FEATURE STORY

THE LEGACY *of* FRANK SHEED

BY BISHOP JOHN O. BARRES

The great Boston College philosopher and Catholic apologist Peter Kreeft recently referred to Frank Sheed (1897-1981) as the "Catholic C.S. Lewis."[1] He is spot on.

An Australian by birth and lawyer by training, Frank Sheed was a charismatic Catholic writer and book publisher, renowned apologist, public lecturer, and devoted leader of the Catholic Evidence Guild. After moving to England, he married Maisie Ward (1889-1975), herself a notable Catholic speaker and writer from the prominent English Ward family that was close to St. John Henry Cardinal Newman.

Frank and Maisie met through a mutual desire to make the Faith better known. This interest never waned in their married life, and eventually, it brought them to New Jersey in 1940.

Wherever he was in the world, be it Australia, England or the United States, Frank Sheed labored for the Faith and paved a 20th century trail of Catholic intellectual life and evangelization that lives to this day.

Through his publishing firm, Sheed and Ward, the works of Catholic luminaries like Karl Adam, G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Evelyn Waugh, Christopher Dawson, and Msgr. Ronald Knox, to name only a few, were made known to a wider audience. Sheed published quality. He produced it, too.

Left to Right: Frank Sheed, Marjorie Barres, Margaret Barres Cotter (Bishop Barres' oldest sister). Picture circa late 1950s.

Photos courtesy of Bishop John Barres

His own books, such as *A Map of Life* (1933), *Theology and Sanity* (1947), and *Theology for Beginners* (1957), have become classics. They are at once accessible and deep, and they retain a freshness even to this day.

His vast correspondence is revelatory. Housed now at the Notre Dame University Archives, it shows an

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Frank Sheed and Marjorie Barres, mother of Bishop John Barres.

important American and European network of friends and acquaintances he sustained with his considerable personal gifts, charisms, charity, and commitment to the evangelizing mission of the Church.

Providentially, this 20th century Catholic powerhouse had a connection to my family. Sheed and Ward published my father's book *One Shepherd, One Flock* – the story of my convert Protestant minister parents entering the Catholic Church in 1955.

Frank Sheed himself wrote the Introduction to the 1956 edition, which was also included in the edition republished by Catholic Answers in 2000. In that Introduction, he recounted meeting my father at a pivotal moment in his journey.

By the mere chance of a speaking engagement in Hartford, I was the first Catholic to whom Oliver Barres talked of joining the Church. He was then a Congregational minister, his wife (Marjorie) a Congregational minister too. With his conversion I had nothing whatever to do: he had thought or read or prayed his way through to every one of the conclusions of this book before we met. No one talked him into a single step of the way – there never was a more impersonal conversion, humanly speaking. That goes with the basic quality of his mind. He has a hunger and thirst for reality, for the objective. That a creed stimulates or consoles or quiets the conscience, that it meets one's desires or felt needs – all that is splendid, but secondary. Unless it is true, he will have none of it...Either there is a voice here upon earth telling us Christ's meaning with Christ's authority, or we cannot know his meaning – we can but make our own choice among the thousand guesses of men. Since there was a voice upon earth claiming to be that Voice, he must see if its claim was true. He came at last to accept the Catholic Church, not from a weak man's need for authority but from a sane man's need for truth, which is reality known. [2]

Christmas 1979. From left: John Barres, Mr. Sheed and Bill Barres.

Frank Sheed was present at a crucial point in my parents' conversion story, and he became an important friend and guide to them and their six children in the years that followed.

I have many personal memories of conversations with "Mr. Sheed" – as I knew him. For instance, he once told me that his training as a lawyer, with its emphasis on discipline, consistent logic and argumentation, and efficient expression, was critical to his contributions as a Catholic writer, speaker, and publisher. Another time, Mr. Sheed mentioned that he did not consider himself an "intellectual" but that he had some gifts and had learned to work with "intellectuals."

As a member of the Catholic Evidence Guild, Frank Sheed would speak about the Catholic Faith on street corners and especially at Hyde Park in London. In his Preface to the revised edition of *Theology and Sanity*, he writes:

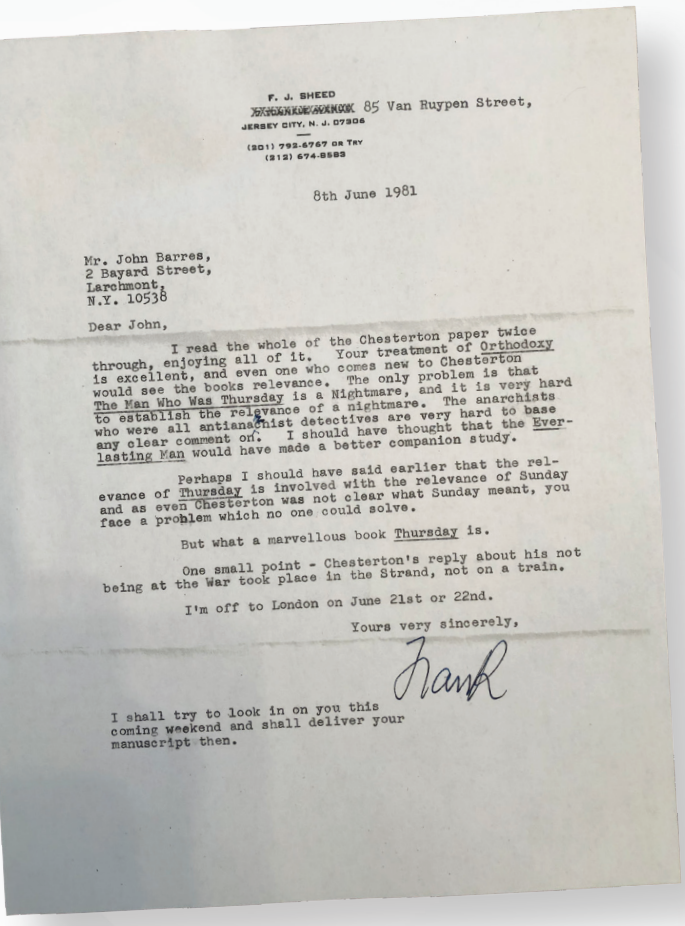
When I wrote Theology and Sanity, I had been teaching the Faith under the open sky for a quarter of a century. The priests who had trained me and others for the work were Aquinas men; but it was from translating St. Augustine's Confessions that I went on to the writing of the book. So Augustine and Aquinas both went into it, in what proportion I could not tell...But Augustine and Aquinas – and Matthew and Mark and Luke and John and Paul – were not the only influences in its shaping. Every paragraph had been tried out on forty or fifty outdoor audiences before I got it down on paper. Listeners were free to walk away the moment they were bored – I tried to learn from their boredom. If they stayed, they could utter their reactions – anything from agreement to intelligent criticism to mockery to blasphemy – with a freedom which speakers who knew only the ivory tower of pulpit or lecture hall found unnerving. It was unbelievably educative. I doubt if there was any objection against the Faith in all the centuries that was not hurled at us. And, unlike the great theologians whose writings had helped to form our minds, we could not go off and think about the objection for a year or two, then write an article. We had to cope – somehow – there and then. The crowd was truly co-author of the book; not a sentence that has not been reshaped by them. [3]

Sheed's back-and-forth with those large - and not always receptive - crowds formed his apologetic style. He learned a lot in those days.

I remember Mr. Sheed in our family home in Larchmont, New York, where he would come for Sunday lunch roughly two times a year, telling me that when people started throwing things at him in Hyde Park, it was important to remain still. He said if you moved or tried to dodge what was thrown, you would get hit. (Not every lesson he learned was about the Faith!)

My sister Catherine remembers him saying that sometimes, when people would "heckle him" and crowd his speaking area, he would reach down, remove their hat, and then graciously present it back to them with his charismatic smile in a way that "befuddled" and disarmed them.

As I got older, Mr. Sheed became a



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(212) 674-8583

8th June 1981

Mr. John Barres,
2 Bayard Street,
Larchmont,
N.Y. 10538

Dear John,

I read the whole of the Chesterton paper twice through, enjoying all of it. Your treatment of Orthodoxy is excellent, and even one who comes new to Chesterton would see the books relevance. The only problem is that The Man Who Was Thursday is a Nightmare, and it is very hard to establish the relevance of a nightmare. The anarchists who were all antianarchist detectives are very hard to base any clear comment on. I should have thought that the Everlasting Man would have made a better companion study.

Perhaps I should have said earlier that the relevance of Thursday is involved with the relevance of Sunday and as even Chesterton was not clear what Sunday meant, you face a problem which no one could solve.

But what a marvellous book Thursday is.

One small point - Chesterton's reply about his not being at the War took place in the Strand, not on a train.

I'm off to London on June 21st or 22nd.

Yours very sincerely,

Frank

I shall try to look in on you this coming weekend and shall deliver your manuscript then.

literary mentor. In my junior year at Princeton, with his enthusiastic guidance and support, I wrote my junior paper on G.K. Chesterton. The title of the paper was "G.K. Chesterton's Relevance Today: Christian Thought in *Orthodoxy* and *The Man Who Was Thursday.*"

On June 8, 1981, Mr. Sheed wrote me a letter:

"I read the whole of the Chesterton paper twice through, enjoying all of it. Your treatment of Orthodoxy is excellent, and even one who comes new to Chesterton would see the book's relevance. The only problem is that The Man Who Was Thursday is a Nightmare, and it is very hard to establish the relevance of a nightmare. The anarchists who were all anti-anarchist detectives are very hard to base any clear comment on. I should have thought that The Everlasting Man would have made a better companion study."

That was Mr. Sheed's nice way of saying my analysis of *Orthodoxy* was excellent, but my analysis of *The Man Who Was Thursday* missed the mark.

What is very moving to me now, seeing the letter 41 years later, is that he signed the letter "Frank," even though I was only 20-years-old. He had enough respect and honesty to critique my paper, and at the same time, he was establishing more of an adult relationship with me.

As I was preparing for my senior year at Princeton, my father had suggested I write my senior thesis on the drama of T.S. Eliot. On June 14, 1981, Mr. Sheed came over to our home in Larchmont, NY, for lunch and we began to discuss T.S. Eliot and prepare the ground for my research and writing.

He provided me the best quote and footnote in the entire thesis that afternoon.

He said that the only time that he ever heard Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), the great Catholic philosopher, tell a joke was in regard to T.S. Eliot. Maritain said that "Eliot exhausted his capacity for conversion (to the Roman Catholic Church) when he became an Englishman."

The last conversation I had with Mr. Sheed was a few months before his death on November 20, 1981. He called our home; I answered. Immediately recognizing his joyful Australian voice, I asked: "Mr. Sheed, how are you?!" He replied, "My legs are above the ground. They shall soon be under it." The affable way he said that was not only Chestertonian but an act of faith in his belief in the Resurrection, Eternal Life and the Immortality of the Soul.

Frank Sheed was a great treasure to the mission of the Catholic Church. In his humble and joyful way, with his wife Maisie, he paved a 20th Century trail of Catholic intellectual life and evangelization that lives to this day – certainly in the heart of the Bishop of Rockville Centre who remembers him and his joyful mentoring with great fondness.

A "Catholic C.S. Lewis," indeed! ✝

[1]Peter Kreeft, foreword to Christ in Eclipse, by Frank J. Sheed (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020), 9.
[2]Oliver Barres, One Shepherd, One Flock (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), vii-viii; and Oliver Barres, One Shepherd, One Flock (San Diego: Catholic Answers, 2000), 15-16.
[3]Frank J. Sheed, Theology and Sanity (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1978), ix-x.

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Above, from left: Sister Alice Garcia, SSCJ, 91; Brother Martin Gonzales, OCSO, 95; Sister Theresa McGrath, CCVI, 86; Sister Anne Cecile Muldoon, OSU, 93; Abbot Emeritus Peter Eberle, OSB, 79.
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