



Conferencia Internacional
(Primera Iberoamericana)

CHESTERTON
Y LA EVANGELIZACIÓN DE LA CULTURA

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Strategies for Evangelizing Culture

R.P. Ian Boyd, C.S.B.

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Sociedad Chestertoniana Argentina

Agüero 1287 Capital Federal CP (1425EMC) - Tel/Fax (54-11) 4961 6847

sca@SociedadChestertonianaArgentina.org

www.SociedadChestertonianaArgentina.org

Cultural evangelization is the subject which we shall be discussing during this conference. The cultural crisis itself has been described memorably by Chesterton in an address which he gave on January 28, 1927 as part of the centenary celebrations of London University. He entitled his talk "Culture and the Coming Peril", and he identified the peril he wanted to warn his audience of as something he called "**standardization by a low standard.**". He gave the vulgarity of modern advertisements as an example of what he meant by this phrase: "**The first thing that strikes one about it is the space occupied, the insensibility to the idea of size. The spaces that are now occupied by an advertisement of some highly dubious wine or some practically quack medicine are large enough to have been the shrines of gods or great saints, to have been a place for the emblazonment of great national coats-of-arms, to have held the proclamations of Napoleon or of the French Revolution, to have been used for a hundred striking and dominant purposes by our fathers in the past. They are now entirely surrendered to trivialities. On those large spaces nothing is seen except small things. That sense of the waste of size and the waste of space is in itself a witness to something that goes against the true intuition and imagination of Culture.**"

The remedies for this cultural crisis are of course multifarious. Some of them are political, and the deepest of them are theological. The papers given at this conference will outline both the problem and the possible solutions to the problem. But Chesterton suggested that all the remedies could be summarized in the one remedy which he called education, and he defined education in these words: "**training the minds of men to act upon the community, making the mind a source of creative and critical action...**" He believed that this work of education was the purpose for which institutions exist. It is certainly the purpose for which the Chesterton Institute for Faith and Culture was established. The conference which is about to begin is part of an ongoing educational effort which has as its fundamental purpose the transformation and the renewal of contemporary culture.

This is a big program for a small organization to undertake. But there are advantages to being small. The Chesterton Institute has as its mission the continuing in our day of the work that Chesterton began in his. That work celebrated decentralization and smallness. It also required and requires the use of the imagination,. Chesterton always affirmed a belief that imagination can be exercised most effectively in small communities. In such a setting it is a power capable of bringing about enormous changes. The many conferences held by the Chesterton Institute over the last thirty years in countries as various as Canada, the United States, Croatia, Lithuania, Ireland and Great Britain and now Argentina, and the publication of the proceedings of those conferences and other writing in the Chesterton Review have provided effective forums in which people who share Chesterton's social vision have been able to exercise their imaginations as they communicate with each other and with those who are looking for fresh views of contemporary problems. In an early issue of Chesterton's own journal G.K.'s Weekly, Chesterton commented upon the way in which good writing in a small journal such as his has the power to awaken the imagination and enable one to see things which have become too familiar to be seen. Imagination therefore has a role in social reform. Chesterton and Chestertonians believe that in order to create a better world one must first be able to imagine a better world.

He believed that all effective work is done in a communitarian setting, and that true community is one that is small enough that individuals can be known as persons.

Some years ago at a Chesterton conference held in Toronto, Cardinal Emmet Carter, the Honorary President of the Chesterton Institute, spoke of the importance of Chesterton as a great religious teacher. Commenting on the wide influence Chesterton exercised through his writing and his personal holiness, the Cardinal suggested that there might be a cause for his canonization to be considered. The Chesterton circle here in Argentina got in touch with the Cardinal, and with his support have made efforts to promote that cause. I do not know whether their efforts are likely to be met with success. But there is no doubt that the contemporary world is in urgent need of Chesterton's wisdom. It is also badly in need of another gift which Chesterton possessed in abundance. This was the gift of cheerfulness and good humour. In Soviet Russia he was read in samizdat versions of his work, and the Russian Chestertonians called him by a wonderful name. They called him the teacher of hope. Perhaps that is gift for which we ought to pray when we ask the intercession of the great man whose work of cultural evangelization we seek to continue here in Buenos Aires.