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RACE WITH THE DEVIL :

A Journey from the Hell of Hate to the Well of Mercy

Joseph Pearce, Ave Maria University

‘A sound atheist can not be too careful of the books that he reads.’ So said C.S. Lewis in his autobiographical apologia, *Surprised by Joy*. These words continue to resonate across the abyss of years that separates me from the abysmal bitterness of my past.

What is true of the atheist is as true of the racist. Looking back into the piteous pits of the hell of hatred that consumed my youth, I can see the role that great Christian writers played in lighting my path out of the darkened depths. Eventually, with their light to guide me, I stumbled out into the dazzling brilliance of Christian day. Looking back along that path, I can see, in my memory’s eye, the literary candles that lit the way. There are dozens of candles bearing the name of G.K. Chesterton, of which *Orthodoxy*, *The Everlasting Man*, *The Well and the Shallows* and *The Outline of Sanity* shine forth particularly brightly. Almost as many candles bear the name of Chesterton’s great friend, Hilaire Belloc, and several bear the name of John Henry Newman. And, of course, there is the flickering presence of Lewis and Tolkien. These and countless others light the path by which I’ve traveled.

Long before any of these candles were lit, I found myself groping in the unlit tunnel of racial hatred, the angst and anger of which had all but obliterated the blissful memories of a relatively carefree childhood. Guilty of ignorance, I left my innocence

behind and advanced into adolescence with the arrogance of pride and prejudice - boyhood bliss blistered by bitterness.

I grew up in a relatively poor neighbourhood in London's East End at a time when large-scale immigration was causing major demographic changes. The influx of large numbers of Indians and Pakistanis was quite literally changing the face of England, darkening the complexion and adding to the complexity of English life. Perhaps inevitably, the arrival of these immigrants caused a great deal of resentment amongst the indigenous population. Racial tensions were high and violence between white and Asian youths was becoming commonplace. It was in this highly charged atmosphere that I emerged into angry adolescence.

At the age of fifteen I joined the National Front, a new force in British politics which demanded the compulsory repatriation of all non-white immigrants. As a political activist my life revolved around street demonstrations, many of which became violent. I filled my empty head and inflamed my impassioned heart with racist ideology and elitist philosophy. It was at this time that I made what I now consider to be my Faustian pact, i.e. my pact with the Devil; not that I had heard of Faust nor, as an agnostic, did I have any particular belief in the Devil. Nonetheless, I recall making a conscious 'wish' that I would give everything if I could work full-time for the National Front. My 'wish' was granted and I abandoned my education to devote myself wholeheartedly to becoming a full-time 'racial revolutionary'.

I never looked back. At the age of sixteen I became editor of *Bulldog*, the newspaper of the Young National Front, and, three years later, became editor of *Nationalism Today*, a 'higher brow' ideological journal. At eighteen I became the

youngest member of the party's governing body. Whether I believed in him or not, the Devil had certainly been diligent in answering my 'wish'.

Apart from the racism, the sphere of my bitterness also included a disdain for Catholicism, partly because the terrorists of the IRA were Catholics and partly because I had imbibed the anti-Catholic prejudice of many Englishmen that Catholicism is a 'foreign' religion. Such prejudice is deeply rooted in the national psyche, stretching back to the anti-Catholicism of Henry VIII and his English Reformation, to Elizabeth I and the Spanish Armada, to James I and the Gunpowder Plot, and to William of Orange and the so-called 'Glorious' Revolution. I knew enough of English history – or, at least, enough of the prejudiced Protestant view of it that I had imbibed in my ignorance – to see Catholicism as an enemy to the Nationhood which, as a racial nationalist, I now espoused with a quasi-religious fervour.

It was, however, in the context of 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland that my anti-Catholicism would reveal itself in its full ugliness. The IRA's bombing campaign was at its height during the 1970s and my hatred of Republican terrorism led to my becoming involved in the volatile politics of Ulster. I joined the Orange Order, a pseudo-masonic secret society whose sole purpose of existence is to oppose 'popery', i.e. Catholicism. Technically, although only 'Protestants' were allowed to join the Orange Order, any actual belief in God did not appear necessary. As a 'Protestant' agnostic I was allowed to join and a friend of mine, an avowed atheist, was also accepted without qualms. Ultimately the only qualification was not a love for Christ but a hatred of the Church.

In October 1978, still only seventeen, I flew to Derry in Northern Ireland to assist in the organization of a National Front march. Tensions were high in the city and,

towards the end of the day, riots broke out between the Protestant demonstrators and the police. For the duration of the evening and well into the night, petrol bombs were thrown at the police, Catholic homes were attacked and Catholic-owned shops were looted and destroyed. I had experienced political violence on the streets of England but nothing on the sheer scale of the anger and violence that I experienced in Northern Ireland.

My appetite whetted, I became further embroiled in the politics of Ulster, forging friendships and political alliances with the leaders of the Protestant paramilitary groups, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). During a secret meeting with the army council of the UVF it was suggested that I use my connections with extremist groups in other parts of the world to open channels for arms smuggling. On another occasion an 'active service unit' of the UVF, i.e. a terrorist cell, offered their 'services' to me, assuring me of their willingness to assassinate any 'targets' that I would like 'taken out' and expressing their eagerness to show me their arsenal of weaponry as a mark of their 'good faith'. I declined their offer, as politely as possible – one does not wish to offend 'friends' such as these! They were dangerous times. Within a few years, two of my friends in Northern Ireland had been murdered by the IRA.

Back in England violence continued to erupt at National Front demonstrations. Outside an election meeting in an Indian area of London in 1979, at which I was one of the speakers, a riot ensued in which one demonstrator was killed. A few years later a friend of mine, an elderly man, was killed at another election meeting, though on that occasion I was not present.

Predictably perhaps, it was only a matter of time before my extremist politics brought me into conflict with the law. In 1982, as editor of *Bulldog*, I was convicted

under the Race Relations Act for publishing material 'likely to incite racial hatred' and was sentenced to six months in prison. The trial made national headlines with the result that I spent much of my sentence in isolation and in solitary confinement because the prison authorities were fearful that my presence might provoke trouble between black and white inmates. Ironically one of the other prisoners in the top security wing was an IRA sympathizer who had been imprisoned for slashing a portrait of Princess Diana with a knife. He and I saw ourselves as 'political prisoners', not as mere 'common criminals', like the murderers, serving life sentences, who constituted the majority of the other prisoners on the top security wing.

Unrepentant, I continued to edit *Bulldog* following my release and was duly charged once again with offences under the Race Relations Act. On the second occasion I was sentenced to twelve months imprisonment. Thus I spent both my twenty-first and twenty-fifth birthdays behind bars.

During the first of my prison sentences, Auberon Waugh, a well-known writer and son of the great Catholic novelist, Evelyn Waugh, had referred to me as a 'wretched youth'. How right he was! Wretched and wrecked upon the rock of my own hardness of heart. Years later, when asked by the priest who was instructing me in the Catholic faith to write an essay on my conversion, I began it with the opening lines of John Newton's famous hymn extolling the 'amazing grace ... that saved a wretch like me'. Even today, when forced to look candidly into the blackness of my past, I am utterly astonished at the truly amazing grace that somehow managed to take root in the desert of my soul.

How then did the cactus of grace, growing at first unheeded in the desert of my just deserts, become the cataract of life-giving waters washing my sins away in the

sacramental grace of confession? How, to put the matter more bluntly and blandly, was I freed from the prison of my sinful convictions? How was I brought from the locked door of my prison cell to the open arms of Mother Church?

With the wisdom of hindsight, I perceive that the seeds of my future conversion were planted as early as 1980 when I was still only nineteen years old. In what barren soil they were planted! At the time I was at the very height, or depth, of my political fanaticism and was indulging the worst excesses of my anti-Catholic prejudices in the dirty waters of Ulster Protestantism. Few could have been further from St Peter's Gate than I.

The seeds were planted in the genuine desire to seek a political and economic alternative to the sins of communism and the cynicism of consumerism. During the confrontations on the streets with my Marxist opponents I was incensed by their suggestion that, as an anti-communist, I was, *ipso facto*, a 'storm-trooper of capitalism'. I refused to believe that the only alternative to Mammon was Marx. I was convinced that communism was a red herring and that it was possible to have a socially just society without socialism. In my quest to discover such an alternative someone suggested that I read more about the distributist ideas of Belloc and Chesterton. At this juncture one hears echoes once again of Lewis's stricture that 'a sound atheist cannot be too careful of the books that he reads', not least because the book to which he was specifically referring was Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*, a book which would precipitate Lewis's first tentative steps to conversion. In this, at least, I can claim a real parallel between C.S. Lewis and myself. For me, as for him, a book by Chesterton would lead towards

conversion. In my case, however, the book which was destined to have such a profound influence was a lesser known book of Chesterton's.

The friend who suggested that I study the distributist ideas of Chesterton informed me that I should buy his book, *The Outline of Sanity*, but also that I should read an invaluable essay on the subject, entitled 'Reflections on a Rotten Apple', which was to be found in a collection of his essays entitled *The Well and the Shallows*. As he suggested, I purchased these two books and sat down expectantly to read the volume of essays. Imagine my surprise, and my consternation, to discover that the book was, for the most part, a defence of the Catholic faith against various modern attacks upon it. And imagine my confusion when I discovered that I could not fault Chesterton's logic.

The wit and wisdom of Chesterton had pulled the rug out from under my smug prejudices against the Catholic Church. From that moment I began to discover Her as She is, and not as She is alleged to be by Her enemies. I began the journey from the rumour that She was the Whore of Babylon to the realization that She was in fact the Bride of Christ.

It was, however, destined to be a long journey. I was lost in Dante's dark wood, so deeply lost that I had perhaps already strayed into the Inferno. It is a long and arduous climb from there to the foot of Mount Purgatory. I was, however, in good company. If Dante had Virgil, I had Chesterton. He would accompany me faithfully every inch of the way, present always through the pages of his books. I began to devour everything by Chesterton that I could get my hands on, consuming his words with ravenous delight. Through Chesterton I came to know Belloc; then Lewis; then Newman. During the second prison sentence I first read *The Lord of the Rings* and, though I did not at that time

fathom the full mystical depths of the Catholicism in Tolkien's myth, I was aware of its goodness, its objective morality and the well of virtue from which it drew. And, of course, I was aware that Tolkien, like Chesterton, Belloc and Newman, was a Catholic. Why was it that most of my favourite writers were Catholics?

It was during the second prison sentence that I first started to consider myself a Catholic. When, as is standard procedure, I was asked my religion by the prison authorities at the beginning of my sentence, I announced that I was a Catholic. I wasn't of course, at least not technically, but it was my first affirmation of faith, even to myself. A significant landmark had been reached. Another significant landmark during the second prison sentence was my first fumbling efforts at prayer. I am not aware of ever having prayed prior to my arrival at Wormwood Scrubs prison in December 1985, at least not if one discounts the schoolboy prayers recited parrot-fashion to an unknown and unlooked-for God many years earlier during drab and lukewarm school services. Now, in the desolation of my cell, I fumbled my fingers over the beads of a Rosary that someone had sent me. I had no idea how to say it. I did not know the *Hail Mary* or the *Glory Be* and I could not remember the *Lord's Prayer*. Nonetheless, I ad-libbed my way from bead to bead uttering prayers of my own devising, pleading from the depths of my piteous predicament for the faith, hope and love that my mind and heart desired. It was a start, small but significant ...

My release from prison in 1986 heralded the beginning of the end of my life as a political extremist. Increasingly disillusioned, I extricated myself from the organisation which had been my life, and which had delineated my very *raison d'être*, for more than a decade. As a fifteen year old I had 'wished' to give my life to the 'cause', now, in my

mid-twenties, I desired only to give my life to Christ. If the Devil had taken my earlier 'wish' and had granted it infernally, Christ would take my new-found desire and grant it purgatorially. Having spent the whole of the 1980s in a spiritual arm-wrestle, fought within my heart and my head between the hell of hatred within myself and the well of love promised and poured out by Christ, I finally 'came home' to the loving embrace of Holy Mother Church on the Feast of St Joseph, 1989. Today, seventeen years on, I still find myself utterly amazed at the grace that could save a wretch like me.