pastoral urgency. He saw his journalism as part of a mission to check the evolutionary materialism and theological liberalism which were becoming the dominant influences on the thinking of the people for whom he wrote.

To a large extent, his prophetic word was a warning directed towards a people who were gradually losing their hold on the Christian ideas which they had inherited, but which they had never really understood or valued. As John Coates points out, Chesterton realized that many of his readers were part of a highly valuable generation of newly and imperfect educated people who were no longer guided by any of the traditional sources of Christian wisdom, and who were absorbing uncritically the anti-religious ideas contained in the popular press of the day. Consequently there was a strange irony to his role as a spokesman for Christian orthodoxy in the popular press. Much of his writing appeared in the same newspapers which were helping to create the very problem which his writing sought to correct: at the same time, his readers were absorbing poison and the Chestertonian antidote for the poison.

But Chesterton was also conscious that the problem was not false ideas only, but one which also had to do with the loss of authority and moral direction. As early as 1904, in an article entitled **"The Patriotic Idea"**, he describes the symptoms of a serious cultural crisis: **"It is precisely from these things that we are suffering: from a loose journalism, from a vague geography, from an excitable smattering of everything, from an officious interest in everybody, from a loss of a strong national types, of a strong religious restraints, of the sense of memory and the fear of God."** In his Autobiography, there is another passage in which he describes the religious and philosophical confusion of English society at the time in which he was beginning his career as a journalist. In his description, he expresses his own sense of being called to perform a national mission in language which is explicitly biblical and prophetic: **"I have been granted, as it were, a sort of general view or vision of all that field of negation and groping and curiosity. And I saw pretty much what it all meant. There was no Theistic Church : there was no Ethical Societies; there were no New Religions. But I saw Israel scattered on the hills as sheep that have not a Shepherd."**

At the same time, his view of a religious crisis was not limited to his own country. As a Christian prophet, he saw connections between individual disorders and the loss of a unifying Catholic faith. He always wrote as a spokesman for this larger Christian community which extended in space far beyond the Edwardian age to an earlier age of faith in which people saw life as a whole. In his writings, he constantly reminds his readers of a religious perspective which made the assumptions and obsessions of the modern age seem grotesquely limited. In 1903, his controversy with Robert Blatchford, though he sketches many of the ideas which he would develop more fully five years later in his book *Orthodoxy*, he places his main emphasis on the absurd provincialism of modern secularism. **"The real question,"** he writes, **"is whether our little Oxford Street civilization is certain to be right and the rest of the world certain to be wrong. Mr. Blatchford think that the materialism of the nineteenth century Westerners one of their noble discoveries. I think it is as dull as their costs, as dirty as their streets, as ugly as their trousers, and as stupid as their industrial systems."** The spirit of the age which threatened to imprison moderns in their own era was Chesterton's real enemy, even though it had no obvious name. Consequently his work as a defender of orthodoxy was directed not only towards the instruction of individuals, but also more critically towards the changing of the

intellectual and moral atmosphere of a society. As Ronald Knox has rightly said, such an influence must be measured not only by its impact on a single mind here or there, but by the way in which it exercised a kind of hydraulic pressure on the thought of the age. The degree to which his work was successful in his own day is difficult to evaluate, but it must be seen as a bold effort but to alter the thinking of an entire people.

The impossibility of attaching a political label to Chesterton's views added to his effectiveness as a spokesman for Christian orthodoxy. His hostility to the conventional Conservative thought of his age is well known. In his view, the hideously ugly and unjust industrial society of his time was scarcely more positive. Long before he was dismissed from his possession as a weekly columnist for the Liberal Daily News in 1913, he had become a critic of shock liberal ideas which he dismissed as **"a mass of middle-class prejudices preserved throughout Europe by the bourgeois freemasons, from which even Bolshevism was an escape into liberty"**. His criticism of Socialism was even more severe, and in 1908, his contribution to debate conducted in the pages of the influential Socialist weekly The New Age was entitled, "Why I am Not a Socialist"; his oddly named Distributist philosophy was first presented in his 1910 book "What's Wrong With the World", and more systematically, in his 1927 book, "The Outline of Sanity", a work that was serialized in G.K.'s Weekly, the magazine in which he presented a running commentary on the political and social life of his time from 1925 until his death in the spring of 1936.

Chesterton's orthodox theology also clarifies everything that is puzzling in his political thought. At first, the two great themes underlying his political writing would appear to be contradictory. On one hand, his cheerful confidence in the ability of ordinary human beings to manage their own lives without interference from outside experts and government officials seems to imply a Liberal's belief in the essential goodness of human nature. On the other hand, his ridicule of H.G. Wells and other progressive thinkers for their failure to take into account what he calls **"the permanent possibility of selfishness that comes with the mere possession off a self"** would seem to imply a Tory distrust of human nature, especially since he insists that a belief in original sin is the test of political common sense and the starting point for all sound political thinking. But his theological views reconcile the apparent contradiction. The confidence in human nature is not that of a sentimental populist who idealizes ordinary people, but the religious conviction of a theologian who understands that the lives of ordinary people are sacred because they are mystical re-enactments of the Gospel story, and that every human being must be revered as a sacramental sign of the Incarnate Word of God. At the same time, this positive Christian attitude towards human nature is not contradicted by a strong belief in the reality of moral evil. Just as human beings can become instruments of God, there is always a possibility that they can become instruments of the evil one. Chesterton always insisted that his belief in the existence of the devil enabled him to maintain his confidence in human beings,, since such a belief enabled him to understand that the human agents of wrong- doing might themselves be tortured and tormented victims of an evil force acting through them.

How a journalism which seeks to avoid direct religious comment can nevertheless be religious is perhaps the best of Chestertonian paradoxes. T.S. Elliot once said though Chesterton was in his day the leading spokesman for Catholic social and political ideas, he concealed his revolutionary purposes behind a Johnsonian fancy-dress, in much the same way as President Sunday concealed his revolutionary designs by holding the meeting of his fellow anarchist conspirers on an open balcony in Leicester Square, but this tactic was not dishonest.

The religious tradition to which Chesterton belonged both as an Anglican and as a Catholic was a sacramental tradition. According to this tradition, the Incarnation of Christ gave a special value to ordinary life and ordinary material things. Christ Himself was the sacrament of God, a human being who made the invisible God visible. The Incarnation is extended throughout history by means of the Church, the sacramental community in which Christ continues the work of salvation through His word and sacraments. ***“The Incarnation”***, Chesterton writes in his book about Saint Thomas Aquinas, ***“has become the idea that is central to our civilisation.”*** More than that, since the life of each believer who is baptized is a mystical re-enactment of the Gospel story, ordinary human life is also sacramental Chesterton calls it a profane story with a sacred meaning. ***“All men”***, he writes, ***“are allegories, puzzles, earthly stories with heavenly meanings.”*** The reference to a story is significant, because the hidden presence of God in a world from which He seems absent gives order and design to events which are experienced as being accidental and contingent. God is, as it were, a cosmic novelist and human beings characters in an on-going novel which He writes. Everything that happens is therefore significant, even though it is difficult to know the exact significance of any particular event. Like creation, human life is a unified whole, and distinctions between the sacred and the profane are absurd, because even most ordinary material thing is part of a mysterious text which has a sacred meaning even though its meaning cannot be understood: what Chesterton calls ***“a living alphabet which man can see but cannot spell; a hieroglyphic in the highest and most ancient sense, that men cannot read it, but do not really that it is holy.”***

The sacramental principle throws light on everything Chesterton did as a spokesman for Catholic Christianity. The interest in ordinary material things and in ordinary human beings is another expression of his sacramental viewpoint. Even simplest human experience, a material object possesses sacramental power: ***“a man may be recalled to the visions of boyhood more vividly by smelling peppermint than by reading about adolescence.”*** For Chesterton, every material thing is a sacred sign: ***“Every stone or flower,”*** he writes, ***“is a hieroglyphic of which we must have lost the key.”*** It is always through contact with a particular material thing that a human being will make contact with the religious mysteries: ***“You do not get nearer to the ultimate mysteries,”*** Chesterton writes, ***“by reaching out for the abstract and infinite. On the contrary, it is always the particular thing that is closest to the thing that passes understanding.”*** . But when the sacramental principle has to do with the human person, the central Christian Mystery is reached. It is not sentimental populism which makes Chesterton reverence ordinary human beings; it is the recognition that they are sacramental signs of an

Incarnate God. The same idea explains his preoccupation with small communities. In such communities, and especially in the small community called the family, Christ is encountered.

Even Chesterton's oblique approach to religious subjects in his writings is connected to his belief in a sacramental universe. The love of allegory and symbolic utterance, and the belief that the deepest truths can be told only in parable, are appropriate for a writer who interprets life itself as a re-enactment of the one Gospel story. **"I doubt,"** remarks a character in one of his novels, **"whether any of our action is really any thing but an allegory. I doubt whether any truth can be told except in parable."** Similarly, his belief in the sacramental principle also explains better his concern for an inwardly confused and vulnerable people who are in danger of losing a rich religious tradition they have never really understood. Above all, the sacramental idea explains the strange phenomenon that the most defender of Orthodoxy wrote relatively little about religious subjects and concerned himself chiefly with the side of life which most people would regard as profane.

Always, he insists on the religious significance of material things. For him, one of the signs of orthodox belief is a respect the material side of life, just as a preoccupation with a disembodied spirituality is a sign of the heterodox. As he puts it in his usual incisive way: the work of God is material; the work of the devil is a spiritual work. Everywhere in his journalism, he refers to a belief in the Incarnation as the test of orthodox faith. A typical example of this criticism occurs in an amusing essay about Mrs. Baker Eddy's Christian Science group and what he calls **"the theology of Christmas presents"**. He writes **"A little while ago I saw a statement by Mrs. Eddy on this subject, in which she said that she did not give presents in a gross, sensuous, terrestrial sense, but still and thought about Truth and Purity till all her friends were much better for it. Now I do not say that this plan is either superstitious or impossible and no doubt it has an economic charm. I say it is un-Christian in the same solid and prosaic sense that playing a tune backwards is unmusical or saying "ain"t is ungrammatical. I do not know that there is any Scriptural text or Church Council that condemns Mrs. Eddy's theory of Christmas present; but Christianity condemns it, as soldiering condemns running away. The two attitudes are antagonistic not only in their thought, but in their state of soul before they ever begin to think. The idea of embodying goodwill that is, of putting it into a body is the huge and primal idea of the Incarnation. A gift of God that can be seen and touched is the whole point of the epigram of the creed. Christ Himself was a Christmas present. The note of material Christmas presents is struck even before He is born in the first movements of the sages and the star. The Three Kings came to Bethlehem bringing gold, frank incense and myrrh. If they had only brought Truth and Purity and Love, there would have been no Christian art and no Christian civilisation,"**

Like George MacDonald, from when he first learnt the sacramental view of life which altered his whole existence, he developed an incarnational spirituality which is fundamentally mystical. Whatever the variety of his topics, his underlying topic is always the same: the presence of the Incarnate God in created being. This is fundamentally orthodox truth, and Chesterton never

tires of repeating it. As Father Noel O'Donoghue says, Chesterton's angel **"saw the face of God in every atom of creation."**

Admirers of Chesterton are fond of recalling Etienne Gilson's description of him as **"one of the deepest thinkers that ever lived."** But something else that Gilson said about him is less well known, and even more illuminating as a description of his prophetic role as a defender of orthodox Catholic ideas. In an unpublished letter, written in 1966, Gilson recalled his meeting Chesterton in Toronto thirty years earlier, and encouraged an English priest to continue collecting Chesterton's uncollected writings: **"You are absolutely right, in collecting every bit and parcel of G.K.'s literary production,"** Gilson wrote, **"Everything which I heard him say was an intellectual revelation. Here in Toronto we value him, first of all as a theologian."**