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Chesterton in the Evangelization of Culture

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There are two interesting articles by Chesterton, one of 1925 in which he says, How I converted into Catholicism and other of 1926 --that it is inside a book-- Twelve modern apostles and their faith. In that book he explains why he became catholic. These are two different aspects for Chesterton. In one hand is the conversion and the other is the incorporation to the Catholic Church.

In his first article, in 1925, after three years of being catholic, he explains that his conversion started around 1900, or even before, in 1898, in his twenties. He went into the Catholic Church at 48 years old.

I think that the personal experience of Chesterton, as he explains it, can be used as an example for the evangelization of culture. He needed to be evangelized, personally. He was a product of a Christian world but he has not been educated as a Christian. This process of evangelization begun --and here I will start pointing out several matters that could be studied later-- with an attack to Catholicism.

From 1898 through 1902 he had to listen a certain Mr. Kensit saying horrors against the Catholic Church. The attacks finished with the death of the attacker. All the horrors mentioned were of use to Chesterton to become more and more interested in Christian faith and the Catholic Church. This is a record in this combat, because evangelization is a combat, a fight. There is a fight between professor Lucifer from one side and Monk Michael on the other. In this world Christ is fighting for each soul, for each culture and for each nation. And devil fights too. The example of Mr. Kensit attacking in spite the bad he did --he ended doing good because as a consequence approached Chesterton to Christianity-- shows us something hopeful that feeds us with serenity. All cultural attacks against Christianity can end by giving something good.

The evil, says Pope John Paul II, quoting Goethe, is that force that always tries to do evil and ends doing good. In Chesterton's life that is what happened. Someone tried to do him wrong, but ended pushing him towards Christianity. This is a touch of hope. We are in the middle of a fight that will last centuries; but attacks end being useful. One modern example of that is The Da Vinci Code. It is a novel completely Christ-phobic but it has the virtue of awakening the interest of many people on Christ divinity for the first time; if Christ is or is not what it was said he was. The attack, for Chesterton, was the first episode --the first one of his life that made him approach to Christianity.

The second interesting fact, which allows us to look into the theme of the evangelization of culture, is that he realized, many years before he knew exemplary personalities --he referred specifically to Father John O'Connor and to Hillarie Belloc--, that he was in debt with one people, the Irish people, because they were profound and uncomfortable Christians, like those first Christians sent by Nero to the lions. For him the example of a nation authentically Christian was an evangelization factor. Today we need to find and show this kind of examples. We cannot find them in Ireland now, because it is not in its best Catholic momentum; but in Korea, Viet Nam, Isla de Flores, Indonesia, or in some place in Latin America --not in every place, not in Buenos Aires--, there are still examples, and very important ones. In Chesterton's case, the Irish evangelized him

simply with the act of living, without knowing that there was a very important man called Chesterton that one day would become a Christian.

In third place, Chesterton said, in his article of 1925, that to read History was very important. He learnt when it was not already a Catholic that to move away from Rome had two consequences in every people or culture: First, that at the beginning they seem to flourish; so, to take distance looked to be a good idea. Second, in the long run it was always decadence. When he started to see that in history cycles always repeated he understood that in Rome there was a secret, a secret of cultural life in the long run, of fulfilled humanity, and he started thinking that it was better to stay with Rome. In today's world it is important to work with historic data, mainly in educative communities that remember that to be apart from Rome always looks as a success at the beginning and in the long run becomes the cultural death of the people who does it. Today we are seeing in Europe how the people that put distance from Rome are suffering a terrible cultural decadence. Chesterton's experience is again confirmed.

Another evangelizing element in Chesterton that at the end he, himself, became an agent of evangelization was to discover that in spite of the many religions and superstitions in the world, there is only one religion that its truly a religion because respects reason. At first he was curious about certain religious practices non-sanctas when he was young, when he was approximately in his twenties. In other words: Satanism. He got impressed and frightened and discovered that Satan exists. We do not know if he had a relationship with the famous British Satanist of the time, Crowley, but the real thing is that he realized that the practices were irrational, that when there were faith and reason there was a religion that respected men and discovered that only in the Catholic Church piety, pray, religion and reason were one, and he prophesized that one day the superstitious practices will be worldwide probably this is the world in which we are living now- that the only people that would be considered as rationalist would be the Catholics. And that is what happened.

Chesterton has become a cultural prophet because Pope John Paul II when wrote the Encyclical Fides ET ratio, Faith and reason, comply with Chesterton's prophecy: Catholic Church has became the defender of reason.

Unbelievably: a world that view itself as very rational is turning into a superstitious, unbelieving and irrational world. Other fact that evangelizes a lot that was also a discovery for Chesterton, in his own words is to discover that all religions give importance to extraordinary things but Catholic church is the only one that gives importance to ordinary life. This is specifically shown in the Christ incarnation mystery: a divinity that uses drapers, that feeds from his mother and grows. This fondness for ordinary life gave Chesterton the conviction about its authenticity. That is why he defended ordinary work, the small private property, the social doctrine of the Church, the importance of marriage and of family life.

To evangelize mean, mainly, to be capable to make understand the world something that was a conversion factor for Chesterton: not to look only for the extraordinary, the

miracle, that many times degenerates, he says warning, in (and it is a little impressive) Satanism.

There are many other facts that in Chesterton's case evangelized him and that could be a model of how to evangelize; but time is tyrant I cannot extend myself.