



Innocence and Humility



by [Donald DeMarco, PhD](#)

The distinguished Catholic convert, Msgr. Ronald Knox, said of G.K. Chesterton that his good friend possessed two virtues in particular, innocence and humility. Innocence and humility are liberating virtues. They are not the virtues of the secular world, but they are virtues of the child of God who is advancing cheerfully toward his heavenly destiny.

There are exceedingly few contemporary writers to whom the same description could be honestly applied. This unusual combination of virtues, however, is of inestimable value to the writer, for it allows him to see things as they are rather than how he would prefer them to be. But it's also of great value for the Christian who seeks to accomplish God's will rather than his own.

Spiders and Visigoths

We usually think of innocence not as a virtue, but as a condition of the very young who aren't yet aware of evil in the world. In *Life is Beautiful*, the best foreign film of 1999, a father endears himself to audiences by the loving and imaginative ways in which he protects his son from a premature awareness of the evil of racism.

In one scene, the son notices a sign on a door saying, "No Jews or dogs allowed." The boy asks his father why they are not allowed to go in. The father, understanding that there are some realities that a defenseless child cannot face, makes light of the situation. "Everybody does what he wants to do," he says. "There's a hardware store where they don't allow Spaniards or horses." Somewhat confused, his son says, "But we let everybody into our bookstore." "From now on, we'll have a sign, too," replies the father. "Is there anybody you don't like?" "Spiders," his son answers. "What about you?" "I don't like Visigoths," states the father, emphatically and without hesitation. "From now on we'll have a sign that says, "No spiders or Visigoths allowed."

The father cleverly reduces anti-Semitism to an unaccountable eccentricity, thereby protecting his son's innocence. Barring spiders and Visigoths — a branch of Goths that settled in France and Spain in the fifth century — seems, to the child, more playful than prejudicial.

Youth Springs Eternal

The word innocent literally means "free from harm" (nocere in Latin refers to harm, as in the medical axiom, Primum non nocere — "first do no harm"). The innocence of the child is freedom from an awareness of evil. It is with this latter sense in mind that Shakespeare asked, "What is a stronger breastplate than a heart untainted?" (Henry VI, Part 2, III, ii).

The importance of the virtue of innocence is implied in Christ's admonition: "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3).

The child is free from an awareness of sin. Christ is telling us that we must remain childlike in the sense that we do not adapt to sin. To acquire the virtue of innocence means to remain childlike in adulthood without sacrificing our developed awareness of sin. It is the innocence of St. Francis of Assisi in his Sermon to the Birds.

Innocent Smith is a literary creation of Chesterton. But he also embodies the innocence of its author. He represents, according to Msgr. Knox, "the innocence and the fresh eyes of childhood, investing with excitement and color the drab surroundings — or so they have seemed hitherto — of half a dozen unsuccessful and disillusioned people." Innocent Smith is youth-reborn, childlikeness recaptured. He displays the virtue of innocence to a world that has grown dull with sinfulness.

The Joys of Detoxification

Chesterton would not have possessed the virtue of innocence had he not also possessed the virtue of humility. Innocence protects us from the poison from without; humility protects us from the poison from within. Pride, our most toxic inner poison, causes our vision of ourselves and reality to be blurred, primarily because it leads us to take ourselves too seriously and reality not seriously enough. It is, as Chesterton states rather succinctly, "the falsification of fact by the introduction of self." If a person is truly to learn anything at all, he must first "subtract himself from the study of any solid and objective thing."

A genuine appreciation of things requires seeing them against a boundary of nonexistence. From the perspective of nonbeing, all light seems lightning, every sensation becomes sensational, and each phenomenon appears to be phenomenal. The attitude of humility, because it expects nothing, is ready to appreciate everything. The person who empties himself is best prepared to fill himself with the wonders of the universe. As G.K. Chesterton has pointed out, "It is one of the million wild jests of truth that we know nothing until we know nothing."

Windows, Not Mirrors

There are cynics who see nothing of value. There are fanatics who see nothing other than themselves to be of value. Innocence allows us to see value wherever it exists. Humility prevents us from perverting it for our own use. Chesterton said that he was never interested in mirrors. By that, he meant that he was never interested in his own reflection or reflections. His entire attitude was outward. He exulted with the saints in being a child of creation.

Humility gives us a clean window; innocence gives us a clear vision. Together they allow us to see the world that God has put before our senses. As Chesterton writes:

"All my mental doors open outwards into a world I have not made. My last door of liberty opens upon a world of sun and solid things, of objective adventures. The post in the garden; the thing I could neither create nor expect; strong plain daylight on stiff upstanding wood; it is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes" (*The Uses of Diversity*).

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DESCRIPTION

Using G.K. Chesterton's life as a model Donald DeMarco explains the importance of acquiring the virtues of innocence and humility and how these virtues are necessary in order to obtain our heavenly destiny.

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