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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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Chesterton's Enjoyable Asceticism

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I grew up as a hearty hedonistic pagan. In my particular pagan culture, the point of existence as I recall was to indulge in as much of life's pleasure as possible, never mind the hangovers or possible consequences. If there is a deity, I thought, he created all of these earthly delights and so he must want us to enjoy them. God must be a god of celebration—a friend of Pan and Bacchus, someone who throws parties for prodigals. Then, when I accepted the Christian faith during college, I went through a typical Augustine-like struggle to tame my passions, so that I could will with the full force of my will, move past the brink of indecision, and “spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites” (Rom13:14).¹ And yet I have always hesitated to fully endorse Christian asceticism, that is, the denial of worldly goods or pleasures for the benefit of the soul. Maybe my hesitancy was partly fueled by interaction early in my Christian life with a denomination that stressed personal holiness and separation from the world. I intuitively recoiled from the threat of Gnosticism.² But I was equally aware of the destructive side of human passions. To be honest, I've always tended to be an addictive-compulsive type.

This burning existential dilemma of how to relate to the world's delights burst into a blaze for me a few years ago as I began to simultaneously read the Desert Fathers and G.K. Chesterton.³ The Desert Fathers counseled me to flee from the world; Chesterton told me to embrace the world madly. Drink deeply of life, he advised: “seek to remind [yourself], by every electric shock to the intellect, that [you are] still a man alive”⁴ I had read enough of Chesterton to know that he detested the teetotaler's doctrine. But what about self-restraint, I mused? After all, our culture is hardly prodigal in self-discipline. Might not Chesterton's doctrine of joy and celebration end in excessive self-indulgence for many today—even to the point of self-destruction? So what role should asceticism play in the life and thought of Christians?

As these thoughts coursed through my head, I happened to be on my way to a spiritual retreat and I was listening to *Orthodoxy* on tape. This is what I heard:

A man loves Nature in the morning for her innocence and amiability, and at nightfall, if he is loving her still, it is for her darkness and cruelty. He washes at dawn in clear water as did the Wise Man of the Stoics, yet, somehow at the dark end of the day, he is bathing in hot bull's blood, as did Julian the Apostate. The mere pursuit of health always leads to something unhealthy. Physical nature must not be made the direct object of obedience; it must be enjoyed, not worshipped.⁵

I had grown up thinking that the mere pursuit of health always led to something happy, if not healthy. To obey passion was to find satisfaction. But Chesterton was describing how the flame of passion without limits and unguarded always blazed into a destructive conflagration. And again Chesterton suggested:

I had found this hole in the world: the fact that one must somehow find a way of loving the world without trusting it; somehow one must love the world without being worldly.⁶

So, here was the question: how to enjoy the world without turning it into an idol, how to embrace it thankfully without loving it inordinately. Chesterton seemed to be agreeing with me that over-indulgence is a potential problem. Of Swinburne he cautioned, “The restraints of Christians saddened him simply because he was more hedonist than a healthy man should be.”⁷ Evidently joy and pleasure could be taken too far. Chesterton had witnessed how pleasure could be abused by the aesthetes of his day.⁸

The solution posed in *Orthodoxy* intrigued me. First, Chesterton argued for balance, for equilibrium. As he pointed out, a person can be mad and eat too much or be mad and eat too little. Either extreme is equally insane. But his case for balance, for Aristotle's μέσον, was in no way a bland balance. He spoke instead of a collision between two apparent opposites, a joining of two furious forces in which the ferocity of each would remain.⁹

Although Chesterton does not apply this notion of energetic balance directly to the case of asceticism, it is easy to make the jump for him. The church, he would say, has believed both feverishly in fasting and furiously in feasting. Yet this perfect balance was not epitomized in any single individual; rather, it "was often distributed over the whole body of Christendom." One person might be fasting while another was feasting. "St. Francis in praising all good, could be a more shouting optimist than Walt Whitman. St. Jerome, in denouncing all evil, could paint the world blacker than Schopenhauer. Both passions were free because both were kept in their place."¹⁰ Within the church, in other words, there is a place for enjoyment of God's good gifts, but to preserve that enjoyment, to ensure that it does not devolve into a kind of pollution of the soul, limits must be tended. "The proper form of thanks" that is due God "is some form of humility and restraint: we should thank God for beer and Burgundy by not drinking too much of them."¹¹

So, since I was unwilling to give up the world's delights, I tried the feasting and fasting routine for a while, the Chestertonian notion of balance, without finding this completely satisfactory. I would have to wait until Chesterton gave me another variation of this feast /fast model in his biography of St. Francis. In Francis, I would discover the fast become feast. This is what I so wanted to learn. So let us now explore Chesterton's beautiful rendition of the Franciscan feasting fast.

I need to declare from the start that I do not like beets. Let's just say they are not an item I would choose at a buffet; but there I was, eating and enjoying a red beet as if it were a juicy steak. Somewhere in that slice of beet (and somewhere in the whole experience of the meal) lay the key to asceticism for which I'd been searching. I should mention that by temperament I am an aesthete, a person drawn to the enjoyment of life's finest experiences. Perhaps I am not an extreme aesthete, like Soren Kierkegaard's "A" in *Either/Or*, though, in fact, Kierkegaard correctly identified the painful dilemma for any committed aesthete: as one pursues the life of meaning through pleasure, sensation, and beauty an increasing danger looms that one will languish in boredom and despair. The pleasure is never enough to please. Kierkegaard cites the emperor Nero as an example. Nero had all the means and resources available any human needed to pursue pleasure, yet he increasingly became discontentedly sated. A law of

diminishing returns kicks in for the extreme aesthete so that more and more stimulation is required to produce the same pleasure (I won't recount the merits here of "A's" rotation method of cultivating pleasure). So Nero stands as one extreme.¹²

The rigorous ascetic represents the opposite extreme. Having read a little of *The Life of St. Antony* and the desert fathers, I recalled the pain they so freely rushed to embrace. Antony kept vigil "to such an extent that he often continued the whole night without sleep . . . He ate once a day . . . His food was bread and salt, his drink, water only . . . For the most part he lay upon the bare ground."¹³ I don't know about you, but that sounds like college dorm life to me. I'm getting too old for those kinds of spiritual heroics. Yet who is so deaf that he or she cannot hear an appealing simplicity in this ascetic call.

But there must be some balance, I thought, between these two extremes of aestheticism and asceticism. To merely denounce the world's goods and pleasures for the sake of rigor seemed a Gnostic renunciation of God's good gifts. Author Kathleen Norris looks at asceticism more positively. In her book *Dakota*, she describes her move from New York City to North Dakota as "entering into a kind of literary desert." She suddenly found herself in monastic conditions. But listen to how she interprets her situation:

I had stumbled onto a basic truth of asceticism: that it is not necessarily a denigration of the body, though it has often been misapplied for that purpose. Rather, it is a way of surrendering to reduced circumstances in a manner that enhances the whole person. It is a radial way of knowing exactly who, what, and where you are, in defiance of those powerful forces in society—alcohol, drugs, television, shopping malls, motels—that aim to make us forget.¹⁴

That sounded good to me when I read it. A little well placed self-discipline might not only do me good, I might actually be able to enjoy the fruits of it as I was doing it. Enjoyable asceticism—what a concept!

Essentially, the reason I became a vegetarian for three years was to practice self-control. It happened this way. A friend of mine was speaking to a group of Christians.¹⁵ In his address he told us that as a group we Christians fare no better statistically than the rest of the culture when it comes to issues of morals and ethics (for instance, when it comes to divorce).¹⁶ He then added this explanation: we are so poor at practicing self-control in most areas of our lives that when it comes to a subject about which we do care (fidelity in marriage), we are so out of practice that we fall flat on our pious faces. In conclusion, he cried out: "So go out there and find some way to develop self-control!" Now, I love meat. "If I gave up eating meat," I thought, "it would

remind me of limits and boundaries in life.” I thought Chesterton would approve of my logic, since my vegetarianism was not based on some sentimental notion that animals should not be killed. As long as animals aren't tortured, I believe meat should be eaten (preferably humans eating animals instead of the other way around).

I arrived at the retreat center, *The Hermitage* in Three Rivers, Michigan, just in time for dinner. What I did not remember was that the meals were to be eaten in silence. I felt unusually adventurous as I examined the variety of dishes on the counter. I took a little of everything. Normally, I scarf my food (even though my nine-year old daughter often reminds me not to). But since scarfing in front of eight other people who can hear every slurp and dribble is embarrassing, I began to eat slowly. I think Taize music was playing that ushered us all into a meditative state as we ate. The taste of each bite and the combinations of tastes were mystically multiplied by a thousand. Was it because all the food was fresh from the Hermitage garden, prepared with care and prayer? Was it because I was eating more slowly? I am not sure I know why, but in any case, it was delicious. The meal was Babette's feast. And the best part was the red beets!

Normally, I would have been ready to go back for seconds and thirds, (and this meal was worthy of at least thirds). But I realized early in the meal that it would be a sacrilege to do so, like asking for a handful of wafers at communion. Indeed, the Spirit had transformed the meal into something sacramental. The meal was somehow perfectly balanced, aesthetically and gastronomically. Piling up my plate would turn the feast into a commodity.

The dinner became a kind of confirmation of my decision to give up eating meat. What I had discovered was an inch of what Chesterton insisted St. Francis had found. Like a reckless lover, Francis gave to God all he could give him, he sacrificed all he had, he gave his very self, out of love and gratitude—and with joy. Francis did it out of love, and what he got back was love. I had given up meat, but gotten back beets in a way that seemed to me at the time more miraculous than if the table water had been turned into wine. The whole meal glowed with an eternal confirmation that I had made the right choice. I had given up one thing, but received the whole world back again in brighter hues and with deeper meaning. I had given up flesh but received back in return joy in all food. As Chesterton says regarding Francis: “There is no way a man can earn a star or deserve a sunset.” In his *Autobiography*, G.K. declares: “I asked through what incarnations or prenatal purgatories I must have passed, to earn the reward of looking at a dandelion.”¹⁷ In giving up we gain. That is the message of Lent. Because only then are we truly thankful when the feast of Easter comes. If you want to learn gratitude for having two legs, try limping

around for a few weeks on one (with the other in a cast), winks Chesterton.¹⁸

What Chesterton helped me see is that asceticism need not be negative. Asceticism can be enjoyable. For Francis it certainly was.

It was as positive as a passion; it had all the air of being as positive as a pleasure. He devoured fasting as a man devours food. He plunged after poverty as men have dug madly for gold. And it is precisely the positive and passionate quality of this part of his personality that is a challenge to the modern mind in the whole problem of the pursuit of pleasure.¹⁹

Here was a way to love the world without being in the world and without having the world suck you into its delusions of happiness. St. Francis, in the end, beats the pagan hedonists at their own game. As Alexander Men, the Russian martyr put it:

At a certain level, [St. Francis] rejected the world; but at a higher level, he adopted it like another person. He loved nature, people, animals, grass, water, as no pagan was ever able to do: ‘My sister the moon, my brother the sun.’ This is something completely different than the gods of Antiquity. He accomplished a certain ‘dialectical turn-around’: having left the world so as to return and sanctify it by his love and his faith.²⁰

Bon Appetit!

Notes

- ¹ Augustine. *Confessions*, in Richard Foster, *Devotional Classics*. San Francisco: HarperSanfrancisco, 1993:55
- ² There are of course a variety of forms of Gnosticism, some more and some less legitimate. The early Christian heretic Marcion, who certainly exhibited Gnostic tendencies, insisted the body “was a stinking dungeon.” Simon Stylites, though his orthodoxy was never impugned, spent 30 years atop a pillar—hardly behavior considered affirming of bodily material existence. The Gospel of John itself incorporates Gnostic notions.
- ³ See Thomas Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert*. New York: New Directions, 1960; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications 1984.
- ⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *Manalive*. New York: John Lane, 1912: 298.
- ⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995: 82.

⁶ *Orthodoxy*: 84

⁷ *Orthodoxy*: 97

⁸ See G.K. Chesterton, *The Diabolist*, in *Tremendous Trifles* (London: Methuen, 1927), where an acquaintance of Chesterton's willingly admitted, "Only what you call evil I call good" (231). Of course, Oscar Wilde was the chief emblem of decadence for Chesterton's generation.

⁹ *Orthodoxy*: 98-101

¹⁰ *Orthodoxy*: 102

¹¹ *Orthodoxy*: 70

¹² Soren Kiekegaard. *Either/Or*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971: 19-42, 281-96.

¹³ Athanasius. *The Life of Anthony and the letter to Marcellinus*. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980: 36.

¹⁴ Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993: 23.

¹⁵ In fact, it was a chapel address at Taylor University by Jim Spiegel.

¹⁶ One might profitably compare the thrust of this argument with Ron Sider's recent book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*. This is "the scandal": after reading Sider's book, one is tempted to insist there is no Evangelical conscience.

¹⁷ G. K Chesterton, *The Autobiography*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988: 321.

¹⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *The Advantage of Having One Leg*, in *Tremendous Trifles*. London: Methuen, 1927: 37-42.

¹⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939: 96.

²⁰ Yves Hamant, *Alexander Men*. Torrance: Oakwood Publications, 1995: 139.