

## QUEST AND CONQUEST

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HERE is a popular literary fashion nowadays which permits great writers who have passed away to compose, as it were, their own eulogies or obituaries by quoting from their works a few passages which seem apropos. When Gilbert K. Chesterton died in June, 1936, he was no exception to this rule. A surprising feature of the many editorials and biographical sketches written in the few months following his death, was how often the Chestertonian self-description was borrowed from one of his latest and finest works, a short popular outline of the life and work of St. Thomas Aquinas.

For the most part, modern journalists have very little in common with medieval theologians. But Chesterton was unique, and across the span of six centuries the English writer and the Italian friar met as kindred spirits. That seems to be the real reason why Chesterton was so unusually successful in capturing for his readers the spirit of St. Thomas. With that masterful touch, which only the word "Chestertonian" can describe, his able pen pictured Thomism in the untechnical terms of everyday English, at the same time doing full justice to his difficult subject. One admirer of both Chesterton and the holy Doctor has gone on record as regretting that "G. K." did not live to set his powerful mind to work on a popular exposition of the whole Thomistic synthesis. When we consider that the sketch was the work of a man without formal training in Thomistic teachings and with a comparatively brief acquaintance with the great theologian's works, it seems to be a logical explanation of its success to say that it comes from the author and subject being so much alike.

There is an obvious point of similarity in their physical resemblance. It is literally, as well as figuratively, true that both of them were giants, standing head and shoulders above their respective contemporaries. In the universality of their interests and appeal, in their versatility and originality, we see other qualities they have in common. But their most fundamental likeness lies in this, that both were seekers, knights with a quest. They were reasonable men with a reasonable quest and the object of their lifelong search was Truth. They are a pair who exemplify perfectly the words of Pascal: "There are but two kinds of people who can be called reasonable: those who

serve God with all their heart because they know Him; those who seek Him with all their heart because they know Him not." St. Thomas spent his whole life serving the God he knew from his infancy. Chesterton spent most of his life seeking the Lord he knew not, and found Him at last in the Church where St. Thomas had always loved and served Him. It seemed almost inevitable that when this most earnest of Truth-seekers entered the Church in 1922 in his forty-eighth year, he would come to know St. Thomas. Having entered into his inheritance as a new-born child of God, it did not take him long to realize that the *Summa* of the Angelic Doctor is a precious part of the Catholic inheritance, not in the sense that it is an heirloom, like the catacombs, to be admired and cherished, but in the sense that it is a rich legacy, to be used and invested for eternal profit. How well he came to know the great Doctor during the latter part of his life may be judged from these words of his: "I will confess that, while the Romantic glory of St. Francis has lost nothing of its glamour for me, I have in later years grown to feel almost as much affection, or in some respects even more, for this man who unconsciously inhabited a large heart and a large head, like one inheriting a large house, and exercised there an equally generous if rather more absent-minded hospitality."

In this quest for Truth above all else, these geniuses were in full accord, and no sacrifice was too great to attain the goal. To become a humble friar in a newly founded Order of mendicants, the noble son of the Count of Aquino rejected all his chances for worldly or ecclesiastical honors. Chesterton, facing a sacrifice similar to this, at the height of his fame and power courageously chose "to adopt a definitely reactionary philosophy," as one man puts it; that is, to profess his belief in the "one creed that could not be satisfied with a truth, but only with the Truth, which is made of a million such truths and yet is one." The fear that he would very probably lose a large part of the audience which revelled in his paradoxes did not deter him from making known to the world his belief in the sublimest and truest of paradoxes.

Chesterton, like the medieval friar, had a mission to perform as well as a quest to complete. When it came to proposing or defending the truth as he saw it, he was as magnanimous as the saintly Thomas. It was no mere desire for self-expression that forced him to enter battle after battle, for Christianity first, later for Catholicism; for justice to the Boers and to the Irish; for more equitable distribution of wealth. It was more out of zeal for the truth and for justice than for love of argument that he indulged in controversy. Never



G. K. CHESTERTON

*"And what an arsenal of literary explosives that merry mind contained! The ancient errors resurrected in modern dress after being laid to rest centuries before in medieval shrouds, he slew once again by laughing them back to their graves."*



STATUE OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS  
In possession of the Dominicans at Woodchester, England

did he draw back into the safety of neutrality when the issue called for taking sides. He was always ready to fight for his steadfast convictions, and even when he might have retained them in comparative peace, he was too earnest to rest while others remained unconvinced.

Once in the struggle he threw all the resources of his versatile genius into the thick of the fray and, though always as courteous as the gentle Dominican, relentlessly assaulted the entrenchments of error. Every weapon at his command—and they were many—was sharpened or polished for a lifelong combat with the old and new in falsehood. But withal he was no monomaniac with a fixed idea, as his gradual progress towards the fulness of light readily reveals. He was always battling for an idea or an ideal, but never once did he close his mind to prevent the new and better from replacing the old. How like St. Thomas who gratefully took the truth where he found it, from Greek or Roman, pagan or Christian, Mohammedan or Jew, and rejected nothing worthwhile no matter where lay its source! Chesterton speaks of St. Thomas as “that almost irritatingly fair-minded rationalist,” because of the impartial manner in which the Prince of Theologians lists and considers the most formidable objections to his theses. It was his own possession of that “irritating” quality that enabled him to see both sides of every question, and as a consequence, to stand firmly on the heights of truth.

Chesterton was a remarkable philosopher. All the transient “isms” of a score of pseudo-prophets could never make him betray the sound common sense which is every true philosopher’s point of departure. Even in the early days when reason alone was his guide, when he “was groping and groaning and travailing with an inchoate and half-baked philosophy” of his own, the deceptive labels and ponderous sophistry shielding modern errors from the light did not lead him far astray. After a study of Christianity had convinced him that “the soul of it was common sense,” he knew that the Church of Christ was his true home. It was “the colossal common sense of St. Thomas Aquinas” that appealed to him more than anything else in the great Doctor’s work. He found that he and St. Thomas were at one with the man-in-the-street on the all-important assertion that “Eggs are eggs” (his very free but not inadequate translation of “*Ens est ens*,” a truth which in his wildest of paradoxes he had never attempted to contest.) Like the man-in-the-street Chesterton needed no Aristotelian or Thomistic teachers to convince him of that proposition’s undeniable truth—that solid foundation which is the basis of Thomistic philosophy as well as of Christianity’s rational justification.

There was a great difference in the methods St. Thomas and Chesterton used in performing their work of spreading the truths they cherished. Of course, the natural temperamental differences between the jovial journalist and the quiet, studious theologian would necessarily be evident in their work. But much of the dissimilarity was due also to the type of adversary with which each had to deal. In the thirteenth century, a rational argument was sufficiently convincing for most men. St. Thomas could always cope with the erring by a direct challenge to their reason; he could let the truth speak for itself. But Chesterton most often had a vastly different type of thinker to battle. There is an anti-intellectual trend in modern thought which all too frequently prevents the demonstrations of the scholastics from exerting their full convincing force. So, even in his work on the most serious and sacred of subjects, Chesterton very often had to substitute for the direct and immediate appeal to rationality, his own inimitable and effective appeal to risibility. Though ideas were always the flesh and bone of his work, and though he never neglected the rational foundations for his convictions, he would prefer to pierce the heart of error with the point of a joke where the point of a syllogism certainly have been blunted.

Perhaps St. Thomas would have varied his attack with humor too, if he thought that weapon would take effect in his day and age. We can be sure that the jests, like the syllogisms, would have been the finest, if he saw fit to use them. St. Thomas has been accused of opening the *Summa* with a pleasantry at the expense of theologians. However, no Thomist has ever doubted for even a moment that he meant very seriously the words of the prologue declaring that the work is intended for beginners. Chesterton thus explains the "dullness of diction" so "enormously convincing" in the *Summa*. "He could have given wit as well as wisdom but he was so prodigiously in earnest that he gave his wisdom without his wit." With something akin to a schoolboy's glee at discovering a stern-visaged professor's well-concealed sense of humor, he notes that St. Thomas "goes out of his way to say that men must vary their lives with jokes and even with pranks." It must have been discoveries like this in the great Doctor's work that gradually brought him to a real affection for the Saint. Anyone who conceded to laughter its just place in the scheme of life was sure to win his heart.

Thus it was in his humorous *reductio ad absurdum* that Chesterton found the cannon for which "many a true word spoken in jest" was effective ammunition. And what an arsenal of literary explosives that merry mind contained! The ancient errors resurrected in mod-

ern dress after being aid to rest centuries before in medieval shrouds, he slew once again by laughing them back to their graves. A witticism based on solid wisdom could handle many a mistake moderns left untouched by direct refutations of his error. Pantheists, Idealists, Atheists and all the other pseudo-intellectuals might resist reason, but they could not resist ridicule when the whimsicality of a Chestertonian pun or paradox turned the falsehood into a joke.

Chesterton was able to participate for more than three decades in the most heated of controversies and yet have it said of him at the end, "He had no enemies," "There was no one envious of him," and "He was the most deeply loved of all the men of his time." All his life he laughed at error, but never at those who proposed it. Like the gentle St. Thomas he was truly great because even in the most bitter of battles he was the most courteous of gentlemen. His generous Christlike charity for those who were his greatest opponents was fully recognized by these enemies themselves. H. G. Wells, one of Chesterton's favorite and most vulnerable targets, said at the close of their years of strife, "If I ever get into heaven, it will be through the intervention of Gilbert Chesterton."

To seek for a common characteristic in the work of two unique masters centuries apart is to look in vain, if we content ourselves merely with a study of style and literary form. In St. Thomas we see the water of wisdom lying, as it were, in the profound placidity of a clear mountain lake, mirroring in its depths the blue heavens above and the everlasting hills surrounding; in Chesterton's work, the same precious liquid now bubbles as from a spring, now bursts like a geyser with a triumphant surge skyward, boisterously, almost wastefully, it would seem, scattering itself in every direction. All they have in common here is that the flow of wisdom is unceasing. One might add, however, another quality of Chesterton's work which gives promise that it will weather the test of time through which the *Opera Omnia* of St. Thomas have so successfully passed. It is a characteristic of all fine literature, which the *Summa* shares with the Scriptures, and Chesterton with Shakespeare. The best word for it is "quotability," and to say that any work has it is to give it as high praise as any literature can receive. "Quotability" means that the work deserves rereading and remembering, as the words and ideas merit repeating. Into his poetry and his prose as well, Chesterton has infused this essential element of classical excellence.

Nearing the end of his work on St. Thomas, Chesterton tells his readers, "Anyone writing so small a book about so big a man, must leave out something." In these few pages much has been left out

too, but there is one final thing, the most important of all, which must not be excluded. The life of Gilbert Chesterton shows us that he was like St. Thomas where two ardent Christians would find the most pleasure in mutual resemblance—in their likeness to Christ. As a model Catholic layman, the life of the Prince of Paradox was ever as effective an apology for Catholicism as any of his works. The zeal with which he turned all the powers of his many-sided genius to the service of the Church was the overflowing of a truly apostolic heart. And in his “huge humility,” to use a Chestertonian expression, we find another trait he has in common with St. Thomas. Writing after Chesterton’s death, but before the publication of the great journalist’s *Autobiography*, Father McNabb, O.P., felt safe in predicting that the book “will leave out nothing that would be a loss to truth. . . . But though every line of it will speak the master-craftsman of words, it will be a masterpiece in the humility of self-effacement.” The event proved how well he knew his man. Except for the chronological details, little more of self-portraiture is to be found in the book than in many of his other works. It is not strange, then, that he could tell so well the stories of the saints and reveal such loving understanding of the Everlasting Man Who is their Divine Model. When he died two years ago last June, one friend of his—a priest—could not “complete what should be said about him without using the word sanctity or holiness;” another—a layman—wrote, “I confess that I believe that a saint has gone from us.” With testimonies of this sort upon which to rely, we have well-grounded hope that he is now enjoying the same bliss—*gaudium de veritate*—as the Angelic Doctor, the eternal reward of one who can say, “See ye that I have not labored for myself only, but for all that seek out the truth.”