

Gerald Kiehl Chesterton (usually known simply as: G. K. Chesterton) was an English gentleman, born in 1874 and died in 1936. He was a convert from Anglicanism to Catholicism and a staunch defender and promoter of the Catholic faith. He was a great thinker and writer, known for his penetrating insights especially into modern times and beliefs. He wrote and spoke on a wide variety of topics – politics, government, religion, philosophy, theology but maybe most basically of all: the purpose of life, what it takes to accomplish that purpose, and the things that thwart it. Chesterton was, at heart, a philosopher, a thinker, a seeker of truth and understanding, and an exposé of false beliefs. It could be argued that he was a modern prophet.

This article will present some saints whose memorials were celebrated this past week. The reason Chesterton comes to mind is because of one of his writings that he called: Orthodoxy. The word orthodoxy just means something like: right thinking or right belief. In the context of Catholicism, it means: consistent with what God has revealed, consistent with the dogmas and doctrines of the faith, consistent with Scripture and Tradition.

Now you might expect a book called “Orthodoxy” to start out with things like the meaning of the word orthodoxy, what constitutes orthodoxy, and so on. Chesterton starts out this book on right thinking or right belief with a chapter called “The Maniac.” A “maniac” is someone who has lost touch with reality, who does not have right thinking or right belief. And who does Chesterton identify as this maniac? The man who believes supremely in himself. “I can guide you to the thrones of the Supermen,” Chesterton says; “the men who really believe in themselves are all in lunatic asylums.” Chesterton contrasts the one who believes in himself supremely with a poet: a poet, he says, only strives to get his head into Heaven; the logician (i.e., rationalist) tries to get Heaven into his head.

Chesterton is bringing out the truth that while we can (and should) know what God has revealed to us, we cannot come even close to completely grasping the infinite God. The arrogant rationalist, superman, the man who believes in himself supremely, who insists on doing so, reduces the infinite to the finite and thus loses touch with reality, hence his lunacy. I have always been puzzled by people’s attraction to the arrogant. The only thing I can figure is that it must stem from a lack of faith. If I choose to believe in superman, it must be because I do not really believe in God; it must be because the person does not care about getting their head into Heaven like Chesterton’s poet, but rather in reducing “heaven” to the mere tangible of the here and now. What about those who do not believe supremely in themselves? What are they like? How do they end up? Let us look a little more closely at a few of these characters.

The memorial of St Thomas Aquinas was last Wednesday, January 28. Aquinas was an Italian Dominican priest, born in 1225. St Dominic had just died in 1221 so Aquinas was one of the early Dominicans. St Thomas is, of course, most well known as the great theologian, the universal Doctor of Church because of the great breadth and depth of the subjects that he covered. To this day, Aquinas’ philosophy and theology hold sway in the Church. Aquinas was undoubtedly granted one of the greatest intellects in human history. St Thomas, however, is not a saint because of his brilliant intellect; he is a saint because he practiced heroic virtue. He is not a saint because he was a great theologian; he was able to be a great theologian because he was a saint, because he sought to put his head in Heaven, not because he thought he could put Heaven in his head.

Humility and truth are inseparable partners; humility entails seeing and accepting the truth about ourselves and about God. Humility-truth-in touch with reality = Chesterton’s poet. Pride-falsehood-out of touch with reality = Superman-Lunatic. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that a man with Thomas’ deep insight into truth was buried in the virtue of humility throughout his life, even when he became in high demand (even by popes) as a teacher and theologian. Perhaps one example of his practice of this virtue would be helpful. The Dominicans, as mentioned, were a new order in Thomas’ time and they were also a mendicant (begging) order. Aquinas had come from a “noble” family and while his family may not have objected to him becoming a priest, they did not want him to become a Dominican. Thomas refused to give it up so his brothers literally took him by force and locked him away in a house to prevent it. They even tried to sway him entirely from his vocation by sending (let’s say) “a lady of ill-repute” to his room. Thomas chased her away with a fire iron. He had

the humility to know that he was not beyond temptation, he did not believe supremely in himself. He then prayed, pleading with the Lord to grant him purity; notice again the lack of superman, the dependence on God. The man who saw farther than all others did not trust in himself, he trusted in God and pleaded with Him to provide what he needed. Thomas could have chosen to use the gift he received from God for worldly glory, to be a superman, but chose God Himself instead. What do you choose?

Let us consider another one of “Chesterton’s poets” – St Angela Merici (1474-1540) whose memorial was also this past week. Angela was also born in Italy and was very pious from an early age, learning the faith from her devout parents. Both of her parents died when she was still young and she and her sister went to live with an uncle. Her beloved sister then also died, and without receiving the Sacrament of Anointing. Angela was very distressed about her sister not receiving the sacraments before death and prayed intensely for her. In response, the Lord granted her a vision of her sister in Heaven, which then intensified her commitment to serving the Lord. When Angela was 20, her uncle died and she returned home. It was here that she was given another vision, one of many young women going to Heaven; she was told to found a “company” dedicated to the education of young women so that they would not be pulled away from the faith. She eventually accomplished this mission – founding the “Company of St Ursula” with 12 other women. Angela said to her sisters:

It is your duty to protect and rescue your lambs from . . . fair-speeched worldlings and hypocritical religious, on the one hand, and heretics [false teachers, lunatics] on the other.”

“Disorder in society is the result of disorder in the family.”

The second quote (especially) reflects her understanding of the importance of motherhood in building up the Kingdom of God, and thus the importance of teaching those future mothers The Way. Bishop Sheen once quoted Napoleon who was asked: when should the education of children begin? Napoleon answered: 20 years before their birth – in the education of the mother. Napoleon is not being held up as a paragon of the faith but he did speak with wisdom in that instance. The father is indispensable in the family and in rearing children but in those very early years the child clings to its mother and the mother has an influence that endures. Motherhood is a high, noble vocation . . . and a serious one. But is it thought of as such today? Hasn’t motherhood been replaced by: careerist first and foremost? Is this not what they are taught? Isn’t it shameful – so say the fair-speeched worldlings, the lunatics – for a woman to make motherhood her first priority?

The memorial of Sts Timothy & Titus was also celebrated this past week. Timothy and Titus were both bishops in the very early Church and were companions of Paul. In fact, St Paul ordained them. In addition to teaching and sanctifying, Paul, Timothy, and Titus had the responsibility of governing – a role different than the other saints mentioned. Timothy, for example, was sent to the difficult city of Corinth to align them with Christ.

One more saint that was celebrated this past week was St John Bosco, an Italian priest in the 1800’s. John Bosco’s God-given work was with rather wayward boys and young men. The Lord Himself came to Bosco’s aid in the form of dreams where He would show Him various things about the boys he worked with, about the world, or the religious order he was to found (the Salesians).

The visible or tangible roles of all of these saints was different. The roles of Paul, Timothy, and Titus – early Church bishops – was quite different than that of Aquinas, Angela, or John Bosco, and each of them was different from the other. And yet at the same time, they all served the same purpose and the same Head. Each one was building up the Mystical Body of Christ, with Christ as the head. They operate together, bringing life to the body. More to the point for this article is that each abides with the Head, each acts according to the will of the Head; as such, they cannot be superman; as such they are humble, true, in touch with reality and thus not a lunatic. This is a choice that every single person faces in this life and this world: 1) pride, belief in yourself supremely, rejecting reality and living in a fantasy world, and finally dying a lunatic, forever separated from truth and goodness, forever miserable; or 2) be one of Chesterton’s “poets” who has the humility to know the truth that he cannot get Heaven into his head but he can sure try and hope to get his head into Heaven.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn*