

## Chesterton in America

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Chesterton's earliest writing about America is found in a fragment which he composed while a teenager. In it he wrote this about the central character of the story:

He wished to discover America. His gay and thoughtless friends, who could not understand him, pointed out that America had already been discovered, I think they said by Christopher Columbus, some time ago, and that there were big cities of Anglo-Saxon people there already, New York and Boston, and so on. But the Admiral explained to them, kindly enough, that this had nothing to do with it. They might have discovered America, but he had not.

The passage is from a notebook containing which was published after his death by his biographer Maisie Ward entitled *The Coloured Lands*. Chesterton's actual discovery of America took place during two visits, the first of which was from early January until mid April of 1921, and the second ten years later, a longer visit, from early October 1930 until late March 1931.

These two visits to America came at a critical time in Chesterton's life. In 1921, though close to making his great life-changing decision, he had not yet been received into the Catholic Church. When nine years later, he visited America as a Catholic, he was received with great enthusiasm at Notre Dame University, where he lectured for six weeks, and at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he received an honorary doctorate. His change in religion illuminates the difference in mood which marked his return visit to America. Although the lectures he gave on his second tour occurred in dozens of cities and were attended by audiences which were not predominantly Catholic, the atmosphere was changed. In 1921, his view of America was somewhat pessimistic; in 1930 it was far more positive. In both instances, however, his reaction to America provides an excellent way of understanding Chesterton and the major themes of his social philosophy. They also throw light on what he learned from America.

In the course of his 1921 visit, Chesterton confirmed the public image that had been gradually forming during the first two decades of his public life. He was proud to describe himself as a journalist, but he was a journalist of a most unusual kind. His meteoric rise to fame in the early years of the twentieth century had made him one of the best-known literary figures of the age. In addition to the hundreds of articles he wrote for newspapers and journals, he also achieved fame by a seemingly inexhaustible flood of

imaginative writing. During these years, he wrote biographies of Robert Browning, G. F. Watts, Charles Dickens and G. B. Shaw, as well as almost all his highly regarded Dickens criticism. There were also a critical study of Victorian literature, a play, and a history of England. During these years he wrote the best of his poetry, including his greatest poem, *The Ballad of the White Horse*. Incredibly he was also a novelist and a short-story writer, with nearly a dozen novels and what is his most famous fiction, The Father Brown stories.

He was recognised as an influential thinker. All his writing represented a coherent philosophy of life, so that in the tradition of the Victorian sage, he had become the moral standard for a generation of readers in the English-speaking world and beyond. Although he was not yet a Catholic, he acted as a spokesman for Catholic beliefs. His account of how he came to believe in Christianity was expressed in a religious and philosophical treatise he entitled *Orthodoxy*, a book which tells the story of his attempt to invent a new religion and of his subsequent discovery that like America it had already been discovered and was called Christianity. "I did not make it," he writes, "God and humanity made it and it made me." Though never disguising his Catholic sympathies, the creed he defended in this 1908 book was cheerfully ecumenical: "When the word 'orthodoxy' is used here," he explains, "it means the Apostles' Creed, as understood by everybody calling himself Christian until a very short while ago, and the general historical conduct of those who held such a creed."

Chesterton's fame in these early years of his career before his first visit to America was based on this role as a moralist and as a defender of an endangered religious tradition. He was an admirer of Dr. Samuel Johnson, appearing once in a pageant as that great English moralist whose thinking was so like his own. Fond as he was of debate, he understood that the malaise of the age could not be healed by argumentation alone. He (and the Anglo-Catholic group with which he worked) understood that it was useless to evangelise individuals, without altering the moral atmosphere which affected individuals as decisively as the physical world around them. Since the collective mind he was attempting to influence was still in some sense Christian, his work was essentially that of Christian education.

Even his apparent limitations were a help in performing this immense task. Since his marriage in 1901 to Frances Blogg, a devout Anglican, he had been in contact with a remarkable group of Anglo-Catholic theologians who were working out a strategy for the religious regeneration of England. He lectured for the Christian Social Union and wrote for their journal *Commonwealth*, as well as for less congenial journals, such as the *Church Socialist Quarterly*, the *Hibbert Journal* and A. R. Orage's *New Age*. He was a friend of Anglican social theologians, including Henry Scott Holland, Bishop Charles Gore, Charles Masterman, and that radical Christian Conral Noel. Many of the ideas which came to be identified as Chestertonian were borrowed from them. They were his teachers, but they also were influenced by him. Nevertheless he was never an Anglican in the ordinary sense of the word. He seldom attended Anglican religious services, and he was never confirmed as an Anglican. In many ways, his religious position kept some of

the vagueness of the Liberal Unitarian universalism which had characterised the religious atmosphere of his childhood home.

But if these were limitations, they were limitations which made him a comfortable figure to his readers on both shores of the Atlantic. He was a sacramental Christian who could speak to evangelical Protestants and other non-sacramental Christians unthreateningly, because he was not a Roman Catholic. His writings were all the more persuasive because he seemed to find room in them for every good thing he found in contemporary life. In his own person, he maintained a genial friendliness with apparently irreconcilably hostile points of view. He was a Liberal in politics and a Catholic Christian in religion, even though the Liberal governments of his day were hostile to the Catholic ideas he championed. Typically, his novels seldom have a single hero or defend a single point of view. Like Adam Wayne and Auberon Quinn, the heroes of his first novel, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), he is both an idealist and a critic of idealism. Like Evan MacIan and James Turnbull, the heroes of his most explicitly religious novel, *The Ball and the Cross* (1910), he is a spokesman for Catholicism and a critic of romantic Catholicism. He is like the Church he describes in *Orthodoxy*, welcoming a variety of apparently opposite points of view and keeping them intact in a complex balance.

It is important to remember that the Chesterton who arrived in America at the beginning of 1921 was already known to the American reading public. Chesterton himself had already noted that the English and Americans read each others' authors. Hawthorne and Mark Twain were as well known in Britain as they were in America, and Dickens and Thackeray were read by Americans even if they knew little about the backgrounds of these intensely English writers. So too it was with Chesterton. Most of his books found American publishers; and although his American readers were unlikely to have fully understood the complex and idiosyncratic English background which provided the context for his writing, they had come to have an affection for an author whom they regarded as wise and humorous—a British Will Rogers, as it were.

But if one is to understand Chesterton's reaction to America during his 1921 visit, it is necessary to note another, hidden aspect of his complex personality. Much which seems surprising in Chesterton's philosophy of life can be explained by a personal crisis which he experienced in 1893-1894 when he was a student at London University's Slade School of Art. The mental and spiritual crisis that he experienced at that time is known to philosophy as solipsism. In chapter IV of his Autobiography, "How to be a Lunatic," Chesterton describes how this extreme form of idealism affected him. He writes:

At a very early age I had thought my way back to thought itself. It is a very dreadful thing to do; for I may lead to thinking that there was nothing but thought. At this time I did not very clearly distinguish between dreaming and waking; not only as a mood, but as a metaphysical doubt, I felt as if everything might be a dream. It was as if I had myself projected the universe from within, with all its trees and stars; and that is so near to the notion of being God that it is manifestly even nearer to going mad. I was not mad, in any medical or physical sense: I was simply carrying the skepticism of my tome as far as it would go. And I soon found it would go a great deal further than most of the sceptics went. While dull atheists came and explained to me that there was nothing but matter, I

listened with a sort of calm horror of detachment, suspecting that there was nothing but mind.

This mental crisis was also a moral crisis. Chesterton describes it “as a condition of moral anarchy within.” He goes on to explain that the “the whole mood was overpowered and oppressed with a sort of congestion of imagination. As Bunyan, in his morbid period, described himself as prompted to utter blasphemies, I had an overpowering impulse to record or draw horrible ideas and images; plunging deeper and deeper as in a blind spiritual suicide.” The entire experience is re-visited in *The Man Who Was Thursday*, a 1908 book regarded by many as Chesterton’s best novel. It is significantly sub-titled “A Nightmare.”

Chesterton’s reaction to the solipsistic nightmare from which he had quickly recovered, explains a great deal about his world view which permeated all his writing. It might be said that he spent the rest of his life celebrating the discovery that he was not God. He insisted that basis of happiness was to be found in the gift of existence itself, a gift for which the only appropriate response was wonder and gratitude. One must learn, he said, to be happy in the quiet moments when one remembers that one is alive. Direct contact with simple material things had an immense importance for him. He disliked vast abstract ideologies such as socialism and monopoly capitalism. He loved small nations and small communities, such as the family and the village. While he hated British Imperialism he was intensely patriotic to England, and to his neighbourhood. After he had become a Christian, he found religious justification for his personal philosophy in the doctrine of the Incarnation. His favourite verse from the Creed was “*Et Incarnatus est:*” ”And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” which is the distinguishing mark of Christianity. Like St. Francis—whom he loved— and about whom he wrote a charming biography he believed that the coming of Christ was itself a Redemption. In one of his most startling paradoxes he said that the work of the devil is spiritual, whereas the work of God is material. As a sacramental Christian, he believed that the Christian community was itself the Sacrament of Christ, that the sacraments were actions of Christ who had attributed to the Church his three-fold mission of healing, teaching and praying, and that the life of every human being was a re-enactment of the Gospel story.

Such was the nature of the man who was welcomed to New York City on a chilly January day in 1921. Everything he then said about America and everything he then learned about America were related to the complex philosophy which it had taken him forty-seven years to develop. Even his witticism expressed his Christianity. It is said that one of the questions an American reporter asked him even before the ship touched land—reporters, Chesterton pointed out, were like pirates who boarded the ship as soon as soon as it came into the harbour—was the age-old question one about what book he would take with him to desert island: the Bible, Shakespeare, Dickens? There are different versions of Chesterton reply, but in essence he said he would take a book entitled *A Hundred and One Ways to Make a Boat*. Here, in a single phrase, is an instance of Chesterton’s ongoing concern with solipsism. The man on the desert island is a metaphor for the man trapped in his own mind, whose most pressing need is a boat that would take him back to his fellow human beings.

Chesterton in America discovered fresh confirmation of what he had come to believe. He tended to interpret events as symbols, and so he interpreted his American experience in symbolic terms. While still aboard the ocean liner, for example, he was thanked by an Irish-American reporter for all that he had done for Ireland. Chesterton had indeed defended Ireland throughout his journalistic, and in 1921 Ireland was a topic of special interest because the Irish war for independence was then being fought. But Chesterton turned this small incident into a symbol about the meaning of America as a defender of the liberty which was the central tenet of his own political philosophy. As the journalist was speaking Chesterton saw the Statue of Liberty and saw that the great bronze was gleaming green in the morning light...And then I suddenly remembered that this Liberty was still in some sense enlightening the world, or one part of the world. They had made it so much their home that the very colour of the country seemed to change with the infusion; as the bronze of the great statue took on a semblance of the wearing of the green.”

*What I Saw in America* which was published the year after his return to England, Chesterton presents his analysis of what America represents. His view is a combination of admiration and foreboding. He had visited a variety of American cities: New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Nashville, Oklahoma, Omaha and Albany. Everywhere he received a hero's welcome, and slowly he formed his impressions into an insight of the country. In essence, his analysis of America amounts to the following: there were two Americas. The first was represented by cosmopolitan New York, which represented for him everything he feared about modern commercialism. The second was the America of small towns and the countryside. But also the cities such as Boston, Baltimore and Washington all of which exhibited an older civic tradition. While he liked Americans, he was uneasy with American life. Maisie Ward, explained his view with a question: “the whole question of America was: would the older, simpler, really great tradition win, or would it be defeated by the new and towering evil?”

All his comments on America are related to this question. New York was his symbol of consumerist capitalism. Consider his comment about Broadway: “What a glorious garden of wonders this would be for anyone who was lucky enough to be unable to read.” An illiterate farmer from Europe might imagine a proclamation in letters of fire of some great national feast. “Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!” How disappointing to learn they were advertisements to make money. Of the sky-scrapers, he admired the aesthetic appeal: “vertical lines that suggest a sort of rush upwards, as of great cataracts topsy turvy—the strong daylight finds everywhere the broken edges of things and the sort of hues we see in newly-turned earth or the white sections of trees.” He found a true “imaginative pleasure” in what he called “those dizzy turrets and dancing fires.”.But his final judgment about them is dismissive: “If those nightmare building were really all built for nothing, how noble they would be.”

It was on the great plains of the mid-West that he found the America he admired, a society mocked by Sinclair Lewis in *Main Street*. For Chesterton, however, it represented the real strength of America. It appealed to him firstly because it was still—unlike England—agricultural. “We in England hear a great deal, we hear far too much,

about the economic energy of industrial America, about the money of Mr. Morgan, or the machinery of Mr. Edison. We never realise that while we in England suffer from the same sort of successes in capitalism and clockwork, we have not got what the Americans have got; something at least to balance it in the way of a free agriculture, a vast field of free farms dotted with small freeholders.”

Small-town America also appealed to him because it was a world of agricultural equality.

“And, even in places like that described as Main Street,” Chesterton continues, “that comparative equality can immediately be felt. The men may be provincials, but they are certainly citizens; they consult on a common basis. And I repeat that in this, after all, they do achieve what many prophets and righteous men have died to achieve. This plain village, fairly prosperous, fairly equal, untaxed by tyrants and untroubled by wars, is after all the place which reformers have regarded as their aim.” The march to Utopia, the march to the Earthly Paradise, the march to the New Jerusalem, has been very largely the march to Main Street. ”

The other aspect of the America Chesterton admired was represented by the older American cities Boston and Philadelphia were for him cities of tradition and traditionalism. In Boston, Chesterton was received by the head of the Cabot family with what he describes as “kindness and hospitality.” “Boston,” he writes, “is very much a place of memories.” Here he found things he loved which reminded him of England, and of things that had vanished from England: “There are old brown houses in the corner of squares and streets,” he writes, “that are like glimpses of a man’s forgotten childhood; and when I saw the log path with posts where the Autocrat may be supposed to have walked with the schoolmistress, I felt I had come to the land where old tales come true.” In Philadelphia, he felt the presence of Penn and Franklin. Baltimore reminded him that the state of Maryland was “the first experiment in religious freedom in human history.” He also visited Nashville and St. Louis, and found there the traditional American South. In Washington, he found a city worthy of the great President after whom it had been named. It represented for him the ideal of George Washington: “the idea of the Republic that rises above modern money-making and endures.” Chicago, he admits, is more than “the mere pork-packing yard that English tradition suggests,” and he admires its setting on the shores of a great lake, but, as with so many cities, he found it “defiled and even diseased with industrialism.”

Again and again he comes back to the theme of the two Americas. In a quiet hotel in Nashville, Tennessee, he found a faded picture on the wall: “And from the dark canvas looked forth the face of Andrew Jackson, watching like a white eagle.” Jackson is another important symbol for Chesterton. “I believe that there are even fewer among Englishmen than among Americans who realise that the energy of that great man was largely directed towards saving us from the chief evil which destroys the nations to-day. He sought to cut down, as with a sword of simplicity, the new and nameless enormity of finance; and he must have known, as by a lightning flash, that the people were behind him, because all the politicians were against him. The end of that struggle is not yet; but if the bank is

stronger than the sword or the scepter of popular sovereignty, the end will be the end of democracy.”

In spite of his admiration for Americans and especially for rural and small-town Americans, and his respect for the tradition represented by Andrew Jackson—a tradition which he believed was embodied in the older cities of America, the view of America which he formed by the end of his 1921 visit was pessimistic. In the conflict between traditional America and the America symbolised by the commercialism of New York, he saw that commercial America was going to be the victor. The culture of the city was invading the culture of the countryside and overwhelming it. The same was true of the traditional cities which incarnated the noble ideals of the eighteenth-century founding fathers. These cities were no match for the overwhelming power of commercial America. Jeffersonian democracy seemed dead.

There was moreover a religious difficulty. America was essentially a Protestant and consequently a non-sacramental nation. The dominant religious tradition was Puritan, especially in that rural America which had come closest to fulfilling Chesterton’s vision of what a good society should be. One of the best-known sayings of Chesterton comes from *What I Saw in America*, his comment that America was a nation with the soul of a Church. President George W. Bush quoted these words a few years ago during a visit to Communist China. He took these words to mean that the Americans were essentially a religious people. And that indeed is part of what Chesterton meant. But Mr. Bush’s interpretation was too simple. It is true that ideals of the American revolution seemed to Chesterton to be altogether large and admirable; unfortunately, by 1921, they had become ineffectual or even dead. But the religious ideals on which the nation had been built seemed to him small and life-threatening, and these ideals he found to be much alive. Chesterton came to America during Prohibition, a social experiment which illustrated what he disliked about Puritanism. He even preferred Deism. On one occasion, he commented on the absence of a Thanksgiving Day in England. He suggested that the English should establish such a national holiday of their own on the same day as American Thanksgiving. There would, however, be one difference. The Americans would continue to celebrate the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers, the English would celebrate their departure.

In the years that followed this first American visit Chesterton returned again and again to the triumph of Monopoly Capitalism. In 1927, he had been invited to give a talk at his Alma Mater, the University College in the University of London, an institution which was celebrating the centenary of its founding. He chose for his topic “Culture and the Coming Peril.” After praising the great Liberal founders of the University, he went on to say that the greatest danger to the Christian culture of the West was not the Bolshevism of Soviet Russia but the globalised Consumerist culture which was spreading from America to every part of the civilised world. He defined the coming peril in a curious phrase: “standardisation by a low standard.” He claimed that the power of this consumerist culture to undermine traditional societies was greater than that of the totalitarian system of Communism. Given that men derive their ways behaviour from the surrounding culture, the new consumerism also represented a moral danger. He had

explained what this danger was in an article he had written for his own journal, *G.K.'s Weekly*, on June 19, 1926. After insisting that the modern Catholic must defend morality against monopoly, he concludes his essay in the following words:

For the next great heresy is going to be simply an attack on morality, and especially on sexual morality. And it is coming, not from a few Socialists surviving in the Fabian Society, but from the living exultant energy of the rich resolved to enjoy themselves at last with neither Popery nor Puritanism nor Socialism to hold them back. The thin theory of Collectivism never had any real roots in human nature, but the roots of the next heresy, God knows, are as deep as nature itself, whose flower is the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eye and the pride of life. I say that the man who cannot see this cannot see the signs of the times; cannot see even the sky-signs in the street, that are the new sort of signs in heaven. The madness of to-morrow is not in Moscow, but much more in Manhattan—but most of what was in Broadway is already in Piccadilly.

Chesterton's second visit to America in the autumn of 1930 was a far more cheerful event than his first visit when his view of America had become gloomy. Anyone who reads the American essays published in his 1932 book *Sidelights on New London and Newer York* will notice the change in tone from *What I Saw in America*. This new and more positive view of the country can be attributed to the Catholic character of this second visit. He came to America in 1932 as the guest of Notre Dame University where he spent six weeks giving thirty-six lectures on Victorian Literature and Victorian History. His welcome at this Catholic institution was enthusiastic. On the average five hundred students attended his lectures. There was another, perhaps more significant, reason for Chesterton's pleasure in America. At Notre Dame he and Frances lived, not in the splendour of what Chesterton had called the Babylonian American hotel, but with an ordinary and normal American family. For the first time they experienced American hospitality in a domestic setting, and that setting was Catholic.

The importance of the Catholic setting is difficult to exaggerate. Chesterton had returned to England in the Spring of 1922 and a year later he had been received into full communion with the Catholic Church. What this event meant to him was expressed in a poem he wrote on the day of his reception into the Church. He entitled this poem "The Convert." The poem concludes with the following lines:

They rattle reason out through many a sieve  
That stores the dust and lets the gold go free:  
And all these things are less than dust to me  
Because my name is Lazarus and I live."

Sacramental confession was in fact the beginning of a new life for Chesterton. Although an evidently good man by any standard, he felt a deep need for the pardon that can be received only in the sacrament of Penance. When asked why he became a Roman Catholic, he replied that the short answer was that he wanted to get rid of his sins. The fact that he was returning to America as the guest of a Catholic institution was therefore the source of great satisfaction to him. Equally significant for him was the fact that the University he would be visiting was under the patronage of Mary the Mother of God. Chesterton's devotion to Mary was central to his Faith. In an essay published towards the

end of his life in his 1935 book *The Well and the Shallows*, he explains the role that Mary played in his conversion to Catholicism: “I never doubted that the figure (of Mary) was the figure of the faith; that she embodied, as a complete human being still only human, all that this Thing had to say to humanity. The instant I remembered the Catholic Church, I remembered her; when I tried to forget the Catholic Church, I tried to forget her; when I finally saw what was nobler than my fate, the freest and the hardest of all my acts of freedom, it was in front of a gilded and very gaudy little image of her in the port of Brindisi, that I promised the thing that I would do, if I returned to my own land.”

In receiving an honorary degree, Chesterton commented on the difference between his first and second visit to America. His new view of the country, he explained was closely connected to his discovery of a Catholic presence, and within that devotion to Mary, a distinguishing sign of the Catholic faith: “I remember,” he said, “that, when I came to America before, about nine years ago, when I was not yet a Catholic, and when I had hardly realised that there were Catholics in America, my first sensation in this country was one of terror. I recall the first landing and that great hotel in New York, the Biltmore, the name of which held for me such terrifying possibilities. (Surely there would not be more of it!) It all seemed alien, although I quickly discovered what kind and generous people the Americans are. I did not feel at all like that when I came to America the second time. If you want to know why I felt different, the reason is in the name of your University. That name was quite sufficient as far as I was concerned. I would not have mattered if I had been in the mountains of the moon. Wherever she has erected her pillars, all men are at home, and I knew that I should not find strangers.”

A further example of how Marian devotion affected his new view of America is found in “The Arena,” a poem he wrote about a football game and dedicated to the University. In it he contrasts the arena of Nero where the athletes saluted the emperor before going to a game in which some of them will die with Notre Dame’s stadium where young men invoke Mary as they engage in a bloodless sport: “We about to live salute thee.” The golden image on Nero’s arena represents for Chesterton everything that was wrong with the pagan world. The statue of Our Lady on the golden dome of the university represents everything Christianity had done to cleanse the world and restore innocence after the horrors of that cruel paganism:

There uprose a golden giant  
On the gilded house of Nero  
Even his far-flung flaming shadow and his image swollen large  
Looking down on the dry whirlpool  
Of the round Arena Spinning  
As a chariot-wheel goes spinning; and the chariots at the charge.

And the molten monstrous visage  
Saw the pageants, saw the torments,  
Down the golden dust undazzled saw the gladiators go,  
Heard the cry in the closed desert,  
*Te salutant mortituri,*  
As the slaves of doom went stumbling, shuddering,  
To the shades below.

“Lord of Life, of lyres and laughter,  
Those about to die salute thee,  
At thy godlike fancy feeding men with bread and  
beast with men,  
But for us the Fates point deathward  
In a thousand thumbs thrust downward,  
And the Dog of Hell is roaring through  
The lions in their den.

I have seen, where a strange country  
Opened its secret plains above me,  
One great golden dome stands lonely with its golden image, one  
Seen afar, in strange fulfillment,  
Through the sunlit Indian summer  
That Apocalyptic portent that has clothed her with the Sun.

She too looks on the Arena,  
Sees the gladiators in grapple,  
She whose names are Seven Sorrows and the Cause  
of All Our Joy,  
Sees the pit that stank with slaughter  
Scoured to make the courts of morning  
For the cheers of jesting kindred and the scampering  
of a boy.

Chesterton then describes the game itself, between Notre Dame and Navy:

And I saw them shock the whirlwind  
Of the world of dust and dazzle;  
And thrice they stamped, a thunderclap;  
and thrice the sand-wheel swirled:  
And thrice they cried like thunder  
On our Lady of the Victories,  
The Mother of the Master of the Masters of the World.”

The final stanza addresses Mary by the paradoxical titles of the Mother of Sorrows and the Cause of Our Joy:

Queen of Death and deadly weeping  
Those about to live salute thee,  
Youth untroubled; youth untortured; hateless war and harmless mirth  
And the New Lord’s larger largesse  
Holier bread and happier circus,  
Since the Queen of Sevenfold Sorrow has brought joy upon the earth.”

The Catholic character of Chesterton’s second tour of America was also underlined by his visit to Holy Cross College at Worcester, Massachusetts, where he received another honorary degree. The highlight of his visit to Holy Cross was the tribute he received from Paul Claudel, the world-renowned poet and dramatist, at that

time the French Ambassador to the United States. Claudel's words were a reminder of what Chesterton meant, not only to American Catholics whom he was meeting for the first time, but also for the entire Catholic world:

I am delighted to bring my salutations to the great poet and the great Christian, G.K. Chesterton, during his tour of the United States. His books, for the past twenty years, have never failed to bring me joy and refreshment: and this feeling of regard is so tender and unusual that approbation is linked with admiration.

During the past century, Catholicism almost everywhere has had to sustain attitude of defence: it preferred to take shelter in the past and in forms of refuge, or as one might say, in chapels severely cloistered and ornamented with rigid refinery. Chesterton thoroughly understood that in our religion Mystery is wed with Evidence, and our eternal responses with the most pressing and present exigencies. He is the man that threw the doors wide open and upon a world pallid and sick he sent floods of poetry, of joyousness, of noble sympathies, of radiant and thundering humour,—all drawn from unfailing sources of orthodoxy. His onward march is the verification of that divine saying: “The Truth will make you free.”

If I were to state his essential quality, I would say that it is a sort of triumphant common sense—that *gaudium de veritate*, of which philosophers discourse;—a joyous acclaim towards the splendour and the powers of the soul, those faculties that were overburdened and numbed by a century of false science, of pedantic pessimism, and of counterfeit and contra-fact. In the sparkling and irresistible dialectics of a great poet, he keeps always bringing us back to that infallible promise of Christ:—And I will refresh you: *Et Ego reficiam vos*.

Another feature of the visit to Holy Cross College also brought home to Chesterton a reminder that the Catholic Church of which he was now a member represented a larger and more varied world than the one what he had previously known. The students at the College greeted him in the languages of their immigrant forefathers, a revelation of the ethnic richness of American Catholicism. Chesterton was greeted in Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, French, Gaelic, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish and Syriac.

The rest of Chesterton's second visit to America requires less comment. His original plan had been to return to England after his visits to Notre Dame and Holy Cross, but his agent persuaded him to extend his visit by embarking on a second tour of the country. Thus his 1930 visit continued until the Spring of 1931. In addition to lectures in the North-East and Mid-West, he travelled to the South and to California, as well as to British Columbia, his third visit to Canada. In 1921 he had come to Windsor, Ontario, from Detroit. In 1930 he had travelled to the New World by way of the St. Lawrence River, disembarking at Quebec City, from where he had travelled to Montreal and Toronto, in each city addressing large and enthusiastic audiences.

The content of his talks throughout the second tour of America was similar to what he had said in his 1921 talks. Again he noted on the narrowness of the Puritan mind. “The essential of the Puritan mood,” he said, “is the misdirection of moral anger.”

“Puritanism he insisted, was a small spiritual idea in comparison with the large political vision of the founders of the American Republic. He even blamed the Puritans for what he regarded as the typically American worship of economic activity at the expense of contemplation. In Albany, he developed this theme:

The people are too eager to build up: they spend their energy in building up something that will be taken down in few years. It has grown to be almost a religion with the people here.

It is a very subtle thing. I don't know where it came from. It is the outgrowth of history, of the exhilarating climate and the pioneer spirit, I suppose. The Puritans came here full of ideals of religion as if a new light shone.

That passionate energy for religion with which they came to this country passed away and the people have thrown their tremendous energy into business. It is the worship of activity for its own sake. They worship it without an objective. In England the rich classes that worship laziness are as bad. Neither is sound. It is a false religion.

In spite of such somber comments, the tone of his second visit was overall remarkably cheerful. This is all the more surprising when one recalls that America was then in the grip of the Great Depression. And yet Chesterton did not remind his audience that the economic disaster which the country was experiencing illustrated the truth of what he had predicted about the dangers of a financial system far removed from the realities of everyday life and of concrete realities. Chesterton did, however, remind his audiences that his criticism of American commercialism was in complete harmony with his criticisms of his own country. He may have praised a number of English things such as “English inns, English roads, English jokes and jokers,” he had, he pointed out, always been a critic of British Imperialism:

And when that perilous power and opportunity, which is given by wealth and worldly success, largely passed from the British Empire to the United States, I have applied exactly the same principle to the United States. I think that Imperialism is none the less Imperialism because it is spread by economic pressure or snobbish fashion rather than by conquest; indeed I have much more respect for the Empire that is spread by fighting than for the Empire that is spread by finance.

The serene cheerfulness of his second visit is illustrated by the tone of the debates he took part in during his tour of the country. In New York City he engaged in a genial debate with Clarence Darrow, the lawyer who was a well-known sceptic. The subject of the debate was the story of creation in the Book of Genesis. Reports make it clear that Darrow was no match for Chesterton. One observer wrote: “I have never heard Darrow alone, but taken relatively, when that relativity is to Chesterton, he appears positively muddle-headed. As Chesterton summed it up, he felt as if Darrow had been arguing all afternoon with his fundamentalist aunt, and simply kept sparring with a dummy of his own making...Chesterton had the audience with him from the start, and when it was all over, everyone just sat there, not wishing to leave. They were loath to let the light die!”

It was also during this final tour of America that Chesterton invoked the memory of Abraham Lincoln in order to pronounce his admiration for the hidden America of small towns and humble people.

Whilst I was in America, I often lingered in small towns and wayside places; and in a curious and almost creepy fashion the great presence of Abraham Lincoln continually grew upon me. I think it is necessary to linger a little in America, and especially in what many would call the most uninteresting or unpleasing parts of America, before this strong sense of a strange kind of greatness can grow upon the soul...It was out of this landscape that the great President came, and one might almost trace a fanciful shadow of his figure in the thin trees and the stiff wooden pillars. A man of any imagination might look down those strange streets, with their frame-houses filled with the latest conveniences and surrounded with the latest litter, till he could see approaching down the long perspective that long ungainly figure, with the preposterous stove-pipe hat and the rustic umbrella and deep melancholy eyes, the humour and the hard patience and the heart that fed upon hope deferred.

On March 23, 1931 Chesterton and his wife left California. Arriving in New York on March 29, Chesterton gave a final series of lectures and then returned to England and to his home in Beaconsfield where, five years later, on June 14, 1936, at the age of sixty-two, he died.

It is almost ninety years since Chesterton made his first discovery of America. What can one now say about his view of the country? In many ways, the views he developed in America were prophetic, for the globalised consumerist culture which he found in New York has had the effects he predicted. Soviet Communism has collapsed, as he said it would, but the Western world has also experienced the truth of what Chesterton had to say about the more insidious danger represented by a dominant commercial culture which undermines traditional societies and coarsens moral life. I would go further and say that the current financial crisis vindicates Chesterton's warning about the essential instability of our modern form Capitalism. A striking indication of the wisdom of Chesterton's critique of Monopoly Capitalism can be found in Pope Benedict's recent encyclical *Gaudium in Veritate*. At a recent Chesterton Institute conference in Oxford, Philip Blond, an adviser for David Cameron—the Leader of the U.K. Conservative Party—described the encyclical as a Chesterton manifesto, with its praise for local initiatives and its insistence on the need for de-centralisation and intermediate civic institutions. Pope Benedict's recent initiative in inviting Anglicans into full communion with the Church is another fulfillment of a Chestertonian prophecy. He had once said that just as Protestants speak of certain figures from the Middle Ages as being "Morning Stars of the Reformation," he would prefer to speak of certain figures who are "Morning Stars of the Reunion." Chesterton, himself is surely such a one.

And yet there are things Chesterton wrote about America which have not stood the test of time. Whatever truth there is in his criticism of American Puritans should be balanced and corrected by what is now known about the virtues of American Evangelicals. They have turned out to be the best allies of American Catholics in the struggle to defend the right to life of unborn children. No group understands so well the

truth of what Chesterton wrote about the new heresy which would be an attack on sexual morality. One may also regret that Chesterton failed to discover the hidden virtues of America's large cities. If he had spent more time in New York, he might have discovered that it was in fact a community of villages teeming with the life of the ordinary people whom he so much loved. Another failure in imagination concerns what Chesterton wrote about Jews. It is true that his writings on this subject have been badly misrepresented. His criticism was directed against a particular kind of Jewish secularism. In fact, at the beginning of his career, he had protested the persecution of Jews in Tsarist Russia, and at the end of his life he was among the first of English writers to denounce the Nazi persecution. How one wishes that he had had a chance to meet Rabbi Stephen Wise during his American travels. This leader of American Jewry defended Chesterton from the attacks of his American Jewish co-religionists. In a letter written shortly after Chesterton's death, he wrote:

Indeed I was a warm admirer of Gilbert Chesterton. Apart from his delightful art and his genius in many directions, he was, as you know a great religionist. He as Catholic, I as Jew, could not have seen eye to eye with each other, and he might have added 'particularly seeing that you are cross-eyed'; but I deeply respected him. When Hitlerism came, he was one of the first to speak out with all the directness and frankness of a great and unabashed spirit. Blessing to his memory!

The words of Rabbi Wise provide a good ending to a paper that has examined Chesterton's relations with America. The blessing of the Rabbi would be echoed by countless Americans who have found delight and wisdom in the writings of this great Englishman.