

Lecture at John Carroll University

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 15, 2006 All Things Catholic

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Yesterday I spoke at Cleveland's John Carroll University on current affairs in the global church. In part, I tried to sum up what the first 18 months of Benedict's papacy have taught us about his spirit and outlook. The following was my introduction, which synthesizes one lesson I think we've learned over that time.

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Though I realize this may seem a quirky way to begin -- even, dare I say it, "unorthodox" -- I'm going to open this "insider's view of the Vatican" by invoking two men who were anything but Vatican insiders: George Bernard Shaw and G.K. Chesterton. While Chesterton was a zealous convert to Catholicism, he swam the Tiber only in a metaphorical sense; so far as we know, he never set foot in any office of the Roman Curia. Shaw was a socialist and free-thinker who saw God merely as an *élan vital* within the natural world. He had little use for institutional Christianity, and precious little for the Vatican. Yet the friendship between Chesterton and Shaw nevertheless offers a fruitful means of putting ourselves "inside the Vatican" in the pontificate of Benedict XVI.

More on that in a moment.

First, back to Chesterton and Shaw. These were, of course, two of the most epigrammatic writers in the history of English letters, each with a razor-sharp wit and a devastating sense of humor. Perhaps only Oscar Wilde consistently produced more memorable one-liners.

Examples of the wit and wisdom of Gilbert Keith Chesterton include:

- "The reformer is always right about what is wrong. He is generally wrong about what is right."
- "It is terrible to contemplate how few politicians are hanged." (This comment, you in Cleveland will be happy to know, came in a 1921 interview with *The Cleveland Press*).
- Lamenting the decline of historical science in England, Chesterton once sighed, "The past is not what it was."
- And, finally, the inscrutable observation, "Poets have been mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese."

If anything, Shaw's catalog of quotable quotes is even more sparkling. A few well-known examples include:

- "If all economists were laid end to end, they would not reach a conclusion."
- "A government which robs Peter to pay Paul can always depend on the support of Paul."
- Speaking of a woman whose company he detested, Shaw said: "She had lost the art of conversation, but not, alas, the power of speech."
- And, finally, the inscription on Shaw's tombstone: "I knew if I stayed around long enough, something like this would happen."

Their penchant for pith was not the only thing Chesterton and Shaw shared. Both were also unrepentant egomaniacs. Chesterton generated certitudes at roughly the same rate that the rest of us exhale, while Shaw once told a newspaper reporter, "I am the most impressive man in London. And you may quote that on my authority."

In other ways, Chesterton and Shaw could not have been more dissimilar. Aside from their philosophical disagreements, Chesterton was a big bear of a man who loved the dinner table; he once compared the Catholic church to "a thick steak, a glass of red wine, and a good cigar," and it was obviously meant as a compliment. Shaw, on the other hand, was a strict vegetarian who spent most of his life rake-thin. The story goes that Chesterton once said to Shaw, "To look at you, people would think there's a famine in England," to which Shaw responded, "To look at you, they'd think you caused it!"

Yet these two men cherished one another, the orthodox gourmand and the abstemious socialist. Shaw loaned Chesterton money and urged him to try playwriting, which wound up earning Chesterton more income than most of his other literary works. Chesterton in turn deeply admired the humanity and the moral seriousness of Shaw; when his friend died, Chesterton wrote, "In a sweeter and more solid civilization, he would have been a great saint."

How was Chesterton able to keep friendships green with figures who had such diverse worldviews? In part, because Chesterton embodied a spirit of self-confidence that animated Catholic intellectual life in the early 20th century. There was a sense of having survived the worst blows secularity had to offer: the French Revolution, Darwin, historical-critical study of the Bible, and the collapse of the Papal States. All were supposed to have doomed Catholicism, yet here orthodoxy stood, generating giants such as Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Dorothy Sayers, Paul Claudel, and a host of others. Chesterton and his generation did not fear "contamination" with alien ideas; on the contrary, they were convinced the false promises of secularity had far more to fear from the Christian gospel. To be sure, Chesterton despised heresy with the best of them, but his delight came not in burning heretics, but in refuting them.

It's striking that in his day, Chesterton's friendships with radicals and atheists never generated controversy. (He was also close friends with H.G. Wells; he, Shaw and Wells actually once made a short farcical film together). Today we live in a different age, in which Catholic identity concerns and ideological polarization have made it far more problematic for the lion to lay down with the lamb. Imagine the reaction today if it emerged, for example, that George Weigel borrows money from John Kerry, or that Mother Angelica admires the writings of Joan Chittister.

Imagine, for that matter, what people might think if Pope Benedict XVI were friends with Hans Küng.

And therein lies the rub, because of course Pope Benedict XVI is friends with Hans Küng, who for three decades has been the enfant terrible of Catholic theology. The two men's warm reunion one year ago makes the point. My thesis is this: After 18 months of Benedict's papacy, one defining characteristic is what we might call his "Chestertonian assurance," a tranquility in the face of diverse currents of thought, as well as the respect that one deeply cultured soul naturally feels for another.

By the way, I am not comparing Benedict and Chesterton on a personal level. Chesterton was irascible and curmudgeonly; Benedict, on the other hand, is unfailingly gracious, polite, and kind. As a personality type, he's

closer to Emily Post. Yet Benedict breathes the same air of Christian enlightenment as Chesterton. His approach to modernity is neither the craven assimilation that Jacques Maritain described as "kneeling before the world," nor the defensiveness of a "Taliban Catholicism" that knows only how to excoriate and condemn.

Facing disagreement and differing cultural visions, Benedict is not afraid -- and because he's not afraid, he's not defensive, and he's not in a hurry.

Such a spirit is largely alien to our fractured and hair-trigger era, and so Benedict has been something of a paradox- this avatar of Catholic traditionalism espousing a positive message, willing to engage in reasoned reflection with people who don't think like him. For 18 months, people have been speculating about when the "real pope" will emerge from beneath this serene, gracious façade. Ladies and gentleman, I suggest to you tonight that the façade *is* the real pope.

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