

## THE THING

“There is one thing in this world which is different from all other. It has a personality and a force. It is recognised and, (when recognised) most violently loved or hated. It is the Catholic Church...”

Hilaire Belloc <sup>1</sup>

Ninety years ago G K Chesterton published a collection of 35 essays in a book called *The Thing* (Sheed & Ward, London, 1929). The book is, under one respect, dated but under another not so: it is dated because it addressed the intellectual positions of the personalities of his day: Dean Inge, H G Wells, Sir Arthur Keith, Arnold Bennett, Bertrand Russell, Irving Babbitt, Bishop Barnes of Birmingham, et al.; it is not dated because the issues they raised are alive today. The appalling Bishop Barnes’ contempt for St Francis of Assisi in Chesterton’s day, for instance, is paralleled by the equally appalling Christopher Hitchens’ contempt for Mother Teresa in our own.

Chesterton’s arguments reduce to this: Are there intellectual standards, *absolute*, which men must acknowledge, or are there not? Are there moral standards, *absolute*, to which men must conform their lives, or are there not? If there are such standards—and there are—there is an enduring entity to which one may look to champion their cause in every age.

Chesterton presents many arguments in support of his position. Here is one that addresses the complaint against the Church for accepting commitment to priestly vows.

What are we to say to those who would pit patriotism or pagan citizenship against the Church on that issue? They conscript by violence boys of eighteen, they applaud volunteers of sixteen for saying they are eighteen, they throw them by thousands into a huge furnace and torture-chamber... and kill them like flies by the million before they have begun to live. That is what... their Protestant, practical, sensible, secular society does. And after that they have the astounding impudence to... complain of us, because in dealing with a small minority of specialists, we allow a man finally to choose a charitable and peaceful life, not only long after he is twenty-one, but when he is well on towards thirty, and after he has had about ten years to think quietly whether he will or not! (‘A Simple Thought’, p. 101 at 105)

Here is a comment that sheds light on the question that has troubled us since Pope Paul VI and the bishops of the Second Vatican Council asserted the existence of a right to ‘religious freedom’.

It is quite obvious that there are three or four philosophies or views of life possible to reasonable men; and to a great extent these are embodied in the great religions or in the wide field of irreligion. There is the atheist, the materialist or monist or whatever he calls himself, who believes that all is ultimately material, and that all that is material is mechanical. That is emphatically a view of life; not a very bright or breezy view, but one into which it is quite possible to fit many facts of existence. Then there is the normal man with the natural religion, which accepts the general idea that the world has a design and therefore a designer; but feels the Architect of the Universe to be inscrutable and remote, as remote from men as from microbes. That sort of theism is perfectly sane; and is really the ancient basis of the solid if somewhat stagnant sanity of Islam. There is again the man who feels the burden of life so bitterly that he wishes to renounce all desire and all division, and rejoin a sort of spiritual unity and peace from

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Dean Inge, *Essays of a Catholic*, London, 1931.

which (as he thinks) our separate selves should never have broken away. That is the mood answered by Buddhism and by many metaphysicians and mystics. Then there is a fourth sort of man, sometimes called a mystic and perhaps more properly to be called a poet; in practice he can very often be called a pagan. His position is this; it is a twilight world and we know not where it ends. If we do not know enough for monotheism, neither do we know enough for monism. There may be a borderland and world beyond; but we can only catch hints of it as they come; we may meet a nymph in the forest; we may see the fairies on the mountains. We do not know enough about the natural to *deny* the preternatural. That was, in ancient times, the healthiest aspect of Paganism. That is, in modern times, the rational part of Spiritualism. All these are possible as general views of life; and there is a [last] that is at least equally possible, though certainly more positive.

The whole point of this last position might be expressed in the line of M. Cammaerts' beautiful little poem about bluebells; *le ciel est tombé par terre*. Heaven has *descended* into the world of matter; the supreme spiritual power is miraculously with the bodies and souls of men. It blesses all the five senses; as the senses of the baby are blessed at a Catholic christening. It blesses even material gifts and keepsakes, as with relics or rosaries. It works through water or oil or bread and wine. Now that sort of mystical materialism may please or displease the Dean [of St Paul's; Dean Inge], or anybody else. But I cannot for the life of me understand why the Dean, or anybody else, does not see that the Incarnation is as much a part of that idea as the Mass; and that the Mass is as much a part of that idea as the Incarnation. A Puritan may think it blasphemous that God should become a wafer. A Moslem thinks it blasphemous that God should become a workman in Galilee. And he is perfectly right, from his point of view; and given his primary principle. But if the Moslem has a principle, the Protestant has only a prejudice. That is, he has only a fragment; a relic; a superstition. ('The Protestant Superstitions', p.152 at 155-6)

Here is a third comment which touches on something with which we are only too familiar.

[A]n even worse example, I think, than the cheapening of the word *charity* is the newspaper cheapening of the word *courage*... Any man living in complete luxury and security who chooses to write a play or a novel which causes a flutter and exchange of compliments in Chelsea and Chiswick and a faint thrill in Streatham and Surbiton, is described as "daring", though nobody on earth knows what danger it is that he dares. I speak, of course, of terrestrial dangers; or the only sort of dangers he believes in. To be extravagantly flattered by everybody he considers enlightened, and rather feebly rebuked by everybody he considers dated and dead, does not seem so appalling a peril that a man should be stared at as an heroic warrior and militant martyr because he has had the strength to endure it.

The dramatic critic of a Sunday paper, a little while ago, lashed himself into a frenzy of admiration for the "courage" of some dismal and dirty play or other because it represented a soldier as raving like a hysterical woman against the cruelty of those who had expected him to defend his country. It may be amusing that his idea of courage should be a defence of cowardice. But it is the sort of defence of it that we have heard ten thousand times during the reaction after the War; and the courage required to utter it is exactly as great as the cant and convention of the moment: such trifles as the absurdity of marriage or the sympathetic personality of Judas Iscariot. These things have become quite commonplace; but they still pretend to be courageous. So sham soldiers have been known to swagger about in uniform when the war was over. ('On Courage and Independence', p. 158-9)

The worst instance of the abuse of the word *courage* in our own time was made by an infamous journalist in a claim in *The Australian* newspaper some years ago that abortionists, those systematic killers of the innocent unborn, were "heroes".

Here is a fourth in which Chesterton contrasts the disparate attacks of the Dean of St Paul's (Dean Inge) and the liberal (or broad-church) Anglican Bishop of Birmingham, Ernest Barnes, on the Church.

[T]hey have a philosophy in common; and it would a cheap simplification to call it Materialism. Indeed, we should be almost as shallow in talking about Materialism as they are in talking about Magic. The truth is that the strange bigotry, which leads the Bishop to scream and rail at all sacramentalism as Magic, is in its inmost essence the very reverse of Materialism. Indeed it is nothing half so healthy as Materialism. The root of this prejudice is not so much a trust in matter as a sort of horror of matter. The man of this philosophy is always asking that worship shall be wholly spiritual, or even wholly intellectual; because he does really feel a disgust at the idea of spiritual things having a body and a solid form. It probably does really give him a mystical shudder to suppose that God can become as bread and wine; though I never understood why it should not give the same shudder to say that God could become flesh and blood. But whether or no these thinkers are logical in their philosophy, I think this is their philosophy. It has a very long history and an ancient name. It is not Materialist but Manichee.

Indeed the Dean uttered an unconscious truth when he said the sacramentalists must be 'natural idolaters'. He shrinks from it not only because it is idolatrous, but also because it is natural. He cannot bear to think how natural is the craving for the supernatural. He cannot tolerate the idea of it actually working through the elements of nature. Unconsciously, no doubt, but very stubbornly, that sort of intellectual does feel that our souls may belong to God, but our bodies only to the devil or the beast. That Manichean horror of matter is the only intelligent reason for any such sweeping refusal of the supernatural and sacramental wonders... (Inge versus Barnes, pp. 200-1.

---

The Catholic Church, the mysterious entity that endures century after century—though her enemies flourish and fail; appear, only soon to disappear; advance reasons against her which they later contradict; against which, notwithstanding lies and fraud, murder and mayhem (as often from within as from without), the gates of Hell have yet to prevail—it was to *this* entity, I believe, Francis Thompson alluded as 'the many-splendoured thing' in his poem.

The angels keep their ancient places—  
Turn but a stone and start a wing!  
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces,  
That miss the many-splendoured thing.<sup>2</sup>

Catholics have a mnemonic they apply to Protestants – *ABC* – 'anything but Catholic', for Protestants are driven not by *adherence* to something but by *rejection* of something, the one thing established on earth for their sanctification and salvation, the "one thing in this world different from all other", the one divine thing in this tawdry world, splendid in its sacraments that attends the believer throughout his life, in the Gifts of the Holy Spirit accorded him, in the beatitudes and virtues nourished in him, each grounded in the Holy Eucharist, the *magnum mysterium*, where mysteriously, Christ makes Himself food for their souls.

Michael Baker

June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023—*Sacred Heart of Jesus* - [Originally published March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020]

---

<sup>2</sup> *In No Strange Land*, 1907