

## Comment

### Fr Vincent McNabb in *The Chesterton Review*

*The Chesterton Review* is the journal of the G.K. Chesterton Society, founded at Spode House, Staffordshire, in 1974 to promote a critical interest in the work of G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936). Whatever one thinks about the 45-volume set of his work in course of publication, there can be no doubt about the permanent value of *some* of his writings. His fiction and poetry will always have admirers, while *Heretics* (1905) and *Orthodoxy* (1908), written long before he became a Roman Catholic, are classics in Christian apologetics.

Chesterton cannot be isolated from the milieu to which he belonged — the 1890s of his youth in London, Modernism, and the heyday of pre-Vatican II English Catholicism. This wider context is always kept to the fore in *The Chesterton Review*. The latest issue, a double number (volume XXII, Nos. 1 & 2, February & May 1996, available from 1437 College Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, S7N 0W6, Canada, price \$40.00), running to 285 pages, is devoted to the life and work of Fr Vincent McNabb OP (1868–1943), one of Chesterton's greatest friends and allies.

Born in County Down, Fr Vincent came of Ulster Catholics with British naval connections on both sides of the family and uncomplicated Unionist assumptions. Educated almost entirely in Belfast, his year of schooling in Newcastle upon Tyne, where his parents had moved, seems to have drawn him to join the Dominicans in England. Ordained in 1891 by Bishop Clifford of Clifton, one of the bishops who left Rome before the final vote in 1870, Fr Vincent then studied at the Dominican house in Louvain. The intellectual scene there was totally dominated by the future Cardinal Mercier with his version of Thomism worked out in conscious opposition both to the positivism of John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer and to neo-Kantian idealism. Characteristically, however, the Dominicans paid little attention and continued to study Aquinas in the light of the sixteenth-century commentators. From 1906 to 1914 McNabb was in charge of Dominican parishes first in London and then in Leicester. Otherwise, from 1894 to 1920 he taught philosophy and systematic theology in the study-houses of the Order in England. In 1920 he moved to the London priory where he was to spend the rest of his life, dying of throat cancer in 1943. By then, trudging the streets in his Dominican habit, black-green hat and heavy boots, and speaking regularly at Parliament Hill Fields or Marble Arch, as well as taking part in many controversies of the day, Fr Vincent was one of the sights of London. His passion for social justice allied him with Ditchling and Eric Gill, the Catholic Land Association, distributism, and the other

movements of the day which strove to avoid both capitalism and Marxism. His asceticism and eccentricity alienated many people, including some of his fellow Dominicans; but many others regarded him as a holy man with prophetic insight into the sickness of the age.

In 1920, standing in for a colleague, Fr Vincent gave a lecture in London on 'The Ministry of Women'. He noted that, for St Thomas, it was beyond the power of the Church to remove the prohibition of women to the priesthood, but he went on to speak of St Catherine of Siena, arguing that though women do not have the sacrificial function of the priest at the altar, they have other functions of preaching and teaching 'which are almost of greater importance'. 'What the future holds for the ministry of women', he concluded, 'God alone knows'. That at least was what he was reported as saying by a young woman journalist on the staff of one of the Catholic weeklies, who seems to have sent a copy of her notes to the Holy Office in Rome. Cardinal Merry del Val, never slow to intervene in the affairs of a country of which he knew much less than he seems to have supposed (he had two years at Ushaw in his youth), forwarded the document to the Master of the Order, who in turn complained to the Provincial in England, Fr Bede Jarrett, instructing him to 'vigilance in controlling henceforth all Father McNabb's public utterances'. No sooner was this storm dispersed — mainly by assuring Rome that the young woman was 'quite incompetent' in theological matters and so her report could be discounted — than an article which Fr Vincent published in this journal (November 1922) led to a second intervention by Merry del Val. Reflecting on the Lambeth Conference of 1920, Fr McNabb saw signs of official action by the Church of England to lessen the difficulties in the way of reunion with Rome. It is hard to believe that his article was not a bid to be invited to join in the Malines Conversations, the first of which took place in 1921 at the instigation of Lord Halifax and under the presidency of Cardinal Mercier. Fr Vincent's praise for Lord Halifax is unstinted — lavish even by today's standards of ecumenical politeness. His main point, theologically, is that, as people begin to understand that bishops are not the Pope's vicars, 'the divinely appointed mission and commission of St Peter' will increasingly be stated, 'as it should be stated' — namely, 'in terms of the Episcopate'. This time, by agreeing never to publish anything 'concerning the Reunion of the Churches and kindred subjects without first submitting the manuscript for examination and approval' (letter dated 26 December 1923), Fr Vincent again pacified the authorities — though the phrase 'the Reunion of *Churches*' surely shows what his conception of what would later be called ecumenism really was. But this is only one chapter, in a remarkable Dominican's life, discussed in this special issue of *The Chesterton Review*.

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