



### **Interview with Father Ian Boyd, CSB**

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The following interview took place on September 9, 2005, and was translated to Spanish to be published in the September 24, 2005 edition of *La Nacion*, one of the leading daily newspapers in

Argentina. The interview was published the day before the inauguration of the first International Chesterton Institute Conference in a Spanish speaking country which was held at the Catholic University of Argentina with the sponsorship of the then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Pope Francis.

The three-day conference organized by the Institute and the Argentinian Chestertonian Society was attended by an average of 1,200 people each day.



*Chesterton wrote about the “cultural crisis of our time” at the beginning of the XX century. Are we better off or worse now? What are the forms that crisis takes today? Why are Chesterton books still relevant in our times?*

Let me begin with the last question first. I think that Chesterton's books, plays, and poems are still enormously important today. They contain a timeless wisdom about human beings and the world—the world God created for them and the sometimes-

terrible worlds they have created for themselves. As for the cultural crisis, it has to do with a loss of the sense of the sacred and a kind of moral and spiritual ugliness that was pervasive in Chesterton's day and has become, if anything, even worse today. It is what Chesterton called the loss of strong religious restraints, of a sense of cultural memory, and the fear of God. The symptoms of this were then and are even more now the sprawling and shapeless cities, the lack of a wide and fair distribution of property and ownership, the loss of human dignity, and a devaluing of symbol and ritual, and a recognition of the essential healthiness of the small community. Chesterton saw these things in his own day and many thought that he was exaggerating them. Now we have lived to see his prophecies fulfilled.

*In today's world, many conflicts are fueled by religion. What's been the role of religion in deepening that crisis?*

I think this is a wrong formulation. Religion properly understood binds people together: that is what the word means. The normal effect of religion is to create harmony, not its opposite. Of course, terrible things have been done in the name of religion, just as in the name of the secular utopias of the last 200 years. These are obvious abuses. On the other hand, Christianity is not a creed of blandness or mere niceness. Christ, after all, came with a sword. Religion involves restraints, not an incitement to violence or selfishness. It is an invitation to love, not hate. Those who are cut off from religion - or who create their own dreadful version of it - a Hitler, a Stalin - who do most damage.

*Why believe in Christianity today?*

This is, if I may say, a foolish question. What has "today" got to do with it. Chesterton laughingly referred to this fallacy when he said that no-one dreamt that there would be any difficulty in believing on Tuesday what you believed on Monday. Christianity is either true or false. It does not become more true by being around for longer. Indeed, Chesterton famously thanked Christianity for saving him from being a child of his own time.

*Do you think having the most powerful country in the world, the United States, governed by a president who has such a firm religious perspective on politics is good for international relations?*

It is good in itself that the president should have firm religious convictions. Whether it is good for international relations or not is neither here nor there. What, though, would you want? A man indifferent to religion, or hostile to it, in charge of a country's foreign policy? The Machiavellian in politics is the really terrifying figure, not the disciple of Christ.

*Many people believe that in order for the Catholic Church to strengthen itself it should become more flexible and adapt to modern times, accepting not only women priests, homosexuality and the marriage of priests but also the use of condoms and birth control pills. What are your views on that? Are traditions always good? Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead.*

One critic put it well. Chesterton believed that limitation is essential to anything that is to be enjoyed or admired or loved. These restraints apply to the sexual appetite - perhaps that appetite above all, where men and women, are called in a uniquely beautiful way to share in the creation of new life. Such things as you mention represent profound injuries to human dignity. If the expression of one's sexual tastes is to be regarded as always good, that raises disturbing questions about such behaviour as child pornography, necrophilia, bestiality, and the like.

*The Chesterton Institute for Faith & Culture's mission is "cultural evangelization." How is "cultural evangelization" today different from that at the times of Chesterton?*

In some ways, it is not different at all, simply more urgent. The cultural crisis is deeper and so our response to it must be more energetic. We lack, let's face it, a thoughtful reading public. Indeed, we lack a Chesterton whom they might read. In Chesterton's time, they were still living on the moral capital of what was essentially a Christian civilization. In our time, we are living, in many places, in a post-Christian civilization. But I do not want to leave you with the idea of gloom or pessimism. Chesterton was enormously joyful and exuberant and so should we be. If Christianity is, as Chesterton regard it, an ongoing revelation of God's love and mercy, then it is impossible not to be filled with joy. Those who believe in God are optimists, filled with what Chesterton calls a "fury for life." He claimed that in earlier time men were so filled with joy that they needed priests to remind them that they were going to die. Chesterton suggests that in our gloomier age we need a new kind of priest - one who would remind them that they are not dead yet.

*What do you mean when you say that "imagination must be cleansed"? Why? What are the differences between moral and social imagination?*

To take the last point first, there are no differences. The social imagination must be moral, or it is nothing. The imagination is one of the essential organs of perception. Is it not obvious that increasingly it has been clouded and degraded? That our understanding of the true and the beautiful has been tainted? That we fail even to perceive that moral ugliness is, indeed, ugly. Evil is real and a polluted imagination cannot see it.

*Chesterton foresaw that consumerism instead of Communism would bring the world to a deeper crisis. How should consumerism be fought?*

Consumerism threatens what Chesterton called the common things. It has the power to disintegrate communities - a power far greater than the more obvious threats you mention - communism and totalitarianism. As Alistair Macintyre points out, "the moral individualism of liberalism is itself a solvent of participatory community."

*Chesterton also wrote that "life is a story told by God." What sort of book would that story make?*

It is a story with a happy ending. Chesterton called it an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. For the believer, it was a re-enactment of the one gospel story whose last

chapter speaks not of death but resurrection. As Chesterton said, joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian.

*“The rich are the scum of the earth in every country.” Chesterton wrote. Do you think in Latin America, where there is a great contrast between a rich minority and a poor majority, the “upper classes” are not taking any social responsibility? What would you recommend?*

Chesterton was fond of expressing truths by shock tactics. What he says recalls a witty comment of Jonathan Swift, namely that if you want to know what God thinks of money, look at the people he gives it to. We also need to be reminded, however, that there are other kinds of poverty in addition to the economic sort. From this point of view, the moral danger of riches is their terrible ability to blind one to the suffering and needs of others. Chesterton was not opposed to capitalism. On the contrary, he saw that the moral good of property was so great that it should be as widely distributed as possible. Free markets are indeed a necessary component of freedom, but the markets of modern capitalism are not, alas, free. Chesterton's social vision was of a free people whose freedom is guaranteed by their ownership of property.

*Why do you think Chesterton influenced Jorge Luis Borges so much? Where can you see that influence apart from the detective stories?*

What Borges admired in Chesterton was his wise imagination. Borges believed that when Chesterton trusted his imagination he was always right. Borges's criticism of Chesterton is related to the same point. He believed that Chesterton was disappointing only when he subordinated that imagination to a narrower rationality. But perhaps this only means that Borges never fully understood the religious dimension in Chesterton's writing. The deeper understanding is to recognize that, with Chesterton, the imagination might be called sacramental: that is to say, he was a great religious writer who seldom spoke directly about religion. He taught his readers to discover God in the part of life from which God seemed to be absent. He erased the difference between the sacred and the profane.

Link to translated article and interview as published:

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Conference announcement note: September 18, 2005

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