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Frank Sheed: The Prophet of Hyde Park

By Patrick Madrid

One brisk, gray afternoon in London, I stood on a corner of Hyde Park with one of Frank Sheed's old friends. "That's the spot where he used to stand and preach," she said with a wistful smile. Now an elderly widow, in the 1940s and 1950s she had worked in the London Catholic Evidence Guild with Frank and his wife, Maisie.

It was easy to imagine the scene: a portly, smiling, middle-aged fellow, who looked a lot like W.C. Fields, evangelizing anyone who stopped in front of his speaker's platform.



Over afternoon tea, Sheed's friend described what it was like to watch Frank manage the crowd. He worked on hecklers and skeptics and scoffers the way a chiropractor works on a bad back — probing, searching for the tensed-up muscle, finding it, and going to work on it with precision. He massaged the minds of his audiences, breaking down hardened prejudices against Catholicism, kneading the "God does not exist!" arguments until they crumbled, and showing atheists the folly of their denials. He made countless converts on the stump.

Frank Sheed was one of the 20th-century's greatest apologists. Some — especially those who knew him personally and saw him in action — say he was the greatest Catholic apologist of the last 100

years, maybe longer. One thing is certain: Few people of any era have been endowed with his unique, powerful combination of gifts — including a rare talent for expressing complex theological concepts, such as the Trinity or the Hypostatic Union, in words that were understandable and compelling to the average reader. His style was clear and luminous; it had the power to persuade as well as to inform.

Sheed was also an accomplished speaker. He preached the Catholic faith under the open sky to any and all who would listen — often in unforgiving and even hostile locations, such as New York’s Time Square and London’s Hyde Park (stomping ground of Communist firebrands, Protestant preachers, and agitators for every kind of cause and “-ism”).

He believed the Catholic faith to his core, and that belief impelled him to share the gospel with all those around him. For many of us, his “taking it to the streets” approach to Christianity might seem extreme or fanatical. It shouldn’t. Frank Sheed understood that for Christians, public testimony about Christ should be the norm. “You are the light of the world,” Christ told us. “A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

Can Anything Good Come From Sydney?

Francis Joseph Sheed was born on March 20, 1897, in Sydney, Australia. His father, John Sheed, sprang from a long line of Scottish Presbyterians. John was a blue-collar worker with a bottomless thirst for ale. Frank’s mother, the former Mary Maloney, was Irish Catholic. By all accounts, she was a loving and devoted mother to her two sons, Jack and Frank. The religious issue between her and John remained always at a stalemate. His antipathy toward Rome never abated, while she remained a loyal, devout Catholic. John insisted the boys be raised Protestant.

At the turn of the century, Sydney was an exciting place. With the striking natural beauty of the city’s harbor and the gentle, verdant hills that ring it, the metropolis was Australia’s New York City. It was here that Frank began to make his way in the world. His family moved around a lot, largely because of his father’s drinking problem. Frank’s son, Wilfrid, recalls his father saying the family had lived in 33 homes by the time Frank was 13.

John Sheed, like many otherwise good men who suffer from alcoholism, drank himself into a sullen middle age, mired in the quicksand of dead-end, low-paying jobs. The daily combination of drink and drudgery brought out the bully in him, and he often beat his two sons. At the age of 16, Frank's brother died suddenly of a rare heart condition. It was around this time that Frank began spending most of his days out of the house, preferring the company of his aunts and cousins at their nearby home — out of the reach of his father's belt.

Growing up in the company of his Protestant and decidedly anti-Catholic aunts and uncles, Sheed learned the ways of anti-Catholicism firsthand. But he himself never bought into the anti-Roman line, quickly recognizing it as a kind of bigotry. The more anti-Catholic tracts, books, and comments were heaped upon him by his Calvinist relations, the more Frank was attracted to Rome.

Although raised as a Methodist by his Protestant relatives, Frank developed early on a private sympathy for Catholicism, sacraments and all. Then one day, he openly declared himself a Catholic. Naturally, this pleased his Irish-Catholic mother immensely and horrified his Protestant aunts and cousins.

Sheed's understanding of Protestantism and its biases against Rome would serve him well over the years. He had no antagonism toward Protestants, but he soon recognized the Reformation's inherent biblical and historical contradictions and was able to point them out with uncanny precision.

He did well in his grammar and high school studies and went on to earn a bachelor's degree from Sydney University. After graduation, there followed a stint at Sydney Law School, where he received a degree in law (along the way he did extra study and acquired a deep knowledge of history and philosophy, as well as learning Latin, French, and Greek). While at the university, Sheed earned money by teaching at a Sydney high school. As a newly minted lawyer, he surveyed the Australian landscape to see what challenges awaited. Whatever he saw there wasn't enough to hold him; he decided to try his luck in a different direction. He boarded a ship and sailed for England.

That proved to be an important decision.

The House That Frank Built

They met at a Catholic Evidence Guild talk. He was working with the guild to make ends meet while he decided what to do with his life. Maisie Ward was a speaker one afternoon at the center where he was helping.

Their encounter was the start of the famous Sheed and Ward publishing career that would catapult many now-legendary Catholic writers to prominence.

Maisie was as different from Sheed as one could imagine. He, although now a Catholic, had been raised a Protestant. The Wards were an ardently Catholic family that had converted to the faith in the 1860s. Maisie was born in 1889, when the English faithful were still severely tested by their country's oppressive anti-Romanism. Frank was an Australian with a broad, suntanned brogue and a taste for adventure and action.

Maisie was English, Edwardian, proper, upper-crust, ferociously Catholic, witty, likable, and incredibly intelligent. Born into a family of writers and editors, Maisie's mind was as keen and expansive as Frank's, and she was steeped in centuries of tough-as-nails English Catholicism. His family was poor; hers had money. For years, the Wards had rubbed shoulders with the major figures in the English Church. This heady atmosphere, cloudy with incense and ringing with Latin and chant and the glorious echoes of generations of recusant English Catholics, was immensely attractive to Sheed. He gravitated immediately to Maisie and her live-wire Catholic world.

Once Frank and Maisie had married, they plunged into the work of Catholic apologetics with gusto. Soon children came: Rosemary in 1919 and Wilfrid in 1930. Frank's writing career began as he discovered his facility for conveying with the written word the same clarity and force he was able to muster on the stump. Books explaining the faith poured forth in a steady stream: *A Map of Life, Theology and Sanity, What Difference Does Jesus Make?, Christ in Eclipse, The Instructed Heart, To Know Christ Jesus*. Frank Sheed had found his vocation as a Catholic apologist.



Along the way, he and Maisie decided that in addition to writing their own books, they would help fledgling Catholic authors launch their careers. And so they formed a publishing house: Sheed and Ward.

Frank and Maisie worked with many of the great names of 20th-century Catholic literature: Fulton Sheen, G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, John Hugo, Arnold Lunn, Dorothy Day, Ronald Knox, Caryl Chessell Houselander, Clare Luce, and Evelyn Waugh. He moved easily among these writers with an amiable self-effacement that won many admirers.

In his apologetic writings, his lectures, his street-corner preaching, his countless open-air public debates about the Catholic faith with atheists, fundamentalists, Communists, freethinkers, and anti-Catholics of every stripe, Frank Sheed was a formidable contender in the age-old battle for truth. He had a gift for oratory — especially in the unpredictable hurly-burly of live debate — and a razor-sharp mind that cut through fuzzy thinking like a surgeon's scalpel. No faulty argument, no cleverly worded fallacy hurled from the mob that pressed around his speaker's platform could get past his guard. He shredded the arguments of atheist hecklers with a smile on his face. What made him so effective was his unflagging and unfeigned courtesy (a quality all too rare among professional apologists). He loved people in the way Christ asks us to love them, and that is part of what made him so successful in opening their minds and hearts to the gospel.

Sheed could spot bogus arguments in a flash and squash them flat, but he never left the arguer himself feeling squashed. This aspect of his personality was described to me over and over again by people who worked closely with him. Stories about Sheed often revolve around his good-natured disposition and the sunny approach he invariably took to the stormy world of theological debate.

This also explains why his writings are so attractive: They're amazingly free of polemic. He simply had no use for it. His approach to apologetics and evangelization was to explain the issue — whether it was the Trinity, spirit and matter, or the Eucharist — with such clarity that the truth stood on its own, naked in its beauty. That was his secret.

The Everyman's Catechist

Invariably, Sheed started his guided tour of the faith with a preliminary discussion about reality itself. For him, there was no point in tackling issues such as the papacy or infant baptism unless one had first laid the proper groundwork. He approached apologetics the way a builder approaches a project: Start with the foundation, build the first floor, and then raise the building from there. If the foundation was laid properly, a structure of any height could be built upon it.

As far as Sheed was concerned, no one was more insane than the man who ignored or denied the existence of God. He argued that if a man denies God's existence, he misunderstands the very nature of the universe and therefore is incapable of truly understanding anything — the laws of nature and natural law (two very different things), even himself. In *Theology and Sanity*, Sheed wrote:

If we see anything at all — ourselves or some other man, or the universe as a whole or any part of it — without at the same time seeing God holding it there, then we are seeing it all wrong. If we saw a coat hanging on a wall and did not realize that it was held there by a hook, we should not be living in the real world at all, but in some fantastic world of our own in which coats defied the law of gravity and hung on walls by their own power. Similarly if we see things in existence and do not in the same act see that they are held in existence by God, then equally we are living in a fantastic world, not the real world. Seeing God everywhere and all things upheld by Him is not a matter of sanctity, but of plain sanity, because God is everywhere and all things are upheld by Him. What we do about it may be sanctity; but merely seeing it is sanity. To overlook God's presence is not simply to be irreligious; it is a kind of insanity, like overlooking anything else that is actually there.

In order to “see” things the way they really are, one needs to exercise the mind, to dust off the intellect and apply it to the world around us. Many of Sheed's apologetic writings begin with an explanation of the human intellect: what it is and what it does. He points out how it is different from the imagination and warns that many people these days rely almost entirely on their imaginations, not on their intellects.

But he also understood the inherent limitations of human intellect: It's an indispensable instrument for navigating our journey through life, but it isn't the only tool God has given us. Divine revelation is God's gift to the human mind. It provides information that, left to its own powers, even the keenest human intellect could never discover. And it further illuminates those areas man's mind has reached through its own natural powers. Revelation leads the mind to the proper conclusions. It's not enough simply to have a welter of raw facts at one's disposal — like a bucket of nuts and bolts and other parts dumped on the table before you. Divine revelation acts as the “schematic” that tells us what to do with that mass of individual parts.

Many Catholics use the expression “It's a mystery” as an escape hatch. They really mean, “I'm too lazy to be bothered trying to understand this or that doctrine.” Intellectual and spiritual laziness are a lethal combination for the person who claims to love the Lord. Sheed showed how to avoid the

lazy way out by seeing a divine “mystery” for what it is: not something we can know nothing about, but something we can’t know everything about.

Natural law was another key concept in Sheed’s apologetics. His books, especially *Theology and Sanity*, provide a crash course on natural law: the rules of the road for successful living in the cosmos. He typically started by reminding his audience that there are plenty of laws, natural and supernatural, that surround us and govern reality. To deny or ignore them is foolishness. It leads, inexorably, into the jaws of that two-headed monster: suffering and death. The terms good and evil mean nothing, he explained, if they’re divorced from the reality that God exists and has determined a moral system for His creation.

A Man of Action

Sheed had his faults. One of them was his ability to lacerate someone verbally. Sheed’s son, Wilfrid, said that his father learned to be sarcastic from his grandfather and that he “reject[ed] this as he was absorbing it, and this was to be a lifelong struggle for him. His tongue could be rough enough as it was, and it was best to handle him with care in certain moods. (Since he worked hard at his equanimity, he might be surprised to hear that at times he reminded me of a hard-nosed Irish Monsignor.) Unbridled, his tongue would have been a deadly weapon, equipped with nuclear capacity and he would never have made a single convert from his soapbox” (*Frank and Maisie: A Memoir With Parents*).

And Sheed was no different from any of us when it came to wrestling with the human inclination to slough off one’s duty to evangelize. There were times he’d much rather have worked on a crossword puzzle or read in his easy chair than preach the faith. Wilfrid remembers from his childhood:

[W]henver they were in England, Frank Sheed and Maisie Ward trudged off every single Sunday afternoon — my father moaning to beat the band and praying for rain — to preach the Faith from soapboxes; and not just in glamour spots like Hyde Park, but in backwaters like Clapham and Pimlico and other places that properly belong in English comic monologues.

At first, the only thing that really struck me as strange was the sound of a man praying for rain in England: then again perhaps he was the cause of it all, and was doing a bang-up job. What does one know at five? Only slowly did I begin to realize that other people thought my

parents were a little crazy. Soapbox oratory is by definition crazy. And when I attended my first meetings I saw little to shake the definition.

A group of city strays would gather in front of the rickety platform and hurl tipsy taunts or village-atheist challenges at my parents, who would answer with a gravity worthy of a lecture hall. My first thought was that they were going to get killed up there by some loudmouthed bully, and to this day I myself suffer from incurable stage fright. But on the way home, they might well complain about the blandness of the meeting: “If only a good drunk had come along,” my father would sigh — surely as strange a wish as for rain on Sunday (ibid.).

That wish reminds us that it’s normal and natural to shrink from the demands of sharing the Catholic faith in the blunt ordinariness of everyday life. Glorious martyrdom? Yes. Humdrum daily evangelism? No. It’s so common — *so Catholic* — to secretly thrill at the daydream of dying for Christ in some glorious and vaguely well-publicized way. But we yawn and reach for the TV remote control when the opportunity actually presents itself to open the front door and share the faith with a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Few of us will ever be called to shed our blood for Christ. But everyone is called to be a witness for Christ (the Greek word for witness is martyr). Sheed knew this. Over the course of their long career, Frank and Maisie used their books, lectures, and work with the guild to engage people in a conversation about the God who loves them. In so doing, they blazed a trail for apologists to follow.

The Sheed and Ward publishing empire has faded dramatically from its former glory. As old age caught up with Frank and Maisie, it was no longer possible for them to manage the company. Around the time of Maisie’s death in 1975, the company split into two Sheed and Ward houses (one in London, the other in Kansas City) and passed out of Frank’s hands. He pressed on for the next several years and died in his sleep on November 20, 1982, from complications following a stroke. He and Maisie are buried in the Jersey City Cemetery.

Given the spiritual, moral, and cultural obstacles arrayed before us, Catholics need all the resources available to them to navigate the hazards they face in the 21st century. As Scripture tells us, we have a race to run, a finish line to cross, and a prize to win (Hebrews 12:1-2; Philippians 3:14). Most important, there is the ancient baton of the Catholic faith that must be handed on to the generation of Catholics that will follow us. To do this well, we must limber up our minds, learn to think clearly and carefully, and stretch our hearts and souls with the expansive, invigorating truths of the Catholic faith.

The story of Frank Sheed's life continues to be an example and an encouragement for those who would undertake this project. Over the course of his 60 years as a teacher and defender of the Catholic faith, he discovered, tested, and marked out for us virtually all the lines of apologetics. He showed us the parameters of dialogue with the world and the answers to critics' most common objections. He ran the race himself, ran it well, and won it in style.

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