



Chesterton and Christmas: *A SERIOUS AFFAIR*

Wednesday, December 16, 2009, Pope Auditorium, Fordham University, New York City

with

Fr. Ian Boyd, is a Canadian priest of the Congregation of Saint Basil and an internationally recognized Chesterton scholar and is the author of *The Novels of G.K. Chesterton* (London 1975). For many years he was Professor of English at St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan in Canada. Currently, he is a member of the Department of English at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey. Fr. Boyd also lectures on the subject of "Sacramental Themes in Modern Literature." Among the Christian authors whose work he discusses are T.S. Eliot, Graham Greene, C.S. Lewis, Flannery O'Connor, Piers Paul Read, Muriel Spark and Evelyn Waugh. Fr. Boyd is the Founder and Editor of *The Chesterton Review* and the President of the G.K. Chesterton Institute for Faith & Culture based at Seton Hall University.

Mr. Tony Hendra, born in England, was a member of the Cambridge University Footlights revue in 1962, alongside the likes of John Cleese, Graham Chapman and Tim Brooke-Taylor. After he moved to the U.S., he became one of the founding editors of *National Lampoon* magazine. In the early 1980s Mr. Hendra helped create the British television puppet show *Spitting Image*. He also edited *Spy Magazine* for a period in the 1990s. His most notable acting role was in *This Is Spinal Tap*, as the band's manager, Ian Faith. He received acclaim for his 2004 memoir *Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul*.

Dr. Dermot Quinn is Professor of History at Seton Hall University, a member of the Board of Advisors of the G. K. Chesterton Institute for Faith & Culture and a member of the Editorial Board of *The Chesterton Review*. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and New College, Oxford, where he was awarded a doctorate in 1986. He has written extensively on Chestertonian themes, has authored three books and many articles and reviews in the field of British and Irish history.

Mr. Christopher Vath was born in New Orleans. He attended North Texas State University where he received a Bachelor of Music Degree in Piano Performance with Joseph Banowetz. He has worked as composer, arranger, and pianist in the field of commercial music. Since 1996, he has been "Talking Music," a lecture concert series which attempts to lead the listener to the ultimate questions of humanity through great works of music. In 2005, in addition to his Weill Hall debut, he gave a private performance for Pope Benedict XVI at his papal summer residence.

The Choir of Communion and Liberation, under the direction of Chris Vath, is composed of high school and university students and adults. Their a cappella repertoire extends from Gregorian chant to the 20th century and spans many countries and languages. Formed in 1994, the choir has performed both its Christmas Lessons and Carols and its Lenten choral meditation around the New York metropolitan area. They perform yearly at the Way of the Cross over the Brooklyn Bridge on Good Friday.

Program

First Part

Poetry *The House of Christmas* by G.K. Chesterton

About G.K. Chesterton or G. K. Chesterton, Biographical Note

Poetry *The Nativity* by G.K. Chesterton

Chesterton's love for Christmas, a conversation

Second Part

Choir *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree* (E. Poston)
Rorate Caeli (S. Rossi)
A Tender Shoot (O. Goldschmidt)
O Bethlehem (Basque carol, arr. Poston)
El Rorro (Mexican carol)
Verbum Caro Factum Est (Anonymous)
El Noi de la Mare (Catalan carol)

Poetry *The Wise Men* by G.K. Chesterton

Choir *Nigh Bethlehem* (A. Burt)
Zhcho to za Predivo (Ukrainian carol, arr. Barvinskiy)

Crossroads: Good evening, and welcome on behalf of Crossroads Cultural Center. We would like to thank the co-sponsors of tonight's event, the G.K. Chesterton Institute for Faith and Culture at Seton Hall University (you can find material about the Institute and its journal *The Chesterton Review* on your chair) and the Campus Ministry at Fordham University.

Among the many ways in which one can prepare for Christmas, an especially beautiful one is by spending some time in the company of G.K. Chesterton. It is always refreshing to go back to Chesterton, who has been perhaps the greatest defender of simple human experience in the English-speaking world. All his work expresses a deeply realistic attitude, a passion for life as it is, not as we would like to imagine it. This was certainly also at the root of his faith because Chesterton clearly recognized that only the Christian proposal fully values and rescues concrete humanity, with both its great desires and also its deep shortcomings. Chesterton's realistic and intelligent religiosity is well-displayed in his poems, which we have the opportunity of presenting in this unique Christmas celebration.

We are exceptionally fortunate to have tonight Fr. Ian Boyd, a worldwide known scholar of Chesterton who, with Dr. Dermot Quinn, another profound expert of the great English author, will converse about his love for Christmas and, in doing so, will help us to reflect upon the great Christian event. To this end, we will listen to some poems by Chesterton offered to us by Mr. Tony Hendra, and we will enjoy the choral pieces from various traditions performed by the Choir of Communion and Liberation directed by Christopher Vath. You will find some essential information about all the protagonists of tonight's event in the program you have received. And now, I am delighted to hand the microphone over to Mr. Hendra.

Hendra: (reads *The House of Christmas*, by G.K. Chesterton)

There fared a mother driven forth
 Out of an inn to roam;
 In the place where she was homeless
 All men are at home.
 The crazy stable close at hand,
 With shaking timber and shifting sand,

Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honour and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;
We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
But our hearts we lost - how long ago!
In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.

Quinn: Tonight we are going to celebrate a man and a moment. The man is G.K. Chesterton, and the moment—which is momentous indeed—is Christmas.

They are well matched. “Joy,” Chesterton said, “is the gigantic secret of the Christian.” And Christmas is, of all seasons, one of joy, of laughter, of the company of friends.

And we will celebrate it in poetry, in music, in conversation, and maybe a little humor thrown in along the way.

I know the music will be good. I know the poetry will be good. As for the conversation, I know only that it will be a conversation—that is to say, it could go anywhere at all.

That, too, would be Chestertonian.

For Chesterton was himself a wanderer. He was a journalist, novelist, playwright, philosopher, and friend—above all, a friend. This great giant of a man—this Fleet Street phenomenologist, this loveable genius—has been a friend to millions who have never met him. He has kept them warm on a winter night. He has shown the way in the darkness of the world. And in his Christianity, we see, too, another kind of wandering—a journey round the world to discover the place he had never really left. “What could be more delightful,” he asked, “to have all the fascinating terrors of going abroad combined with all the humane security of coming home again? What could be better to have all the fun of discovering South Africa without the disgusting necessity of landing there?”

So if we wander, forgive us. If we miss the path, we will find it before the night is out.

Because Christmas is nothing if not a retracing of steps, a stumbling path to Bethlehem. And what shall we find there? A child in a manger. A star in the east. We will find, as Chesterton said, “that home behind home for which we are all homesick.” We can only take a sample of the universe, he once said, “and that sample, even if it be a handful of dust (which is also a beautiful substance) will always assert the magic of itself and hint at the magic of all things.”

Christmas is not a sample of the universe. It is the universe summed up in a Mother and her Child.

In it, we see the deepest truth of all: that “God became man in Palestine/and is with us yet in Bread and Wine.”

In it we glimpse that love expressed by Paul Claudel:

He makes an act of Faith. He places himself naked in our arms, this little child from whom, according to Saint Paul, all paternity springs. He no longer commands; he requests. He teaches us that it is he who needs us; his feeble hand seeks our hearts as best it can. He tries to arouse in us a fundamental and irresistible feeling of kinship.

One would say that he has forgotten that he is God and that it is only from our lips that he wants to learn it. God places himself in the arms of his creature to be weighed and measured; and I, a man, support him. I hold him; I sustain him; I carry him in my arms; I possess him utterly.

So let us celebrate because there is something—there is everything—to celebrate.

Hendra: (reads *The Nativity*, by G.K. Chesterton)

The thatch on the roof was as golden,
Though dusty the straw was and old,
The wind had a peal as of trumpets,

Though blowing and barren and cold,
The mother's hair was a glory
Though loosened and torn,
For under the eaves in the gloaming
A child was born.

Have a myriad children been quickened,

Have a myriad children grown old,
 Grown gross and unloved and embittered,
 Grown cunning and savage and cold?
 God abides in a terrible patience,
 Unangered, unworn,
 And again for the child that was squandered
 A child is born.

What know we of aeons behind us,
 Dim dynasties lost long ago.
 Huge empires, like dreams unremembered,
 Huge cities for ages laid low?
 This at least- that with blight and with blessing,
 With flower and with thorn,
 Love was there, and his cry was among them,
 'A child is born.'

Though the darkness be noisy with systems,
 Dark fancies that fret and disprove,
 Still the plumes stir around us, above us
 The wings of the shadow of live:
 Oh! princes and priests, have ye seen it
 Grow pale through your scorn;
 Huge dawns sleep before us, deep changes,
 A child is born.

And the rafters of toil still gilded
 With the dawn of the stars of the heart,
 And the wise men draw near in the twilight,
 Who are weary of learning and art,
 And the face of the tyrant is darkened,
 His spirit is torn,
 For a new king is enthroned; yea, the sternest,
 A child is born.

And the mother still joys for the whispered
 First stir of unspeakable things,
 Still feels that high moment unfurling
 Red glory of Gabriel's wings.
 Still the babe of an hour is a master
 Whom angels adorn,
 Emmanuel, prophet, anointed,
 A child is born.

And thou, that art still in thy cradle,
 The sun being crown for thy brow,
 Make answer, our flesh, make an answer,
 Say, whence art thou come- who art thou?
 Art thou come back on earth for our teaching,
 To train or to warn-?

Hush- how may we know? Knowing only a child is born.

Quinn: The great danger of having a Chesterton conversation is that it becomes a set of quotations from Chesterton, which is actually a wonderful thing to do, and I would have no objections to that at all. Chesterton's words are a lot better than my words.

But to begin with, I think, Father Boyd, you may have a few more coherent thoughts, and if we have coherent thoughts, I might respond with some incoherent thoughts of my own.

Boyd: Thank you, Dermot.

I wanted briefly to explain the personal reasons why Christmas was important for Chesterton.

In one of the Father Brown stories, Chesterton's priest-detective comments on one of the problems of the modern age. It happened, he explains, "all because you are frightened of four words: 'He was made Man.'" (*The Oracle of the Dog*) In his book on St. Thomas, Chesterton writes that the Incarnation has become the central idea of our civilization. In a startling paradox, he insists that the work of the devil is spiritual; whereas the work of God is material. In all his writing, the Incarnation is a recurring theme. It could be said that it is his favorite theological belief. He seldom writes about the Redemption. Instead, like St. Francis, he insists that the coming of Christ was itself a Redemption.

There was a personal reason why the Incarnation was so important to him. A turning point in his life occurred in the years 1893-1894 while he was a student at the University of London's Slade School of Art. This crisis was both mental and moral, and it is described in his Autobiography in a chapter he entitled "How to be a Lunatic." The problem seems at first to be absurd. He entertained the possibility that nothing existed outside his own mind; that he had projected the entire universe from within; that the world was a dream and that he was the dreamer who had dreamed it. When a fellow student told him in the solemn manner of an adolescent atheist that he no longer believed in God, Chesterton was tempted to reply that he no longer believed in him. The crisis was also moral because it seemed to imply that there was no right or wrong in reality. As Chesterton himself was later to remark, the personal crisis had a general meaning. What he had done was simply to extend the skepticism of the age as far as it could go. And it went very far.

With the help of his friends and with his love for his devoutly Christian fiancée, he recovered quickly from this solipsistic nightmare. Nevertheless it had a permanent effect on him. It might be said that for the rest of his life he celebrated his discovery that he was not God. His escape from solipsism explains why material things were of immense importance to him. For ever after, he distrusted the abstract inventions of the lonely mind, and trusted the wisdom of the community. In *Heretics*, he remarks that a book is likely to be written by the one person in the village who is not sane. On another occasion, he said that the reading room of the British Museum—the room in which Karl Marx wrote *Das Kapital* and Bernard Shaw wrote his earliest work—served many of the functions of a private mad house.

It is in this context that one must understand his preoccupation with the doctrine of the Incarnation. When, under the influence of his wife and the remarkable group of Anglo-Catholic theologians to whom she introduced him, he abandoned his agnosticism and became a Christian, the idea of Incarnation made an immediate and personal appeal to him. When he thought of it, he wrote, the foundation of his mind was moved. That the All-Powerful and invisible Creator of the universe should assume a material human nature and become a human being, truly God and truly Man, so that the child in the crib in Bethlehem combined human weakness with divine strength, this was the idea on which everything else turned. As he wrote in *The Everlasting Man*, in the chapter he entitles "The God in the Cave," Christianity rests on a single truth, "that the hands that had made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle. Upon this paradox, we might almost say

upon this jest, all the literature of our faith is founded.” Or again in one of the Christmas poems which he wrote and revised again and again:

The world grows terrible and white,
 And blinding white the breaking day;
 We walk bewildered in the light,
 For something is too large for sight,
 And something much too plain to say.

The Child that was ere worlds begun
 (... We need but walk a little way,
 We need but see a latch undone...)
 The Child that played with moon and sun
 Is playing with a little hay.

There are many examples of the way in which Chesterton wrote about the paradox of the Incarnation. But always he insists on the fundamental importance of materiality for a correct understanding of what Christmas means. One of the most amusing examples of his treatment of the subject occurs in an essay in which he discusses the theology of Christmas presents. The target for his gentle satire is Mrs. Baker Eddy and her Christian Science theory about Christmas presents. Chesterton writes:

A little while ago I saw a statement by Mrs. Eddy on this subject, in which she said that she did not give presents in a gross, sensuous, terrestrial sense, but sat still and thought about Truth and Purity till all her friends were much better for it. Now I do not say that this plan is either superstitious or impossible, and no doubt it has an economic charm. I say it is un-Christian in the same solid and prosaic sense that playing a tune backward is unmusical or saying ‘ain’t’ is ungrammatical. I do not know that there is any Scriptural text or Church Council that condemns Mrs. Eddy’s theory of Christmas presents; but Christianity condemns it, as soldiering condemns running away. The two attitudes are antagonistic not only in their theology, not only in their thought, but in their state of soul before they ever began to think. The idea of embodying goodwill—that is, putting it into a body—is the huge and primal idea of the Incarnation. A gift of God that can be seen and touched is the whole point of the epigram of the creed. Christ Himself was a Christmas present. The note of material Christmas presents is struck even before He is born in the first movements of the sages and the star. The Three Kings came to Bethlehem bringing gold and frankincense and myrrh. If they had only brought Truth and Purity and Love there would have been no Christian art and no Christian civilization.

Chesterton is fond of meditating on the significance of the gifts of the wise men. The gifts implied for him a complete theology. He writes:

“There were three things prefigured and promised by the gifts in the cave of Bethlehem concerning the Child who received them; that He should be crowned like a King; that He should be worshipped like a God; and that He should die like a man. And these things would sound like Eastern flattery, were it not for the third.”

There is a final thing that should be said about Chesterton and Christmas. Chesterton was a sacramental Christian, and he viewed Christmas from the perspective of the sacramental tradition. According to that tradition, the mysteries of the Catholic faith, which took place historically in a particular time and place in Palestine, also take place each year in the liturgical celebrations of the Church which is the Sacrament of Christ.

Quinn: Thank you, Father, for those wonderful introductory remarks...A couple points occurred to me immediately. One is that it's delightful in this large audience actually to have a baby. I can hear gurglings in the background. That is the spirit of Christmas. It's wonderful to hear the baby.

The other thought that occurs to me is that as you talk about Chesterton and Incarnation that I very delicately want to point out the obvious which is that the fatter the man, the greater the belief in Incarnation. That does seem to go some ways in Chesterton's Incarnational philosophy.

As I was thinking about this a little bit earlier in the week, it occurs to me that first of all the genius of Chesterton is that all of Chesterton can be found in any of Chesterton. Chesterton has a complete philosophy of life. And all you have to do is take a page of Chesterton and that is the entirety of Chesterton. There is such a common way of expression and an intensity of Chesterton, that one Chesterton paradox or epigram in a sense contains in a kind of DNA form, if you will, the entirety of Chesterton's thought, and Christmas is a good example of that because Christmas is really the central fact of our civilization, and it's the central fact of Chesterton's philosophy of Incarnation.

As I listened to your remarks, a couple of thoughts occurred to me, maybe about five words capture some of what you've said, and the first of those words is *wonder*. It's impossible to read Chesterton, and certainly it's impossible to read Chesterton intelligently without being overwhelmed by this sense of wonder. Wonder seems to be at the core of Chesterton's imagination.

Boyd: Absolutely. He said in one of the earliest numbers of G.K.'s weekly, he was explaining his purpose as a writer, and he said it was to awaken a sense of wonder, to awaken the imagination of his readers. Not to instruct them, not to give them more information or even knowledge, but to create a sense of wonder about things they already knew. He said in one of his novels that you have to look at something 99 times, and then at the 100th time, you're in danger of seeing it for the first time. So his strategies as a writer were always to teach us to wonder. He said that you have to learn to be happy in those quiet moments when you remember that you are alive.

Quinn: Yes, that does seem to be the heart of it. You can pick at random pages of Chesterton, and we've talked about the first pages of *Orthodoxy*, that wonderful supreme masterpiece in many ways, where he says that the great task of the philosopher is to be both at home in the world and utterly astonished by it. And that of course is the extraordinary fact of the Incarnation as well, that Christ, God was at home in His own world and that we have to be astonished by the world. He says in his lovely little essay, *A Defense of Baby Worship*, (we could do a lot more of that nowadays) "Astonishment at the universe is not mysticism, but a transcendent common sense." And I think, in a way, Chesterton's whole philosophy is "a transcendent common sense." And at the heart of that is astonishment at the universe.

The point with Chesterton is that the most astonishing thing is the very fact of the universe at all. Existence itself! Chesterton talks about "the supreme adventure of being born." Of course the world is born every day. Creation happens every day.

About a month ago I was in South America giving a set of talks on Chesterton and St. Thomas Aquinas. (The two had a great deal in common. Chesterton was profoundly influenced by the philosophical realism of St. Thomas and the problem of solipsism.) I had the marvelous experience (Gloria, who was with us will testify to this). We were on our way to give a talk and we passed a town named "Better than Nothing." And suddenly I realized that this is the philosophy of St. Thomas and it's the philosophy of Chesterton summed up in three words! I was going to give a talk lasting an hour and a half summed up in three words—better than nothing!—which is to say that all of creation is better than nothing because nothing is the alternative and for Chesterton we must give thanks for the extraordinary fact of existence itself.

So it seems to me that the first thing that we see in Chesterton is a sense of wonder, a sense of exhilaration at the very fact of being alive.

The materiality of our existence is central to Chesterton. What the Incarnation represents is the triumphant validation of the flesh. Our true being, we are not merely spiritual entities; we are a body and a soul. For Chesterton, the fleshliness of Incarnation is profoundly important as well.

Boyd: This is true. This is true if you think that this materiality applies to Chesterton as a sacramental Christian. The sacraments of the Church, each of which is an action by Jesus, and it always involves something material—water, bread, wine, oil, human love. For Chesterton the mystery of the Incarnation, his sacramental faith meant that he saw it everywhere.

There was an event in Chesterton’s little town of Beaconsfield at his church, the church dedicated to St. Therese to which Chesterton contributed to the building of it, and a statue of the Blessed Virgin that he gave to it. But anyway, in that church they had a little Christmas concert, and they had a crib, but a live crib. Someone was St. Joseph, some children the shepherds, and so on. And they had a live baby. And Chesterton made a wonderful remark. He said to the mother of the child, “May I hold the Christ child?” And there you have it. For Chesterton every human life was a reenactment of the Gospel story, and the mystery of the Incarnation happens again in the liturgical life of the Church. It happened then, but it happens now. Our faith means that we can be directly in touch with Christ as a little child, as well as the Christ who died on the cross and rose from the dead and is sitting at the right hand of God. So sacramentality involves materiality.

Quinn: As I listen to that story I think of a similar occasion at Seton Hall a few years ago when we had a living crèche which was perhaps a little less successful because the student in charge of it, this was 9 or 10 o’clock at night, decided that he didn’t really care to look after these animals, so he went down to Cryan’s Beef and Ale House and celebrated Christmas with a few beers, and returned to Seton Hall around midnight to discover that the animals had escaped! There were actually donkeys going up and down.

The other thought is on the word *sacrament*, and maybe we’ll talk a little bit on that later. The second word that comes to mind is *gratitude*. The sense of wonder has to be balanced or has to be reinforced by a sense of gratitude. Chesterton had an enormous gratitude. He said the whole burden of his life was to give thanks for the fact that he wasn’t God, (he kind of escaped from a solipsistic nightmare) but also to give thanks for the fact of existence itself. He said, “The chief idea of my life is taking things with gratitude and not taking things for granted.” And he said in his little short history of England, which is a marvelous book, “I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought.” To be thankful is the highest form of thought, and “happiness is gratitude doubled by wonder.”

Boyd: He had that sense of gratitude for the presence of Christ in the sacraments. After he became a Catholic, he had difficulty receiving Holy Communion. He had never been much of an Anglican, never confirmed as an Anglican, and sort of always spoke for Catholic truth in the Anglican-Catholic community he was in. But anyway, he became a Catholic and famously he remarked, it was the sacrament of confession that he wanted, when asked why he became a Catholic, “It was because I wanted to get rid of my sins.” But Holy Communion was a problem for him. He could never get used to the way in which his fellow Catholics could approach the sacrament so casually. Chesterton trembled at the idea that he was receiving the Creator of the Universe coming to him under the appearance of bread. He trembled. He did not take it for granted. He had a sense of wonder about the Incarnation and the continuing presence of Christ in His sacraments and a wonderful sense of gratitude for the sacraments.

The day he was received into full communion with the Catholic Church, he wrote a little poem he called, “The Convert.” The poem ends where he compares the rationalist to people digging for gold who have a strange kind of sin that keeps the sand and lets the gold run free. And then Chesterton says, “But all these things are less than dust to me because my name is Lazarus and I live.” The event from the Gospel, the miracle of Lazarus, happens again as a kind of resurrection when someone comes into the full life of the Church.

You talk about gratitude and wonder, very true.

Quinn: And I notice that you talk about sacraments, and there are little sacramental signs that Chesterton was very, very committed to them. He was forever making the sign of the cross. He was therefore blessing himself in small ways, which I encourage all of us to do. We have to express gratitude in those physical ways. Chesterton, with a great, big, fat cigar would make the sign of the cross.

Boyd: Actually his signature, which indicates that he was trained as an artist before he began to write, if you look at Chesterton’s signature, it’s filled with crosses. He introduced the cross to almost every letter of his signature. He makes that little act of faith. Before he had a cigar, he made the sign of the cross. For everything that he did he made a sacramental sign. As Newman wrote, “Whene’r across this sinful flesh of mine / I draw the Holy Sign, / All good thoughts stir within me and renew...” You know the poem. The sacramental sign is again something material which brings about an inward grace.

Quinn: And he says in *The Everlasting Man*, reflecting on the Incarnation, with the birth of Christ, “the whole universe had been turned inside out...All the eyes of wonder and worship which had been turned outwards to the largest thing were now turned inward to the smallest...God who had been only a circumference was seen as a centre; and a centre is infinitely small...The faith becomes, in more ways than one, a religion of little things...It is the paradox of that group in the cave at Bethlehem...that while our emotions about it are of childish simplicity, our thoughts about it can branch with a never ending complexity.” This religion of little things.

Boyd: And not only a religion of little things, but a social philosophy of little things. We had a Chesterton Institute conference a few months ago in Oxford on the theme of the current financial crisis, and the main speaker—we had speakers from America, France, Spain, and the UK—but the main English speaker was a man who is the director of the think tank *ResPublica*, Phillip Blond, a great Chestertonian, and he pointed out that the Holy Father’s new encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* is a Chestertonian manifesto. For Chesterton, the small unit, because of the Incarnation, is the big unit. The family is the big world in which you really encounter Christ, and instead of these gigantic financial systems which become increasingly abstract and unreal, you have to get back to plain material things, what the Holy Father in Chestertonian language talks about the need for “localism,” “decentralization,” “intermediate social units.” Chesterton’s whole philosophy is based on the Incarnation.

Quinn: I think so, and the family of course is the central image that we have of that stable in Bethlehem, and for Chesterton as a social philosopher, his social philosophy was deeply Incarnational and it’s summed up in two words: *family* and *freedom*. It’s only when we have strong families that we can have free societies. It’s the family that stands four square against the over mighty state, and busy-bodies and do-gooders and rational planners and secular utopians, and people with clipboards saying, “You don’t have quite the requisite number of downstairs bathrooms in your house...” and so on and so forth. Chesterton would not have liked modern America, that’s for sure. So for him the family is the bulwark of freedom, and Christmas (here is another example of how Christmas can be unpacked to reveal that social philosophy)...he wrote a lovely essay called “The Spirit of Christmas,” and he sums this up rather beautifully. If you indulge me, I’ll read a paragraph.

Christmas has been a family festival. It was concerned with a happy family because it was consecrated to the Holy Family. Christmas is built upon a beautiful and intentional paradox—that the birth of the homeless should be celebrated in every home. Christmas occurs in the winter. The old and healthy idea of such winter festivals was this; that people being shut in and besieged by the weather were driven back on their own resources; or, in other words, had a chance of showing whether there was anything in them... But let there be one night when things grow luminous from within: and one day when men seek for all that is buried in themselves, and discover, where she is indeed hidden, behind locked gates and shuttered windows, and doors thrice barred and bolted, the spirit of liberty.

That's his social philosophy, and that's Christmas for Chesterton.

Boyd: Just as you had said, Chesterton can be found in every part of Chesterton's writing, the complete Chesterton. The whole is in each of the parts.

Quinn: I suppose the other word that comes to mind—wonder, gratitude and *celebration*. These are not synonyms, they are not the same thing, but they follow naturally from each other. And for Chesterton, the whole point of Christmas is that it be celebrated. The story you tell of Mrs. Baker Eddy, “think beautiful thoughts,” as if that constitutes a Christmas present. I invite any parent among you to “think beautiful thoughts” and see how your children react to that present. For Chesterton, if you're going to celebrate, celebrate properly. Christmas is a time for having a party. It's a time for having carols, doing what we're doing this evening—listening to music, listening to poetry, having conversation with your friends. It deserves a party, not simply beautiful thoughts.

In a way, Father, if Dickens is the English author who is primarily associated with Christmas, then Chesterton is a close runner up, wouldn't you think?

Boyd: Yes, and Chesterton remember is widely regarded as one of the best of Dickens's critics. He wrote an article about Dickens, he wrote a book, he wrote introductions to all of Dickens's novels, but he wrote a wonderful article for *The Encyclopedia Britannica* on Dickens and in that article he said that the greatest achievement of Dickens was that he rescued Christmas from the Puritans. Christmas in England in the early 19th Century was in danger of dying out. It was Dickens, who like Chesterton, wrote constantly about Christmas, published a Christmas book every year. We remember *A Christmas Carol*, of course. And that Incarnational festival, that is, the turkey which is almost too large for Tiny Tim to carry, and the plum pudding, and the drink, and the gathering of the family, what Dickens called, “the earthly side of Christmas,” Chesterton treasured. It was not genuinely Christian, not a genuine Christian Christmas unless it was Incarnational.

Dermot, you were talking to me earlier today about a comment Chesterton made about Bernard Shaw and the commercialization of Christmas.

Quinn: Chesterton was fascinated that people can miss the whole point of Christmas, and Bernard Shaw certainly missed the whole point of Christmas. Who would want Bernard Shaw at their Christmas dinner table? “A little more carrot juice...” It doesn't seem to me the way that I would want to celebrate Christmas. Chesterton said that Shaw was someone who got the thing absolutely the wrong way around. For Shaw, Christmas was simply an excuse for jewelers, for grocers to sell turkeys, and so on and so forth. It was a great capitalist sort of conspiracy to persuade people to buy things that they don't really want, like turkey. And Chesterton said, “This is such an arrestingly stupid idea, and only Bernard Shaw could have come up with it!” It's a bit like saying that sex exists only for jewelers to sell rings—an absolutely crazy notion!

Talking of the great escape from Puritanism, reminds me of someone else who escaped from Puritanism, and that is my fellow countryman, C.S. Lewis, who of course was born and bred in Northern Ireland, which is where I'm from.

Boyd: But did he ever fully escape? Remember Tolkien's wonderful comment when he was explaining why Lewis never became a Catholic? He said, "He had Ulsterior motives."

Quinn: Well, I can speak to those "Ulsterior motives" myself, but that's a much longer evening. Although I can't help but quote Reverend Ian Paisley when Ulster comes up, who of course absolutely refused alcohol of any kind, and once complained that Guinness was "the devil's buttermilk." Wonderful phrase!

Lewis, once he had more or less escaped the Puritanism of his upbringing, had a very Catholic theology of pleasure, and it almost sums up Chesterton's attitude towards the celebration of Christmas. Lewis said, "There's no good in trying to be more spiritual than God." God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why he uses material things like bread and wine to put new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not. He likes matter; He invented it. Christmas should be celebrated with carols and food and drink. If we are acknowledging the Incarnation, we do it in an Incarnational way, and Chesterton was very insistent on this. To deny people the pleasure of a celebration, was to deny something very beautiful to them. It was to deny them their dignity. He also said that the celebration of Christmas in carols and the giving of presents and in trees, and so on, is a kind of poetry. The event itself is the people writing their own poetry. It's a wonderful image.

Boyd: It is. And in one of his uncollected essays, "Why I Am Not a Socialist," the reason he gives is quite unusual. He says that Socialists, their idea is sharing, which is a lovely idea, but what they miss out on is the fact that a Socialist doesn't understand the value of a man giving a pear grown of his own pear tree to a guest. The idea of hospitality in a family—this can only be done by a free people. It's a gift. And he says of Santa Claus, of course Santa Claus is real. There's a tradition, again it's sacramental...every time you give gifts...children who don't believe in Santa Claus will suffer from insomnia. He said that Santa Claus again brings you back to the Three Wise Men and their gifts. The gifts that Santa brings are reminders, are reenactments of what the Wise Men did, and then Chesterton said, "If the heathen mind which governs our society doesn't understand this, so much the worse for them."

Quinn: As I think of this, I think of a story I read a couple months ago, maybe last year, of someone in Britain who discovered about twenty years ago that Christmas day was his favorite day of the year. He loved Christmas. He loved it so much that he decided every day should be Christmas day. I'm not making this up. You can find it somewhere, I suppose, on the Internet. He now has a Christmas dinner every day...in the middle of July...he decorates his house every day with a Christmas tree. He has a recording of the Queen giving the Queen's speech. He listens to this at three o'clock every afternoon. I think the technical term for this is lunacy. He's clearly not quite right in the head, but the point is that the instinct is a right one. Chesterton said that every day is Christmas day because of the stunning fact of the Incarnation.

Of course Christmas for us is a winter festival. When I was in South America a month ago, Christmas was being celebrated already, but it's summertime there. But for Chesterton it's important that it is a winter festival, and he often was heckled by people who would make this argument that Christmas is simply the appropriation by Christianity of old pagan customs. And dull historians make that argument, and believe me, I know quite a number of dull historians who make that argument, and Chesterton says, you've missed the whole point! He said, "When you say that ritual and dance and human pleasure are of pagan origin, you might as well say that our legs are of pagan origin." We were human before we became Christian, and these are deeply human things, and it is the genius of Christianity not to obliterate paganism, but to preserve that which is most deeply human in paganism. As Chesterton said, "We still have legs to dance as well as to pray."

Boyd: I think we should end with some reference to Mary and her central part in Chesterton's thought. Chesterton said that before he became a Catholic, whenever he thought of Mary, he thought of the Church, and whenever he tried to forget about the Church, he forgot about Mary. He said Mary represented for him everything about his Catholic faith.

Quinn: Well, in that case, let us end with a Marian thought. For Chesterton, the mother and child are at the heart of this beautiful moment, this momentous moment, this moment which is the central moment of all our lives. Maybe this final quotation from Chesterton which comes from his marvelous book *The Everlasting Man*, might sum up our conversation, and Chesterton's view of Christmas:

When I was a boy, a more Puritan generation objected to a statue upon a parish church representing the Virgin and Child. After much controversy, they compromised by taking away the child! You cannot chip away the statue of a mother from all around that of a newborn child. You cannot visit the child without visiting the mother. We must either leave Christ out of Christmas or Christmas out of Christ, or we must admit that those two holy heads are too near together for the halos not to mingle and cross.

Thanks very much.

Hendra: (reads *The Wise Men*, by G.K. Chesterton)

Step softly, under snow or rain,
To find the place where men can pray;
The way is all so very plain
That we may lose the way.

Oh, we have learnt to peer and pore
On tortured puzzles from our youth,
We know all the labyrinthine lore,
We are the three wise men of yore,
And we know all things but truth.

We have gone round and round the hill
And lost the wood among the trees,
And learnt long names for every ill,
And serve the made gods, naming still
The furies the Eumenides.

The gods of violence took the veil
Of vision and philosophy,
The Serpent that brought all men bale,
He bites his own accursed tail,
And calls himself Eternity.

Go humbly ... it has hailed and snowed...
With voices low and lanterns lit;
So very simple is the road,
That we may stray from it.

The world grows terrible and white,
And blinding white the breaking day;
We walk bewildered in the light,
For something is too large for sight,
And something much too plain to say.

The Child that was ere worlds begun
(... We need but walk a little way,
We need but see a latch undone...)
The Child that played with moon and sun
Is playing with a little hay.

The house from which the heavens are fed,
The old strange house that is our own,
Where trick of words are never said,
And Mercy is as plain as bread,
And Honour is as hard as stone.

Go humbly, humble are the skies,
And low and large and fierce the Star;
So very near the Manger lies
That we may travel far.

Hark! Laughter like a lion wakes
To roar to the resounding plain.
And the whole heaven shouts and shakes,
For God Himself is born again,
And we are little children walking
Through the snow and rain.