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Frank Sheed and his World. Popular Apologetics in 20th Century England*

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF FRANK SHEED

The first two thirds of the twentieth century was a golden age of apologetics in England. There was the so-called «Catholic Literary Revival», a great and sudden flowering of the written word, directed towards the fortification of the faith among Catholics, and the conversion of non-Catholic England. There were two generations of gifted writer-apologists, the most famous among them being Hilaire Belloc, G.K. Chesterton, and Ronald Knox; but there were many others.

Right in the midst of these authors was the Australian-born cradle-Catholic Frank Sheed, who lived from 1897 to 1981. His place among them could be likened to that of the conductor of the orchestra. He ran the publishing house Sheed & Ward over four decades, from the mid-1920s to the mid-1960s, and he was the publisher of many of their best-known works. But he was more than just an organiser, because he was himself one of the best of the writer-apologists of the era.

Sheed's twenty-nine books were published over a period of fifty-five years; the first was written in 1926, to the last in 1981, the year of his death. His best

* Texto leído en la defensa de la tesis doctoral el 11 de junio de 2014 en la Facultad de Teología de la Universidad de Navarra, ante el siguiente tribunal: prof. César Izquierdo (presidente), prof. José Luis Gutiérrez, prof. Juan Alonso, prof. Juan Luis Caballero, prof. Fernando Milán, (secretario).

works were critical and commercial triumphs when published and have never been out of print; several of them have been translated into other languages. Among them are several classics, such as *A Map of Life*, *Theology and Sanity* and *To Know Christ Jesus*.

Throughout the period of the Literary Revival, from the 1890s through to the 1960s, there also flourished the so-called Catholic Evidence Movement, which produced an army of street-corner apologists for the Catholic faith. The movement was an assemblage of several organizations, but by far the largest of them was the Catholic Evidence Guild. At the height of the Guild's work in the 1930s it could count on over 600 open-air-speakers nationally, as well as the supporting work of many thousands of other helpers.

Frank Sheed was there too. He and his wife were great street orators who led the Catholic Evidence Guild from the early 1920s through to World War II, recruiting and training its speakers, writing –and publishing– its training outlines, rallying the faithful at the annual meetings, and urging forward the mission for the «conversion of England». Frank Sheed's life was apologetics. For other writers, it was important. For Frank Sheed, it was his life's work.

2. OBJECT OF THE THESIS

The object of the present work is to study the work of Frank Sheed, publisher, writer and public orator in the cause of «Catholic truth», in the context of the Catholic Evidence Movement, of which he was the most brilliant product.

Sheed was a street-corner speaker first and foremost, before he was a publisher or writer. The influence of speaking in public influenced all aspects of his work as a writer and publisher. He himself acknowledged his intellectual debt to the open-air audiences. His autobiography, *The Church and I*, is one of the best sources for what life was like in the Guild. He wrote, «I am writing so much» he wrote, «about the street corner crowds to whom I tried to teach the Faith, because they played so large a part in my Catholic intellectual formation (...) the crowds forced a general intellectual and specifically theological formation not to be had elsewhere»¹. Sheed found himself «automatically thinking how I could make this or that truth clearer to this or that audience»².

¹ F.J. SHEED, *The Church and I*, London, 1975, p. 54.

² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

3. STATE OF THE QUESTION

It is generally known that Sheed was indebted to the open-air lecturers. The *degree* of that indebtedness is not, however, appreciated, not least because a complete history of the Catholic Evidence Movement remains to be written. The movement was the subject of a short monograph, which was published as long ago as 1921³. Remarkably, that short study remains the only published account of the movement as a whole. The historical chapters of the present dissertation will hopefully be regarded as a contribution toward rectifying this gap, because it was a significant chapter in twentieth-century English Catholicism.

The thesis aims further to show how the Catholic Evidence Guild exerted its wider influence, which it did through Sheed's writings, and further through the activities of the publishing house Sheed & Ward. The study also examines Sheed's apologetical writings and analyses his apologetics, comparing it with the apologetics of the Guild. It also compares Sheed's apologetics with that of the scientific treatise of Apologetics –classical apologetics, if you will–, and draws conclusions as to its continuity with them, and its novelty.

4. METHOD

The first three parts of the dissertation are historical in method. After setting out some basic notions of apologetics and presenting various methods, including the so-called classical method, it goes on to explain the genesis of the Catholic Evidence Movement in late Victorian England.

The second part then describes the formative years of Frank Sheed, as also of Maisie Ward, and their work for the Guild. It goes on to cover the golden age of «popular apologetics», the Guild's organisation, the systematization of its method, its rapid expansion and the extent of its apostolic outreach. It also analyses the reasons for the decline of the Catholic Evidence Movement –and apologetics in general– from the mid-1960s onwards.

The third part of the dissertation covers the history of the publishing house Sheed & Ward, as well as the other principal publishers of Catholic works of that era. Their historical trajectories are compared with the expansion and decline of the Catholic Evidence Movement.

³ The book is H. BROWNE, *The Catholic Evidence Movement: Its Achievements and its Hopes*, London, 1921.

The fourth and final part of the dissertation is less historical in method, and more theological; it examines Frank Sheed as an author, and the ideas which emerge in his writings.

5. WHY FRANK SHEED IS OF INTEREST

There are several reasons why, among the apologetical writers of the twentieth century, the figure of Frank Sheed should be especially intriguing to the student of apologetics. Firstly, Sheed's apologetical works speak to the reader with authority because they respond to a real need to explain Catholicism to a real audience, which had real difficulties with the faith. Sheed really met and debated with real crowds of people, argued over real points of concern to them, replied to their questions. His written apologetics possesses all the «felt reality» of a genuine encounter. Sheed is the acknowledged master of practical apologetics. Of his own books, he wrote, «the crowd was truly co-author». Doctrines were presented in the language of the crowd, in response to real problems they were really raising.

Secondly, Sheed is an excellent writer, with the ability to persuade. His best writing has an extraordinary clarity of expression that has been compared with that of his non-Catholic counterpart, C.S. Lewis. His style may be described as forensic, but possessed of a popular touch honed to perfection by years of speaking on the street corner podium. Other writers may display more surface brilliance, but of all that generation of apologists, Sheed is the most lucid. He had a particular gift for expressing complex theological concepts, such as the Trinity—his favourite topic as a public speaker—in clear and simple terms, which could be understood by anyone, without however thereby watering down the meaning of the doctrines.

There is another aspect to Sheed's lucidity. His speaking experiences taught him to be systematic and thorough. When he turned to writing, Sheed was one of the most systematic of the Catholic apologists of the era, constructing his case patiently, building up from the foundations. As a result of his speaking experiences, his written explanations are very clear indeed. The chapter on the Trinity in *Theology and Sanity* has been described as «the clearest explanation of the Trinity ever put on paper»⁴. Sheed's characteristic lucidity, then, is not just a matter of literary style; it arises also as a result of his apologetical system, which is interesting in itself.

⁴ K. KEATING, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism. The Attack on «Romanism» by «Bible Christians»*, San Francisco, 1988, p. 336.

Thirdly, Frank Sheed's books are well known. His major works are still in print. They are popular and influential among Catholics in the English-speaking world, and several have appeared in foreign translations. Present-day apologists such as Carl Olson, Karl Keating and Patrick Madrid have praised Sheed's apologetics, and have written about his example to them as a teacher and defender of the Catholic faith⁵.

This interest, which might be termed the historical angle, is all the greater because, as already mentioned, Sheed was a central figure in the «Catholic Literary Revival». His firm published not only his own books, but also the works of most of the other major Catholic writers of the era. Because of his central position and his influence, the varied activity of Frank Sheed provides us with a vantage point from which one can attempt to descry the field of apologetics in England –and in the English language– in the twentieth century. To a surprising degree, Frank Sheed is the fixed point about which events turn, and other people move in and out of view with them.

Thus Frank Sheed is therefore a significant figure from at least three angles, the apologetical, the literary, and the historical. But there is a fourth reason why Sheed is of interest: he was, unusually for the period, a theologian who was also a layman, with a wife and children to support; and one of the themes which makes an occasional appearance in his work is that of the need to be a saint. Thus his writings are of interest in the context of the development of lay spirituality in the twentieth century. The theme is present in Sheed's mature works, and although he does not enter into detail, there is enough to show that by the time of the Council he already understood that the ordinary Christian is called to sanctity.

6. SOURCES

This thesis is composed of material gleaned from a wide range of sources. Only a fraction of their number can be mentioned here, the sources that cover more specifically the life and work of Frank Sheed and the Catholic Evidence Movement. There are several sources on the «Catholic Literary Revival», notably Joseph

⁵ Cfr. *ibid.* pp. 333-338. Cf. also C.E. OLSON, *Lessons Learned from Great Apologists: «This Rock»* (El Cajon, California), 10:11/12 (November/December 1999) 16-21; as well as P. MADRID, *The Prophet of Hyde Park: Secrets of a Street-Corner Evangelist*: «Crisis Magazine» (Bedford, New Hampshire), 20:3 (March 2002) 30-35.

Pearce's well-known work on the «Literary Converts»⁶. The main references for Frank Sheed's life are his autobiography⁷, the separate autobiography of his wife Maisie Ward⁸, and the memoir of them both written by their son, the distinguished author Wilfrid Sheed⁹. As regards his work, several of his books are still in print, and even those that are out of print are readily available.

The question of sources becomes more acute in the study of the Catholic evidence movement. There is the (aforementioned) very early monograph written by Henry Browne in 1921. Frank Sheed wrote a useful booklet about the Guild and its work in 1926. Maisie Ward compiled the *Catholic Evidence Training Outlines*, which came out in several editions from 1925 onwards. Both Sheed and Ward write about their time in the Guild in their autobiographies. Additional information can be obtained from various Guild publications, such as its 1922 Handbook, from news items in the Catholic press, from an article by Debra Campbell published in the *Heythrop Journal* in 1989¹⁰, and above all from archives.

Much of the work on this thesis has taken place in the archives of the Catholic Evidence Guild and of the Catholic Missionary Society, which are both physically located within the Westminster Diocesan Archives. Visits to the south London offices of the Guild of Our Lady of Ransom, to search through back issues of *The Ransomer*, and to Herald House in the City, to sift through old copies of the *Catholic Herald*, both proved to be very fruitful.

In general, it can be affirmed that while references to the Catholic evidence movement can be hunted down in various places, there are few specifically historical works of reference, a circumstance which raises the question whether its influence on 20th century English Catholicism may have been underestimated in the past.

This thesis also contains summarised histories of several Catholic publishing houses, including of course Sheed & Ward. Much of this historical narrative has had to be reconstructed from contemporary sources, especially news articles appearing in the *Catholic Herald*, checking where possible with information obtained from elsewhere.

⁶ J. PEARCE, *Literary Converts*, London, 1999.

⁷ F.J. SHEED, *The Church and I*, London, 1975 (and New York 1974).

⁸ M. WARD, *Unfinished Business*, London, 1964.

⁹ W. SHEED, *Frank & Maisie: A Memoir with parents*, New York, 1986.

¹⁰ D. CAMPBELL, *The Catholic Evidence Guild. Towards a History of the Laity*, in *Heythrop Journal* (London), 30 (1989), pp. 306-324.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Some of the most important conclusions reached in the course of the work are the following:

I) That the Catholic Evidence Guild wielded a strong influence on the course of twentieth century apologetics in England. It was a decisive influence on Frank Sheed. It was one of the dominant influences on the publishers Sheed & Ward. And even outside of Sheed & Ward, it can be detected in the presentation and style of some of the other written apologetical works of the period.

II) That the wider movement contributed significantly to the growth of the Catholic Church in England during the first half of the century. Between the two world wars conversions accounted for at least half of the annual growth of the Catholic population; and of conversions a significant percentage came from the effect of the Catholic Evidence Movement.

III) Frank Sheed, through his multiple activities, was the leading influence in the world of English language Catholic apologetics in the middle of the twentieth century. Sheed's influence stems from his multiple activities as author, publisher, and lecturer to literally thousands of audiences. His influence began to be important in the late 1920s after the foundation of Sheed & Ward, and grew through the 1930s. After the War, Sheed dominated until the mid-1960s, apologetics went out of fashion. The period could be extended to his death in 1981, albeit in a much diminished field.

IV) Sheed integrated within an apologetical framework a wide-ranging presentation of Catholic doctrine as a whole. He kept to the order of the classical treatise, but within its framework he presented Christian teaching positively. In doing so he made a comprehensive exposition not just of the contents of the scientific treatise of apologetics, but of Catholic doctrine as a whole. The apologetical content was kept unobtrusive; it was present not for its own sake, but hidden, to support the doctrinal content all the more effectively. It was an integrated apologetics.

This approach was a legacy of Sheed's experiences with the Guild; he learned from his experience with the open-air lecturers that it was not enough to defend the faith from criticism; it was necessary to teach it to the critics. However, Sheed's approach is subtler in that rather than intersperse lectures on specifically apologetical subjects with others on general Catholic doctrine, as might happen at a Guild meeting, Sheed seamlessly merges the two. In his work the doctrine is supported by an appeal to reason. The effect is of an *apologia* for the Catholic faith.

In this approach Sheed may said to have been ahead of his time, and is especially interesting now for the catechesis of Catholics who no longer live in a Catholic culture. The appeal to reason is therefore all the more necessary in the presentation of doctrine. Sheed's work provides a model of how to go about this work of doctrinal formation.

V) That the atmosphere after the Second Vatican Council adversely affected interest in written apologetics, and also national conversion figures. However, the chief cause was not the Council itself; it was a «false irenicism» rather than ecumenism properly understood, an «irenicism» which fed upon a crisis of identity among Catholics and indeed the general crisis of authority of the 1960s.

VI) That Frank Sheed understood and taught that all the laity were called to be saints, thus anticipating a key line of teaching of the Second Vatican Council. It is not a large element in his writings, nor does he go into great detail; but the teaching is clearly present in works which he wrote from the late 1940s onwards.

VII) That Frank Sheed's questioning of one specific aspect of *Humanae Vitae* should not be taken to imply that he disagreed with its teaching on contraception. On that point he was clear. He did, however, favour discussion with dissidents as the best way to bring the situation under control, and in trying to reach out to them he fell into a lax interpretation of the encyclical. His reputation has survived because from his writing it is obvious that, rather than dissenting, he made a mistake. Sheed's attempt to build bridges should probably be seen in the light of the attempts of his father-in-law Wilfrid Ward to mediate with Modernists six decades earlier, after *Pascendi*.

8. SUMMARY

This work has analysed Sheed's importance from various perspectives: historical, literary, apologetical, systematic and spiritual. A general conclusion which covers all of the above would be, the work of Frank Sheed was central to twentieth century English language Catholic apologetics as a whole.

But there is a final point: Sheed was a great communicator; his written apologetics reaches its target, as did his open-air lecturing. His best work is still read today, and gets a response more than half a century after it was originally conceived, in a world very different from our own.

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