



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of October 2, 2015,  
Feast of the Holy guardian Angels

**Dear Friends,**

“**I**T has often been rightly said, very truly, that religion is the thing that makes the ordinary man feel extraordinary; it is an equally important truth that religion is the thing that makes the extraordinary man feel ordinary.” In writing this, Gilbert Keith Chesterton was unwittingly describing himself. A powerful literary genius, this writer arrived at the Catholic faith at the end of a humble and honest path that led him to admire the goodness of God in all things, as well as man’s capacity to know Him.

G.K. Chesterton was born in London on May 29, 1874. One month later, he was baptised in the Anglican Church. As a schoolboy, he seemed rather mediocre, even a bit simple and distracted, to the point that his fellow students vied with one another in making fun of him. One of his classmates would later say: “We felt that he was seeking God.” However, he himself would confess, “I was a pagan at the age of twelve, and a complete agnostic by the age of sixteen.” He went through a crisis of skepticism, to the point of submitting to the fascination of satanism, finally considering suicide. In spite of everything, a profound sense of wonder, to which was joined gratitude for the good of existence, grew within him bit by bit. “I hung on to religion by the thin thread of gratitude.”

## **A strong attraction**

**F**rom 1892 to 1895, Gilbert studied art at the University of London. But feeling a strong attraction to writing, he passionately threw himself into journalism. In 1900, he published a collection of poems, titled *The Wild Knight*, in which he pleaded for concepts that modernity, already in his day, was ridiculing: patriotism, humility, veneration of the child... Chesterton captivated his readers with his fertile imagination, his lively style, his insatiable interest in the world, and above all, with his stunning ability to perceive the profound meaning of things and attitudes that familiarization ran the risk of trivializing. He cast a new light on familiar realities, shook off the dust of habit, and saw ancient things in the splendor of newness.

Gilbert was a physically imposing man: 6 foot 4 and 287 pounds, a cigar in his mouth, draped in a cape, wearing a crumpled hat and carrying a swordstick.



G.K. Chesterton

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In 1901, he married Frances Blogg. They would not have children. Always absorbed in his thoughts, he would remain fairly distracted throughout his life. One day he sent a telegram to his wife: “Am at Market Harborough. Where should I be?” The terse response arrived: “Home!” Drawn to and passionate about the beauties of creation, he nevertheless realized that they could never fully satisfy his heart. Hoping to find true happiness, he sought to unite affection for the good things of this world with a detachment that left him free. He would find this harmony only in Christianity. He explained his journey in his book *Orthodoxy*, published in 1908. Three years earlier, he had published *Heretics*, a work in which he noted that, each time a new “prophet” presents a new doctrine, under examination this doctrine reveals itself to hold nothing new at all. Heresy consists in isolating a truth; the heretic prefers a single truth he likes over the whole truth. But since only the whole truth makes one free, heresy proves to be a slavery rather than a liberation. In a homily of December 5, 2013, Pope Francis evoked these words from Chesterton: “A heresy is a truth gone mad.” And the Holy Father observed, “When Christian words lack Christ, they begin to head down the road of madness”. (*Osservatore Romano English language*, December 12, 2013).

Chesterton’s extraordinary genius did not keep him from remaining profoundly humble. Once day, a major

newspaper once sent out an inquiry to famous authors, asking the question, "What's wrong with the world today?" After hesitating a long time, Gilbert replied: "Dear Sir: Regarding your article 'What's Wrong with the World?' I am. Yours truly." He thought, in fact, that one must "beware of no man more than yourself; we carry our worst enemies within us." Chesterton drew from humility a great capacity to see reality with the eyes of a child. Modern inventions did not make him lose his common sense, or his love for simple things. "From the beginning, I was stunned by the stupendous marvel of existence—by the miracle of sunlight through a window, by the miracle of people walking on legs through the streets, by the miracle of people talking to each other".

In 1914, Chesterton suffered a serious health crisis that sent him to bed for several months. At the end of the Great War, another trial struck his heart—his brother Cecil died in a military hospital in France. Out of fidelity to his memory, Gilbert continued to edit the newspaper his beloved brother had founded. After the war, he became the leader of the "Distributist" movement, which holds that the means of production should be spread as widely as possible, rather than being centralized under the control of the state, a few individuals, or corporations.

### **The motive for conversion**

In the area of religion, Chesterton perceived ever more clearly "there is one Church exactly as there is one universe." In 1922, he entered the Catholic Church. His wife would follow him four years later. When he was asked why he had converted, he laconically replied, "To get rid of my sins." Dom Ignatius Rice, who had received his abjuration, stated simply that he became Catholic because of the efficacious power the Church has over sin. This desire to receive forgiveness for one's sins implies recognition of the reality of sin, but also belief in the existence of original sin. For Chesterton, the doctrine of original sin, rather than being depressing, was on the contrary the source of great consolation: "It holds that we have misused a good world, and not merely been entrapped into a bad one. It refers evil back to the wrong use of the will, and thus declares that it can eventually be righted by the right use of the will. Every other creed is some form of surrender to fate." These words are in keeping with the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC).

"Because creation comes forth from God's goodness, it shares in that goodness—*And God saw that it was good... very good* (Gen. 1:4 and ff.) ... On many occasions the Church has had to defend the goodness of creation, including that of the physical world. ... Following St. Paul, the Church has always taught that the overwhelming misery which oppresses men and their inclination toward evil and death cannot be understood

apart from their connection with Adam's sin... The doctrine of original sin, closely connected with that of redemption by Christ, provides lucid discernment of man's situation and activity in the world. By our first parents' sin, the devil has acquired a certain domination over man, even though man remains free. ... Ignorance of the fact that man has a wounded nature inclined to evil gives rise to serious errors in the areas of education, politics, social action, and morals." (CCC, nos. 299, 403, 407) In fact, because of original sin and its consequences, particularly the triple concupiscence, man is inclined to evil and is in need of a redeemer. JESUS CHRIST, the Son of God, has redeemed sinful humanity through His death on the Cross, but each soul's actual reconciliation with God is achieved through the sacraments. If Baptism remits original sin and all other sins committed before the reception of Baptism, the sacrament of Penance, or Confession, remits the sins committed after Baptism. Administration of this sacrament is entrusted to priests, who receive the power to remit all sins. Divine mercy knows no bounds, and no one should ever be discouraged in considering one's sins, however grave they may be. If we approach this sacrament with the necessary dispositions (contrition, the desire to amend and do penance, and the confession of the sins), we are certain to receive God's forgiveness. It is a sign of the unfathomable wisdom of God, who willed that sins be remitted by a man, that one is able to hear from the mouth of another man, a sinner like ourselves: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

### **A private religion**

The famous author embraced the traditional Christian faith because it was true. He held that the primary reason that many do not arrive at fully knowing the truth is pride, which he defined as "the falsification of fact by the introduction of self". Chesterton did not draw his philosophy from a personal "feeling", as do many modern writers. He based it on an objective, universally valid experience: "A man can no more possess a private religion than he can possess a private sun and moon." Gilbert knew very well that the Catholic Church is criticized for its rigid dogma. In reality, the whole world has its "dogmas", i.e., its standards of judgment; without them life is simply impossible. "There are only two kinds of people," he wrote, "those who accept dogmas and know it, and those who accept dogmas and don't know it." The real question then is to know on which dogma we are basing our life. Some think that Christianity, after having had its day in the sun, is now obsolete. Chesterton did not share this view. For him, the truth of the matter was that "the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

## A priest detective

One day Gilbert encountered a priest, loaded down with parcels and holding an enormous umbrella under his arm. This man left him with the impression of someone clumsy and naive. But, during a walk in his company, Chesterton realized that because of his experience with souls, this candid clergyman, Father O'Connor, a simple parish priest, knew the secrets of vice and crime better than the best Scotland Yard agent. He then imagined a character for a novel, Father Brown, who became the hero of a series of police stories. The priest detective appears at the scene of a robbery or murder asking seemingly absurd questions. At first, his views are dismissed, but soon his wisdom becomes apparent because he alone, enlightened by his spiritual intuition, detects the lie through words, faces, or attitudes, and in the end, identifies the true culprits. In this enjoyable manner, Chesterton conveyed his conviction that only the Catholic Church profoundly knows souls, for she alone has the divine mission to transform them, above all through the ministry of the priesthood. Thus in the story *The Flying Stars*, Father Brown begs Flambeau, a criminal, to change his ways: "There is still youth and honour and humour in you; don't fancy they will last in that trade. Men may keep a sort of level of good, but no man has ever been able to keep on one level of evil. That road goes down and down. The kind man drinks and turns cruel; the frank man kills and lies about it. Many a man I've known started like you to be an honest outlaw, a merry robber of the rich, and ended stamped into slime." Chesterton's intuitions were confirmed in a way by Saint John Paul II, who declared, "Man is incapable of understanding himself fully without Christ. He cannot understand who he is, nor what his true dignity is, nor what his vocation is, nor what his final end is" (June 2, 1979).

Chesterton's numerous written works (articles, novels, short stories, historical and critical books, etc.) bear witness to a witty and highly intelligent mind. The author was a master of the art of paradox, to the point that he was called the "Prince of Paradox." He used it in all areas and the most serious subjects: world events, politics, economics, philosophy, theology, etc. He sought to shed light on the truth and good-naturedly ridicule the incoherence of those who indiscriminately agree with everything. In certain controversies, he appealed to "uncommon sense", slyly pointing out that common sense is perhaps not as widespread as it once was, since even renowned thinkers hold positions that "lack common sense."

## To know the real

Chesterton found this beloved common sense among the great minds that held the faith. Eager to share his discovery, towards the end of his life he wrote a biography of Saint Thomas Aquinas, a masterpiece that

an expert on Thomism, Étienne Gilson, would consider the greatest book ever written on the Angelic Doctor. Chesterton had no philosophical or theological formation other than his personal readings. Yet he profoundly discerned that man, created in the image of God, is capable of knowing the real. Thus he found that he understood and could write the life of a man to whom he was so close in spirit. At the end of the book, the author evokes, in contrast, the figure of Martin Luther, and shows how the latter consummated the divorce between man and reason. Indeed, for Luther man was so corrupted by sin that his natural powers of intelligence and will were incapable of doing anything useful—fallen man can do nothing but cry out for mercy from the depths of his wretchedness. Saint Thomas, on the other hand, and with him the Catholic Church, believe that "human reason is ... truly capable by its own natural power and light of attaining to a true and personal knowledge of the one personal God, who watches over and controls the world by His providence, and of the natural law written in our hearts by the Creator" (CCC, no. 37). This theme of the relationship between reason and faith was developed by Saint John Paul II: "On her part, the Church cannot but set great value upon reason's drive to attain goals which render people's lives ever more worthy. She sees in philosophy the way to come to know fundamental truths about human life. At the same time, the Church considers philosophy an indispensable help for a deeper understanding of faith and for communicating the truth of the Gospel to those who do not yet know it" (encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, September 14, 1998, no. 5).

A defender of the faith, Chesterton was also a defender of public decency. One of the signs of the moral decay of a society is license in dress. Gilbert found this trend of immodestly revealing the body not only dangerous for public decency, but even detrimental to reason. Struck by a passage from the Gospels, he wrote of the hero of the *Adventures of Gabriel Gale*: "Have you ever noticed how true is that old phrase, 'clothed and in his right mind' (cf. Mk 5:15)? Man is not in his right mind when he is not clothed with the symbols of his social dignity. Humanity is not even human when it is naked." On this point as on many others, to go against the current requires courage; but it means deciding to live, for "a dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it."

G.K. Chesterton saw respect for the legacy of our predecessors as an act of deference to our fathers: "Tradition means giving a vote to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about." But respect for tradition likewise implies seeing ourselves and our own interests clearly. "Don't ever take a fence down until you know the reason it was put up" is an implicit reference to the inspired word: *You shall not*

remove your neighbor's landmark, which the men of old have set (Deut. 19:14). In reality, true progress is only possible when we start with what has been passed down to us: "Real development is not leaving things behind, as on a road, but drawing life from them, as on a root."

### Popular chats

In 1931, Chesterton was invited to produce a series of radio broadcasts. He agreed, and would produce some forty broadcasts a year until his death. These chats were very popular, to the point that, if his death had not put an end to them, Chesterton would have become the dominant voice on the BBC. Like his friend Hilaire Belloc, he did not hesitate to speak out on the great issues of the day. From the beginning, he made known his opposition to the Nazi regime; he was equally opposed to eugenics, at a time when Great Britain was getting ready to approve the "Mental Deficiency Act" (1931), with which certain groups were promoting the sterilization of "mentally deficient" individuals. Such ideas, he declared, were crazy, "as if one had a right to dragoon and enslave one's fellow citizens as a kind of chemical experiment." Revolted by this perspective, he strongly criticized the proposed law which, in its vague wording, provided no one protection from its inhumane provisions. "Every tramp who is sulky, every labourer who is shy, every rustic who is eccentric, can quite easily be brought under such conditions as were designed for

homicidal maniacs. That is the situation; and that is the point... we are already under the Eugenist State; and nothing remains to us but rebellion."

Backed by his faith in the divine image imprinted on man from his creation (cf. Gen. 1:26-27), G.K. Chesterton was throughout his life the passionate defender of man. Thus did he watch with anguish the direction humanity was taking. He thought that if one did not recognize that the dignity of man has its intangible origin in God, nothing could stop the mad attempts to modify his nature indefinitely. Who will prevent, he asked, the "new marvels" from leading to the "old abuses" of degeneration and slavery? He also foresaw that the rejection of God would lead directly to the rejection of man, the rejection of the supernatural to the rejection of nature. For "if you cut off the supernatural, what remains is the unnatural," that is a wounded and sick nature. "The rights of man must be unconditionally based on an order that surpasses them. Otherwise, they risk vanishing into abstraction or, even worse, foundering in ideology," said Saint John Paul II, on November 19, 1983.

Exhausted by work, Chesterton peacefully rendered his soul to God on June 14, 1936, at his home in Beaconsfield, in Buckinghamshire. A process with a view to a potential beatification was recently initiated by the bishop of Northampton.

The writings of this courageous man remain a light in the darkness of our world. Faced with the considerable forces that reject reason and faith and, in doing so, debase man, G.K. Chesterton unceasingly encourages us to forge ahead, testifying to the truth *in season and out of season* (2 Tim. 4:2). Following his example, let us place our trust in God's grace and love, which wishes to save man by teaching them to love in a Christian manner, for "to love means loving the unlovable. To forgive means forgiving the unforgiveable. To believe means believing the unbelievable. To hope means hoping when everything seems hopeless."

*Dom Antoine Marie O.S.B.*

- Gilbert: *The Man Who Was G.K. Chesterton*, by Michael Coren, Paragon House Publishers, 1990.
- *Autobiography*, by G.K. Chesterton, Ignatius Press, 2006.

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**ABBAYE SAINT-JOSEPH DE CLAIRVAL – 21150 FLAVIGNY-SUR-OZERAIN – FRANCE**

Fax : + 33 3 80 96 25 29 – email : [abbey@clairval.com](mailto:abbey@clairval.com) – website : <http://www.clairval.com/>