

About 25 years ago in the late 90s, I decided to help out the parish I was at, Saint Vincent de Paul. as a catechist. Faith formation then met on Sunday nights, and imprudently forgetting the Vikings sometimes had a 3 p.m. game, I nonetheless signed up and was asked to help with the 8th grade class. I'd go over the materials and try my best to get kids interested in the faith.

Well, as you might expect, sometimes this worked, but often it didn't seem to work. The kids might not seem interested, and sometimes it was clear they didn't even know some of the most basic things about our faith, or why they were Catholic. These days, I sometimes experience this too at a wedding or funeral Mass, when often people don't know when to sit or stand, and on some occasions if you can believe it, they don't what the words to the "Our Father" are.

Sometimes it can be tempting to get frustrated, or to give up, because there's so many in our world who are just kind of adrift, not knowing who God is, let alone understanding why faith matters, or why God's Church matters. Or other times it can be tempting to run to extremes, and think we need a smaller Church that focuses more on the people who are more

active, or need to go to the extremes in terms of making all feel welcome and not bother people with the more difficult things of our faith but instead focus on simply a “happy clappy” Christianity with an emphasis on music or almost entertainment as opposed to worship.

As Catholics though, we must remember it's a two way street: we need to cling to what we believe in, and develop a true Catholic identity, but also not be afraid to build bridges to the world. As for those who seem to be quite removed from the faith, well, where we are at at one point or another might be quite different from where we end up just a little further down the road. For some of the people who seem the most lost one day become the best of fishers of men.

In May of 1874, Gilbert Keith Chesterton came into the world, the son of Marie Louise and Edward Chesterton; he'd be known as “G.K.” most of his life. Like most English children, he was baptized into the Church of England, but like I suspect a number of the youths in my faith formation class, his family wasn't practicing. In fact along about the time he was in his teens, he became interested in the occult and experimented with ouija boards. He studied art and some literature, but didn't finish his degree.

Eventually, he'd meet a young woman Frances Blogg who would help him rediscover the Christian faith, who became his wife in 1901.

In the late 1890s, he had started to work for a London Publisher, and he'd do freelance art and literary criticism. By 1902 he was writing for the Daily News writing an op-ed column, and ended up writing weekly for the Illustrated London News for 30 years. He'd also get involved in fiction, perhaps becoming best known for writing of the character Fr. Brown the detective priest. He was known to be friendly, and have a great sense of humor, making fun of his large stature, once saying to a woman who inquired why he wasn't out on the front in World War I that if she were to go round to the side, she would see that he was, and joking with a thin friend that he appeared as if England had a famine to which his friend replied if so then Chesterton was probably the cause. He also was a prolific debater.

But through it all, it was the faith that began to absorb him, as he focused more and more on God and coming to know God, eventually through the Catholic Church. His wife Frances was a devout Christian; an Anglican. She'd bring him to the Christian faith again; and later in life he'd help her find the truth of the Catholic faith. He'd become one of the 20th centuries'

greatest Catholic apologists. Initially it was the Church of England he returned to. But as early as 1911, his looking into Anglicanism left him unsatisfied. He wrote in 1911 that ***“I think I have known intimately by now all the best kinds of Anglicanism, and I find them only a pale imitation.”*** As he looked more deeply at the Catholic faith, he wrote: ***“Catholicism necessarily feels for Protestantism not the superiority a man feels over sticks and straws, but that he feels over clippings of his hair and nails. She feels Protestantism not merely as something insufficient, but something that would never have been even that, but for herself.”*** But he was also struck with the Catholic Church being this Church that would stand firm on Her traditions, rather than do whatever was most popular at the moment. In his own words and one of my favorite quotes from him: ***“The insecurity I felt in Anglicanism was typified in the Lambeth Conference (a gathering of bishops). . . the crowd there cheered all references to the Pope, and laughed at every mention of the Archbishop of Canterbury. It s a queer state of things. . We do not want, as the newspapers say, a Church that will move with the world. We want a Church that will move the world . . . It is by that test that history will really judge, of any Church, whether it is the real Church or no.”*** And so in 1922 he made the leap, becoming a Catholic. This

followed his own soul searching and a conversation with a Yorkshire priest, a man he said knew quite a bit about the nature of evil who later became the basis for Father Brown. He said he would have converted earlier but that he was “much too frightened of that tremendous Reality on the altar.”

As his career went on, he'd write over 4,000 newspaper essays, including those 30 years for the Illustrated London News and 13 years of weekly columns for the Daily News and he put out his own paper too; today we might call it a blog. His was GK's Weekly.

Looking at him, a man who was 6'4 and about 300 pounds (or 21 stone if you prefer), who walked with a cane and cape and crumpled hat, would often be absent minded and call his wife to help him sort out his schedule or let him know what train station he was at, and entertain kids at parties by catching biscuits in his mouth, you might not think of him as a Catholic apologist or great mind. But his words, coming largely from his faith, had an incredible impact. His book “The Everlasting Man” led a young atheist named CS Lewis to become a Christian. He wrote “The Napoleon of Notting Hill” a book in an alternative reality with no advances in technology or the class system or cultural attitudes of the time with an impersonal

government that led Michael Collins to fight for Irish Independence. And one of his essays inspired Gandhi to lead a movement to end British colonial rule. He wrote a book on St. Thomas Aquinas that many consider one of the best ever written.

He also wrote a well known Essay “Why I am a Catholic” and says there are 10,000 reasons all amounting to one: that Catholicism is true. He writes: ***“The Church does often set herself against the fashion of this world that passes away; and she has experience enough to know how very rapidly it does pass away ..Nine out of ten of what we call new ideas are simply old mistakes. The Catholic Church has for one of her chief duties that of preventing people from making those old mistakes; from making them over and over again forever, as people always do if they are left to themselves ...There is no other case of one continuous intelligent institution that has been thinking about thinking for two thousand years....Now there is no other corporate mind in the world that is thus on the watch to prevent minds from going wrong. The policeman comes too late when he tries to prevent men from going wrong. The doctor comes too late, for he only comes to lock up a madman, not to advise a sane man on how not to go mad***

***...Every moment increases for us the moral necessity for such an immortal mind. We must have something that will hold the four corners of the world still ...***

He realized that was the Church, and this man who you might look at and quickly dismiss ended up changing not just his own path in life, but winning so many souls for the Lord through his perseverance.

What I love with his story is it shows the importance of having a Catholic identity; namely knowing what it means to be Catholic which includes having a distinctiveness, but he also was a man who didn't keep that identity to himself nor did he force it on others, but rather he knew he could be an evangelist to help others find the joy that he found coming to know God and His Church.

In the first reading this week, we meet Ezra, an Israelite priest. The people have dealt with exile; they return to their homeland, and Nehemiah tells us the story of the ruined city of Jerusalem. Ezra knows though Jerusalem is meant to be a light to the nations; for the Jewish people are the chosen people; and so he invites the people to rediscover their identity, reading to

them the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Nehemiah knows this too; he himself was a governor of the province of Judah, more a political figure, and one of his first tasks was to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem.

In exile, the people forgot who they were; they need this kind of rediscovery through the efforts of the prophet. For Chesterton, he had forgotten what it meant to be a Christian before Frances helped him find that again as she was Ezra to him. So how about us? For you and me as Catholics, it's important we too have a Catholic identity. We can sometimes lose sight of who we are because we want to blend into culture too much. Again, we engage the world (more on that in a moment) but when we embrace what's called moral relativism, where anything goes, we have a problem. But we also have a problem as Catholics in that so many of us just don't know the faith. They weren't taught it as kids; or just drifted away. So many don't go to Mass. So many don't know what happens on our altar when Jesus becomes present to us in the Eucharist. We build up our identity as Catholics by thinking about our faith. By not just going through the motions and looking at Mass as punching a clock because it's what we've always done, but by truly entering into worship. By praying daily. By learning what our faith teaches in terms of faith and morals through some good reading

that forms our consciences. By growing as a person. By being at times counter cultural and not defined by the media or society, but knowing there are absolute truths and following them. If our final destination is to be heaven, we need to remember the Church is such a gift from God to help us get there. Chesterton was right - the Church is what holds the four corners of the world still because the Church doesn't just change with this or that or say what people want to hear, but what people need to hear - so may we listen to her.

But with that, we, like Chesterton, like Ezra, we evangelize. We partake in the mission of Christ through our baptism and confirmation to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free. That's people in our world. The paradox is those who think they are free are so often imprisoned to their vices. Those who think they can see are like Pilate who looked Jesus in the face and had no idea of what Jesus could do for Him. So many follow the false gods of our world; money; ego; power. So how do we evangelize?

It starts in our homes. What do our kids learn? Do they know our basic prayers? Do they know why we go to Mass or what happens at Mass? As

they get older, do they develop a theology of the body that emphasizes we are all body and soul which are united? So many kids like some back in that class have a concept of God, but just don't see how much they are loved by God and how important it is to foster a relationship with Him and His Church, which is there to help them. So this is why as parents, we don't just have the Church take care of faith formation on Wednesday night or in the Catholic school, but moms and dads need to pray with their kids, to talk to them about the faith, and explain it to them. It's why we have speakers here once a month and so much for parents and kids too; faith formation is always womb to tomb and is always ongoing, and we need to help others learn it.

How about our adult friends or others in our family or workplaces? How about in our communities? People sometimes get uncomfortable when talking about their faith; or if they see a person going down the wrong path who has become blind to their decisions; or when the Church is at odds with many in society on an issue. Who likes to rock the boat, right? But Jesus surely did. And sometimes we have to as well. It doesn't mean being in someones face or combative, but by praying with someone, by looking

for opportunities to talk about our faith, by being an apologist like Chesterton, we can do so much to help others come to see the truth.

Sometimes in life, we want this or that, but hopefully what all of us realize is that the greatest thing to aspire to is sainthood. God gave us a gift to help us obtain that, called the Church. And what a wonderful Church we are blessed with. Being Catholic should mean something, namely reminding ourselves that we have a very special identity that we cling to, but also a very special mission that we do as many parts of the one body: transforming the world. Like Chesterton, may we do that by living out our faith and helping the world come to know how much God loves them and what it means to respond to that love.