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An Apologetic for Marriage and the Family from G.K. Chesterton

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G.K. Chesterton was regarded by friend and foe as a man of genius, a defender of the faith, a debater and conversationalist par excellence. As a journalist he wrote thousands of essays; as a biographer he confounded the scholars. His large body of fiction is most well-known through the *Father Brown Mysteries* which are still published, as is much of his work.¹ He inspired C.S. Lewis, who listed *The Everlasting Man* in the top most influential books in his life. His biography of St. Thomas Aquinas was hailed by eminent Thomist scholar Etienne Gilson as “without possible comparison, the best work on Aquinas.”² He was successful in marriage and with his extended family, and though he and Frances bore the pain of childlessness, they were greatly loved by children.

Chesterton lived from 1874 to 1936, and his task in life was to trumpet the truths that are rooted in common sense and the very nature of things. He believed that we can discern what *is* from life as we see it (the fall being fundamental to such a vision). For Chesterton, “The business of a man is to discover reality and, having discovered it, to hand it on to his fellows.”³

My task today is to present his defense for marriage and the family. For Chesterton, the family is integral to what it means to be human. Tradition, convention, and, as he put it, the “dumb certainties of experience”⁴ are the votes of the dead which we ignore to our peril.⁵ Chesterton believed the fact of marriage and family as central realities with intrinsic norms expresses some of those certainties, and he had a great deal to say about it. We will look at some of what he said, but before we do, a glance at his apologetic approach is merited. I see three main points in his apologetic:

1. Truth fits the human spirit: So far from leaving God out, this approach insists God is very much *in*, for He created the human spirit, and created it in His very image, no less. Thus, for Chesterton, if a thing doesn’t fit the human spirit, it must go. “If a house is so built as to knock a man’s head off when

he enters, it is built wrong.”⁶ In the conclusion to *What’s Wrong with the World*, he sums it up thus: “all institutions shall be judged and damned by whether they have fitted the normal flesh and spirit.”⁷

2. Truth transcends time: He believes it is possible to speak from verities fixed in human nature and thus **not subject to times and seasons in any fundamental sense**. If all notions are determined by pre-conditioning then everything devolves backwards until ultimately, there are no ultimates—*all is bias*. There is, he says, a “degrading modern heresy that our minds are merely manufactured by accidental conditions, and therefore have no relation to truth at all This thought is the end of all thinking. It is useless to argue at all, if all our conditions are warped by our conditions. *Nobody can correct anybody’s bias if all mind is all bias.*”⁸ Thus, Chesterton’s argument for marriage and family is an attempt to give us some ‘ultimates,’ some foundational truth.

3. Truth does not proof-texting: For Chesterton, a man who lived **require** and wrote within the continuing rise of rationalism and secularism in early 20th century London, **the apologetic had to present the sanity of orthodoxy without quoting Scripture or even referencing theology as such.**⁹

This, he says, is a very restrictive requirement, but necessary, given the audience. He believed the experience of generations of humanity revealed some indelible facts about life, and that these facts were discernible and fixed, not to be tampered with. With an apologetic thus grounded in life, it is hoped that his argument for marriage and the family can speak to any listener who is deaf to Scripture and the Christian tradition but, being alive, cannot be *entirely* deaf to life.

If you know Chesterton, you know that the word “systematic” has little bearing on his mode of

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expression. He casts about, one wonders where or why, only to confound you by drawing it all together in a piece you never imagined possible. And so, though I love that genius, it can make the analytical task maddening. However, I believe such a problem is integral to the subject at hand, for it is so close to life that we are swimming in the subject while trying to understand it. As he suggested, trying to systematize innate reality is like landing Leviathan with a hook and line.¹⁰ My solution is to attempt to reflect his thinking in a similar style. While I have divided today's discussion into two main divisions, there will be several defenses throughout—defenses that inter-relate, casting about, attempting to reveal the life that shines through any true discussion of marriage and family. In the process, let us hope the Truth Chesterton defends is the Leviathan that lands us.

Celebrating Family as Foundational to Life

“the oldest of the earthly cities”¹¹

Chesterton defended marriage and the family, first of all, by celebrating the family as the central reality of human life. As he put it:

“I really think there was a moment when I could have invented the marriage vow (as an Institution) out of my own head; but I discovered, with a sigh, that it had been invented already.”¹²

And then,

“I do not dream of denying, indeed I should take every opportunity of affirming, that monogamy and its domestic responsibilities can be defended on rational apart from religious grounds.”¹³

And finally,

“Two facts must be put at the very beginning of the record of the race. The first is original sin. The second . . . is the family.”¹⁴

And so we ask: “How is the family foundational?” First, in the way the family reflects the Holy Family and the trinitarian vision therein.¹⁵ In this, admittedly, we are into theology proper, unusual for Chesterton, and *contra* his apologetic approach as noted above. Since he is going to the soul of things here—trying to explain reality, it is perhaps permissible for him to push things to theology, for how else does anyone get to the ultimates a without defining god thereby; or in this case, letting God define those ultimates.

Be that as it may, Chesterton said that as the holy family of Bethlehem brought the Saviour to the world, so the human family is a ‘sacrament’ of grace, a daily means of redemption for all who celebrate it by partaking in and of it as they are able. Of course he is using Bethlehem as the starting point. When he speaks of family as a trinity, he is clearly speaking to the idea that the family reflects *the* Holy Family—the mystery of Trinity that is the Godhead. Within this Trinitarian model one finds the basis for understanding family as it should be understood. That being true, as marriage is the foundation of the family, it would be hard to find a stronger case for its importance; for when we participate in marriage and family, we are demonstrating, *and participating in*, an expression of the very nature of God.¹⁶

Approaching this theme from a different angle, Chesterton says we must celebrate the distinction between the sexes; that to call a man ‘manly’ or a woman ‘womanly’ is to touch the deepest philosophy.¹⁷ Chesterton has many fascinating treatments of the diversity of the sexes and the natural divide between them, coupled poignantly with the mad desire to be joined. As he put it, “Those whom God has sundered, shall no man join,” his artful way of reminding us that only God could join such impossibly divided persons.¹⁸ One of my favorite references to this diversity within union is this selection, well worth its length:

“. . . the sexes are two stubborn pieces of iron; if they are to be welded together, it must be while they are red-hot. Every woman has to find out that her husband is a selfish beast, because every man is a selfish beast by the standard of a woman. But let her find out the beast while they are both still in the story of ‘Beauty and the Beast.’ Every man has to find out that his wife is cross—that is to say, sensitive to the point of madness: for every woman is mad by the masculine standard. But let him find out that she is mad while her madness is more worth considering than anyone else’s sanity.”¹⁹

In this we see the actual state of the matter—men and women are different and yet they are driven to find a way to unite. Once again, unity and diversity are held together in the intrinsic relationship of the sexes.

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This is expanded and seen in yet another way, what I call “family as ‘uni-versity.’” Because the family is able to combine unity and diversity, it serves as the foundation for society. The family, not the individual *or* the state, is the answer to the problem of societal organization. The home is greater than the government and it also supersedes the individual. Both one and many bow to the home, for it best balances the impossible see-saw of individual vs. state. For this reason the home is the sentinel for freedom. It keeps both individual and state at bay by combining the essence of both within itself. Thus the family supports both: individuals by birthing them and states by populating them. For either individual or state to work against the family is to cut off the limb upon which they sit.

Finally, marriage and family is foundational to life because only within sexual union can life itself be created. The possibility of children is written into the relation of the sexes, and denying that reality is to undo a central component of the relationship. For Chesterton, removing the possibility of children from marriage steals “the pleasure belonging to a natural process while violently and unnaturally thwarting the process itself.”²⁰ These lines from *GK’s Weekly* in 1930 continue the theme:

“What strikes me as truly extraordinary is the implication that there is something low about the objective [of sexual union] being the birth of the child. . . . it is obvious that this great natural miracle is the one creative, imaginative and disinterested part of the whole business. The creation of a new creature, not ourselves, of a new conscious center, of a new and independent focus of experience and enjoyment, is an immeasurably more grand and godlike act even than a real love affair If creating another self is not noble, why is pure self-indulgence nobler?”²¹

Here we see the foundational sense coming full circle. It begins with grounding in the nature of God, it continues by seeing the family as the grandest human answer to the problem of bringing union within diversity, and it finishes by emphasizing again the necessity of the relationship being more than binary; that is, the relationship is not complete unless *otherness*—in this case the possibility of children—is considered. Marriage and the family are indeed *necessary to the way God made the world*. Chesterton would have agreed with Joseph Strong, naming marriage as the “parent, and not the child of society; the source of civility and a sort of seminary of the republic.”²²

Denying the Superstition of Divorce

“The idea of a vow ‘is to combine the fixity that goes with finality with the self-respect that goes with freedom.’”²³

Well, to press on, pulling in the Leviathan, landing ourselves on Chesterton’s points. Chesterton defends marriage and family by celebrating its innate, foundational truths and by offering ways we can strengthen this most vital of institutions. Here I propose to deal only with Chesterton’s treatment of divorce, a discussion which points up the necessary issues at stake, and thereby can strengthen the home as well as anything.

In this case the Leviathan may devour us, for what is more contentious, more heart-rending, more devastating than the modern demise of marriage and the divorce that is cause and symptom of so much of it? I would beg deference for a few minutes, an attempt to put the question into a rational box for consideration. A too well-known statistic tells us that half of all marriages end in divorce. Among all of the answers we hear, precious few seem to speak to the meaning—the being of marriage and the corollary questions about divorce itself. If they do nothing else, Chesterton’s proposals will jolt us, break into our cultural malaise and unthinking, and perhaps enable us to see what really underlies the question.

“On this question of divorce,” Chesterton said, “I do not profess to be impartial, for I have never perceived any intelligent meaning in the word.”²⁴ His approach echoed another friend of Lewis, Charles Williams, who said: “Adultery is bad morals, but divorce is bad metaphysics.”²⁵ In his outstanding compilation of excerpts from Chesterton on the family, *Brave New Family*, Alvaro de Silva comments on the necessity of proper metaphysics, saying “society’s survival and success depend on true metaphysics more than good morals” for, at the end, “the morals . . . of a people are the ripe fruit of its metaphysics.”²⁶ So the question speaks to the being of a thing—in this case the being of marriage and the question of whether such a being can be undone.

Chesterton is saying that if marriage is really the “combination that does combine,” it is troublesome to think we can negate such a combination with a legal construct such as divorce.²⁷ Indeed, Chesterton’s belief in the metaphysical status of marriage is so strong that while divorce may rarely be justified, re-marriage never is.²⁸ Divorce may be a necessary evil in extreme cases; re-marriage is simply not real in any metaphysical sense. This echoes the vow—‘til death do us part’—and insists that it is more than a self-created legal union; rather it recognizes the indelible union of the sexes which cannot be literally—metaphysically—undone while the persons are still living.

I come from a beloved, sectarian-Protestant, country church background. Nonetheless, when I read Chesterton on this point I do not see “marriage-as-

sacrament” or some other such construct that brings religion into the picture to trounce the secular mind. Rather I see the legitimate appeal to the *being* of this thing we call marriage. If we really think it as an *union of persons*, do we really believe it can be dissolved in the cavalier manner of the modern divorce court—or for that matter, dissolved at all? As has been wearily recognized, easy divorce makes easy marriage, and too much of both will doom a culture. Such was Chesterton’s prophecy 100 years ago and it rings hauntingly true today.

Chesterton goes further to say it would be one thing if divorce advocates only wanted liberty for bound parties. But what they really mean to do is *to give the same respectability to divorce that we give to marriage*.²⁹ Marriage has respectability for many reasons, not the least being the beauty of fidelity itself, the “glamour [of the] vow.”³⁰ Fidelity is respected. How rational is it to accord the same respect to infidelity?³¹ In picturing this, Chesterton suggests that toasts to divorce could be drunk, etc. and guests would assemble “on the doorstep to see the husband and wife go off in opposite directions.”³² This speaks to the question of why we marry in church but divorce in court. If the doing and undoing are legitimate, should not the church do, and approve of, both?

So what of the hard cases? Nobody denies, says Chesterton, “that a person should be allowed some sort of release from a homicidal maniac. The most extreme school of orthodoxy only maintains that anybody who has had that experience should be content with that release.”³³ It may be permissible to complain that you are married; do not then persist in complaining of being unmarried once divorced.³⁴ In this matter he is the helpful realist, reminding us that fidelity is demanding—freedom requires “vigilance and pain.”³⁵ He is saying most clearly that the family is important enough to merit great suffering.

Chesterton’s emphases on this point are all about mankind being all it is intended to be; he has this ever-present ideal in mind, something toward which we are to progress. It is vital in the hardships of life to have some hope, some purpose. Chesterton believes the purpose for man is to be blessed, but that “men must suffer to be beautiful, and even suffer a considerable interval of being ugly.”³⁶ Herein lies the truth of “the second wind” as Chesterton calls it. Without constancy and perseverance in marriage, the potential value and beauty cannot be realized. The tragedy of most divorces is that a couple quits before they have given the marriage enough time to really grow and become deeply rewarding. Indeed, perseverance in keeping one’s vows is itself a reward worth having—the “glory of the vow.” When we elevate divorce, metaphysically, to the level of marriage we make it too easy for couples to miss out on the rewards of fulfilling their vows.

Finally, Chesterton reminded us of this all too painful truth: mutually desired divorce is very seldom

the reality. Again, a lengthy quote helps to establish his point:

“ . . . if we are really to fall back on the frank realism of our experience as men of the world, then the very first thing that our experience will tell us is that . . . the consent [for divorce] very seldom is sincerely and spontaneously mutual. By far the commonest problem in such cases is that in which one party wishes to end the partnership and the other does not. And of that emotional situation you can make nothing but a tragedy, whichever way you turn it.”³⁷

Here surely we can see the pain and poignancy of life as it is, putting the matter in true perspective. Divorce is no friend and perhaps, as Chesterton would have us believe, embracing it as we have will be our undoing.

Summary

After the deeply painful reminder of the brokenness of our world which a discussion of divorce elicits, I am happy to return to the basis for Chesterton’s argument. It is fair to say that He saw the family as the *summum bonum* within the Created order, God’s grand design for making the world work. Chesterton celebrated marriage and family because he celebrated the life God had made. He knew this life could never be enjoyed fully without that fundamental societal unit, the family, protected and nourished, given its place as paramount. From this flow all of his defenses, and they can help us a great deal today in the morass that is the legacy of the sexual revolution.

And so the family, like the Sabbath, is a gift. If we keep it, it will keep us. Indeed, we were not made for the family—persons to be fitted into an ‘institution.’ Rather, the family was made for us, a haven, a home, a place that makes sense of the world if we will let it. Such was Chesterton’s argument—may it bring added life to the vital struggle to strengthen the home.

Notes

- ¹ Ignatius Press plans well over 40 volumes in *The Collected Works* project.
- ² Garry Wills, *Chesterton: Man and Mask*, (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961), 216, n. 9.
- ³ Janet Gassman, “Religion and the Arts: A Second Look at G.K. Chesterton,” *Religion in Life* 28:3 (Sum, 1959): 444, quoting from *The Saturday Review of Literature* 14:3-4 (July 4 1936). Chesterton had died 3 weeks prior.
- ⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics/Orthodoxy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 180.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 207. In this one also sees his implicit insistence that the history of the world is reasonable and

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consistent with itself. Life is not about a random occurrence of events with no bearing in a composite, underlying reality. In a word, he believed in Truth that was reasonably discernible, and that it was folly, and led to sheer anarchy, to affirm otherwise.

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, (San Francisco: Ignatius), 1994), 193.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton*, (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1936), 27, emphasis added.

⁹ His comments in *The Superstition of Divorce* illustrate this with typical wit: "Thus, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, an intelligent man in other matters, says that there is only a 'theological' opposition to divorce, and that it is entirely founded on 'certain texts' in the Bible about marriages. This is exactly as if he said that a belief in the brotherhood of men was only founded on certain texts in the Bible, about all men being the children of Adam and Eve. *Millions of peasants and plain people all over the world assume marriage to be static, without having ever clapped eyes on any text.* Numbers of more modern people, especially after the recent experiments in America, think divorce is a social disease, without having ever bothered about any text. It may be maintained that even in these, or in any one, the idea of marriage is ultimately mystical; and the same may be maintained about the idea of brotherhood." (*The Superstition of Divorce*, 230-1, emphasis added) In *What's Wrong with the World*, 154, he says, "I must submit to those very narrow intellectual limits which the absence of theology always imposes." He mentions this occasionally, as in *What's Wrong with the World*, 113: "This book must avoid religion, but there must (I say) be many, religious and irreligious, who will concede that this power of answering many purposes was sort of strength which should not wholly die out of our lives."

¹⁰ "To draw out the soul of things with a syllogism is as impossible as to draw out Leviathan with a hook." Available from <http://www.dur.ac.uk/martin.ward/gkc/books/The_Defendant.html#A_DEFENCE_OF_NONSENSE>, 16; *Internet*. Accessed March 31, 2006.

¹¹ *The Superstition of Divorce* in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Vol. 4, edited by George J. Marlin, Richard P. Rabatin, and John L. Swan (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 280.

¹² *Heretics/Orthodoxy*, 275.

¹³ *Eugenics and Other Evils* in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Vol. 4, edited by George J. Marlin, Richard P. Rabatin, and John L. Swan (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 412.

¹⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 53.

¹⁵ Ibid., 54-5.

¹⁶ This conclusion follows from Chesterton's idea that the family as a trinity reflects the divine Trinity. If this fundamental characteristic of God's nature is seen in the very form of the family, then members of the family are participating, in some fashion, in the nature of God. I am aware of the theological problems with calling family "trinity." However, we can at least allow that much of what we understand about Trinitarian inter-relatedness—union and diversity held in proper balance—can, or should be, said of the real nature of families.

¹⁷ Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, (New York: Sheed & Ward 1943), 109.

¹⁸ In this cryptic and sacramental comment, Chesterton recognizes at once the distinction of the sexes and the simple fact that the distinction is so strong that only God could adequately join them. The quote is from *Two Stubborn Pieces of Iron* in *G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950), 141-3.

¹⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *The Common Man*, (New York: Sheed and Ward), 1950, 141-143.

²⁰ Ibid., 441.

²¹ Alvaro de Silva, *Brave New Family*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 171, quoted from *G.K.'s Weekly*, 9-27-1930.

²² Quoted in: John Witte, Jr. "The Meanings of Marriage." *First Things* 126 (Oct. 2002) 30-41, 34.

²³ *The Superstition of Divorce*, 267.

²⁴ *Divorce vs. Democracy* in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Vol. 4, ed. by George J. Marlin, Richard P. Rabatin, and John L. Swan. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 423.

²⁵ Charles Williams, *He Came Down from Heaven and The Forgiveness of Sins*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1950), 196.

²⁶ *Brave New Family*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 18.

²⁷ *Eugenics and Other Evils*, 338.

²⁸ *The Superstition of Divorce*, 278.

²⁹ Ibid., 274.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ From *The Sentimentalism of Divorce* in *Fancies vs. Fads*, quoted in *Brave New Family*, pg. 135. Chesterton is saying, I believe, that allowing remarriage puts marriage and divorce on equal metaphysical footing, thus according infidelity level status with fidelity. He is defining fidelity simply as keeping one's vows. If they can be broken and then remade with another partner, does the making have any real ontological status? If so, how is it undone? Legally? This seems to devolve marriage itself to a legal construct pushing to the conclusion that marriage and divorce have equal ontological status. They can both be done or

undone at will; they are subject to the will of the persons. They have no reality outside of the persons. This cheapens marriage and makes one wonder why it is sought after, which returns the issue to its central place.

³² *The Superstition of Divorce*, 236.

³³ *Ibid.*, 278.

³⁴ These additional lines from *The Superstition of Divorce*, 278-9 add clarity: "To put it roughly, we are prepared in some cases to listen to the man who complains of having a wife. But we are not prepared to listen at such length, to the same man when he comes back and complains that he has not got a wife. Now in practice at this moment the great mass of the complaints are precisely of this kind. The reformers insist particularly on the pathos of a man's position when he has obtained a separation without a divorce. Their most tragic figure is that of the man who is already free of all those ills he had, and is only asking to be allowed to fly to others that he knows not of."

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 274.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 275.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

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