



Chapter Six

FOLLOWING FAITH (1922–1926)

You will I know be glad to hear that I received my first Communion at Wycombe last Sunday and was confirmed in the Cathedral in the afternoon—I am very happy

The first book Gilbert wrote after his conversion was a biography of his and Frances's favorite saint: Francis of Assisi. Gilbert had loved St. Francis since childhood. He and Frances both based their admiration for the saint in a belief in the superiority of childlike innocence.¹ Gilbert's book was a success. Catholics and non-Catholics alike admired the saint, and Gilbert's book transformed Francis' story into a romance.

The holy man of Assisi was a happy point of unity between the two. They had, by now, settled comfortably into their closely-knit relationship. They were so comfortable they could even tease each other—even regarding Gilbert's old girlfriends. They wrote poems together and for each other, and they helped each other during illnesses. Gilbert said the time he felt most helpless was when Frances needed him when she was ill. Frances was the one great light of his life. It was she who lavished upon him all the affection of a woman and the homage of an ardent admirer.² But now, there was a form of separation between them, as they did

¹ Pearce, 293.

² Braybrooke, 22.

not share the thing that was most important to both of them. St. Francis was, therefore, a happy consolation, and a reminder that they shared a great deal in faith, though divided by affiliation.

With her father-in-law's death and her husband's conversion, and her own physical condition, Frances suffered a great deal in 1922. To her great relief, she returned to the doctor in October, and he found that she was much improved. His only suggestion now was that she would be much better off if she could get to a warmer climate sometime after Christmas. He suggested Morocco, Madeira, or the West Indies. They never went.

Her work continued as ever. Frances wrote a play for the children to perform at the annual children's Christmas party, and enthusiastically announced it to Fr. O'Connor:

December 4, 1922

... I've written a Children's play called the Children's Crusade which is being acted here—If you want anything for children to perform you might like it. Doggerel verse but it acts all right and Geoffrey Shaw HMI has written music for the carol. Gilbert is well. Writing an opposition [to] Wells' *History of the World!* Save us!

Yours ever, Frances Chesterton³

The song was published as “Crusader's Carol” (also known as “The Shepherds Found Thee by Night”) by Novello & Co. In addition, the poem Frances had written as a Christmas card in 1917—“How Far Is It To Bethlehem”—also known as “The Children's Song of the Nativity” and “A Nativity Song”—was also set to music and published in 1922 by Novello & Co. as a musical score.

³British Library folder 73196-0203.

At the end of the year, Gilbert attempted a daring adventure: traveling alone to attend a theater production of *The Man Who Was Thursday*. It was an unmitigated disaster. He forgot his dress clothes, and someone had to run for them, arriving only ten minutes before the train started that was to take him to the theater for the opening night of the play. Frances decided he should never again go anywhere without her.

Six months after Gilbert's conversion, in January of 1923, Frances wrote to O'Connor concerning the possibility of her own conversion: "I am better, but still unable to get about much, and longing so desperately for a little time in which to find my own soul and lose my own body . . . we are neither of us ever left alone for a moment."

Life continued at its relentless rate, and that "little time" still did not come. In May of 1923, the *New Witness* halted production due to lack of funds—although it was not initially apparent to Gilbert that it was finished completely. He still hoped it could be revived. In November, Bernard Gilbert offered to buy the *New Witness* from Gilbert, who refused, kindly, saying he could not really sell it, believing he owed it to his brother either to save it or sink it himself. Gilbert went on to praise Bernard Gilbert for his book, *Tyler of Barnet*, which had been published in early 1923, which he was reading while getting over a cold:

I think "Tyler of Barnet" quite admirable; a very original and imaginative scheme of work achieved with a success which I should have thought impossible for it. My wife began to read it when I was *hors de combat*, and came to me with such a fire of appreciation that I started on it in preference to the murder stories in the magazines. If you knew how fond I am of murder stories, you would appreciate that compliment more than you probably do.

The months passed. In a letter from July 1923, Frances wrote again to O'Connor: "I am feeling my way into the Catholic fold, but it is a difficult load for me, and I ask your prayers—I will write when I want definite help. Yours affectionately, Frances Chesterton."⁴

As 1924 dawned, conversion continued to come slowly. This year Gilbert attained the honorable age of fifty (Frances would turn fifty-five). Their writing output continued on a prolific scale, as always. Frances enjoyed particular success. Samuel French, Ltd. published three of her verse children's plays—*The Children's Crusade*, *Sir Cleges*, and *The Christmas Gift*—as a set.

The plays, Frances stated in her preface, "make no pretense to any historical or literary value. They merely serve as a text or background for the exercise of that ingenuity and love of pageantry and even rhetoric which is the common heritage of all children." Frances then goes on to explain that the only reason she sought publication was that others had encouraged her to do so after noting the sheer number of requests she had for copies of the plays for others to put on in their own homes or schools. She also noted that, although the children enjoyed putting on the plays, it was quite possible that the making of the scenery, creating costumes, and painting heraldic shields was an even greater part of the enjoyment.

The Children's Crusade is a sweet story of a medieval Christmas where three children grieve because their father is missing. He has gone to fight in the crusade. The play begins with a triolet, a popular poetical form Gilbert, his wife, and their friends all enjoyed:⁵

⁴British Library folder 73196-0206.

⁵Ada Chesterton had mentioned earlier that a well-planned meal took as much creativity, in her mind, as a novel or a triolet.

Sorrow fills my heart,
 Oh Richard, oh my King,
 That you and I did part
 Sorrow fills my heart.
 But Blondel with his art
 Will strive awhile to sing,
 Though sorrow fills his heart,
 Oh Richard, oh my King!

Sir Cleges is an Arthurian story, which includes the song “How Far Is It to Bethlehem.” It was performed locally for the benefit of the Bromley Cottage Hospital and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. *Sir Cleges* was also performed at the Dickens Fair at Sutton Surrey on December 1 and 2, 1926, by the children of the congregation of Our Lady of the Rosary. The third play, *The Christmas Gift*, takes place during World War I in Flanders.

In December 1924, Frances again went to the doctor, who sent her on to see an endocrinologist, Dr. Gardiner-Hill at St. Thomas’ Hospital, London. Based on blood work, Gardiner-Hill suspected a problem with her pituitary gland, and started her on a course of pituitary and thyroid drops for six months.

At around this time, yet another of Frances’s plays appeared. The children of Oakdene School performed *Piers Plowman’s Pilgrimage: A Morality Play in Five Scenes* for Christmas. There were two performances, December 16 and 17. Two of the Chesterton’s nieces, Kate and Pamela Oldershaw, were part of the cast. The play was written up in the newspaper on December 17, 1924.

On January 23, 1925, Gilbert and Frances were guests of honor at a dinner held at the Grand Pump Room Hotel in Bath, where Frances would have *Piers Plowman* performed later in

the year. They were seated with the mayor of Bath, and afforded all courtesy and attention.

Unfortunately, the trip was not simply one of delight; Frances once again fell ill. This doctor she visited in Bath wrote to Dr. Bakewell, reporting the incident and offering his diagnosis. Her complaint was general muscular rheumatism. Her pulse, as before, was too fast: 140. Her blood pressure was too high: 180 over 100. She had a fine tremor, palpitations upon exertion, and swelling in her feet. He prescribed medicine and suggested to Bakewell that she might have an overactive thyroid.

Four months later, on May 7, 1925, the Citizen House Players performed *Piers Plowman's Pilgrimage* at the Pump Room in Bath. Saturday, May 9, the *Bath Chronicle* wrote a glowing review. The play reminded the reviewer of earlier mystery plays: "Surely here there is symbology enshrined within symbology, and a parallel is presented with the adoration of the Blessed Virgin and the Holy Child."

Bridget Muller was praised for the beautiful songs she composed for the play (Samuel French published the score soon after, much to the benefit of would-be future performances). During intermissions, the string section of the Pump Room Orchestra played. "The performance was enthusiastically received," notes the reviewer, "and at its conclusion Mrs. Chesterton was called before the curtain and presented with a bouquet." The very youngest performer presented the delighted Frances with the flowers.

Mr. Fred E. Weatherly, one of the members of the audience, wrote a letter to the editor of the newspaper, and Frances cut it out and saved it:

To the Editor:

Sir—Will you allow me to add a few words of appreciation to the tribute which I am sure will be paid in your columns to Mrs. Gilbert Chesterton’s “Piers Plowman’s Pilgrimage,” given so successfully at the Pump Room on Thursday night?

I am, as I think you know, a very old play-goer, and I find benefit and pleasure in every form of dramatic art, and, as such, may I say that Mrs. Chesterton’s play impressed me with a delighted admiration which it has seldom been my good fortune to feel.

And why? I have no doubt why. It is because the subject of the play is a straight-forward, wholesome, and noble one, one which all can understand, and by which most of us can profit.

It is because the language of Mrs. Chesterton is simple, strong, pure English.

The following week, the Players put on *Piers Plowman* at the Little Theatre, from Saturday through Thursday, performing it six times. Yet again, it was afforded a favorable newspaper review (complete with several photographs of the performance):

This play, founded on the 14th century poem, reproduces with reasonable fidelity the language of the period, and contains many aspects of a distinctly mystic character. While the play is written for acting, it contains many passages, notably in the dignified prologue and epilogue, of literary power. This play, which was very favourably received on Thursday evening is still in manuscript. . . .

In 1925, *Piers Plowman* was formally published. Frances wrote two longer plays this year, *The Three Kings* and *Faith and Fable: A Masque*,⁶ both of which were for a mixed group of adult and child actors. These plays were performed in community theater

⁶ Also known as *Legends of the Gods and Saints*.

productions, schools, and as benefit performances to raise donations for causes that the Chestertons supported.

Even as her theatrical light glowed so brightly, another light was fading. In early 1925, the *New Witness* was finally allowed to rest in peace, and a new periodical was about to rise phoenix-like from its ashes. Gilbert, after many delays and debates over the naming of it, dubbed the resurrected paper *G.K.'s Weekly*. The first issue came out on March 21, 1925.⁷ As usual, he had irons in many fires. *Tales of the Long Bow* appeared this year as well, and on September 30, Hodder & Stoughton published what is often considered Gilbert's most important work, his masterpiece: *The Everlasting Man*.

The theatrical endeavors were not solely Frances's; during the Christmas of 1925, Gilbert rewrote his own Christmas play about St. George and the dragon. He had begun working on this play as early as 1907.

During the following year, however, his primary concern was *G.K.'s Weekly*, an enterprise that was already foundering. It needed capital and there were no sources from which to tap, other than the Chestertons' own bank account, which they regularly raided. The Distributist League was initially founded to support the paper financially. However, it quickly took on a life of its own as a society for the discussion of economic ideas that would help make England a better country in which to live. The *Weekly* became the mouthpiece for articles in support of Distributism; branches of the league quickly sprang up all over the country.

Gilbert, to Frances's mild frustration, wanted to continue to run the newspaper despite its uncertain funding. Her complaints

⁷ A pilot edition was released in late 1924, but regular editions did not begin until March 21, 1925.

and her concerns notwithstanding, Frances still fully supported her husband and the Distributist League. Nevertheless, she admitted freely that the paper had never made money and Gilbert continued to rescue it. Here, for example, is a letter Frances wrote to Fr. Charles O'Donnell, of Notre Dame, November 17, 1930:

. . . My husband wants me to add a line to thank the University very warmly for their generosity in the matter of payment for his lectures. He is very grateful indeed. The money is badly needed if he is to keep the flag flying in the [G.K.'s] *Weekly* & elsewhere.

There is such a heavy debt on the paper, & Notre Dame has lightened a very heavy burden for him. It is very difficult to keep a paper going without any capital or subsidy—and one way or another he has tried to preach. . . .—ever since he could run a paper at all—over twenty years now, & there has never been even a penny gained & the debts have been heavy, though he has always paid them—& kept the paper going. Forgive this little personal paragraph, but we wanted you to understand how much your generosity is appreciated. . . .

In addition to financial concern over the paper, Frances also began 1926 with severe back pain—her rheumatism was acting up. The doctors suggested she go to Biskra, in Algeria, for the winter; to which they once again never traveled.

As was common with the Chestertons, the new year was productive across the board. *The Man Who Was Thursday* (Ada Chesterton's theatrical adaptation of Gilbert's novel) opened at the Everyman Theater on January 19, 1926. Gilbert's *The Incredulity of Father Brown*, another collection of Father Brown stories, appeared in bookstalls.

In April of 1926, Gilbert and Frances, accompanied by Frances's cousin Rhoda Bastable, traveled to Spain. They visited

Toledo and Madrid before venturing in Barcelona, where Gilbert had been invited to speak. They stayed until early June. It was, alas, yet another challenging trip, with Frances ill with heart trouble.

On June 28, Gilbert and Frances celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with a party. Every friend and relative was invited, and the evening included a play performed in honor of the guests and the couple. This play, which was held in the garden, was a triumph. It was like a toy theater romance—but for adults. Nearly everyone of literary note was there that evening; it was so crowded it was difficult to move around the house or garden, all gathered to celebrate twenty-five years of married harmony. “The marriage had survived a long road of success without there being in either of the Chestertons any self-satisfied worldliness,” noted Patrick Braybrooke.⁸

It was at around this time that Gilbert and Frances, along with some local friends including Patricia Burke and Margaret Halford, formed a group in Beaconsfield called “The Players Club.” These were people interested in putting on plays for the community—their own plays as well as Shakespeare’s.⁹

In the midst of so much productivity, Frances finally felt ready to make her way into the Catholic Church. At this time, she was advised to see her local priest, rather than one of her more famous priestly friends. O’Connor was a wonderful friend, but he lived at a distance and was too busy to instruct Frances in the faith. (In those days, priests met regularly and individually with potential converts, instructing them on all points of the Roman Catholic faith.) Frances looked instead to Fr.

⁸ Braybrooke, 65.

⁹ The Players Club won the trophy in the final of the British Drama League’s national festival at the Garrick Theatre in May, 1932 with Miss Margaret Halford as the producer.

Thomas Walker, soon to be the first priest at the new church of St. Teresa's in Beaconsfield, which had begun construction in 1926. Fr. Walker currently said Mass at St. Augustine in nearby High Wycombe. Fr. Walker was an excellent choice; he had already prepared Gilbert for his First Holy Communion.¹⁰ He was also a discreet choice—above all, Frances wanted to avoid publicity, as is clearly shown in her letter to Father O'Connor at about this time:

I wish you had been at the Catholic Congress to see or hear the ovation [Gilbert] received and how the Bishop of Salford spoke of the *Weekly*. It was encouraging. I have been meaning to write and tell you of myself, but it is so difficult to find time. Now I send a line, but am just off to the funeral of my cousin Rev. W. Braybrooke (Michael's father) but I am wondering if you are likely to be coming South in the 3rd or 4th week of October. I have been receiving instruction all this time from Father Walker and I am to be received into the Church when he returns from Spain on the 18th. I had hoped it might be managed before the Congress, but I could not rush it and also I wanted you to know. You will understand how dreadfully I hate the idea of publicity in such a matter but I think most of my friends know. I told the Bishop of Leeds (for I lost my heart to him completely) and he has asked me to let him know the date of my Reception and promises to say Mass for me that day—I am fairly well though my heart is a bit groggy after the bad time I had in Spain.

Yours affectionately,
Frances Chesterton.¹¹

¹⁰ Some of his memories of Gilbert were collected in Maisie Ward's biography of G.K. Chesterton.

¹¹ British Library folder 73196.

Meanwhile, Gilbert corresponded for a long time with Father Knox regarding the possibility of Frances's conversion. He did not specifically request Father Knox's assistance; on the contrary, Gilbert wrote that, especially since Frances has not yet met Father Knox, the most suitable priestly advocate for conversion must be O'Connor. He later wrote touchingly of her support for his conversion:

I have had a serious and very moving talk with my wife. . . . In our conversation, my wife was all that I hope you will someday know her to be; she is incapable of wanting me to do anything but what I think right; and admits the same possibility for herself: but it is much more of a wrench for her, for she has been able to practice her religion in complete good faith; which my own doubts have prevented me from doing.¹²

After what must have seemed an exceptionally long wait to a man so eager to be always in accord with his beloved wife, Frances was able to announce her decision. On October 25, 1926, she wrote again to Father O'Connor:

Dear Padre, I hope I am to be received into the Church at High Wycombe on All Saints' Day, but I am waiting to hear quite definitely from Father Walker. I suppose there is no chance that you could come South then? But I know you will think of me and pray for me and I would hate you to tire yourself out for me.

She was received on November 1, 1926, at High Wycombe. Her reception was a two-step process: the first, like Gilbert's reception in the Railway Hotel four years earlier, included her

¹²Wade Center folder 314.

first confession, and some prayers; the second would take place the following month, involving her reception of the sacraments.

To Frances's horror, the papers immediately reported the news, and it spread even across the Atlantic Ocean within a matter of days. Thus, on November 7, 1926 the *New York Times* published the following:

MRS. CHESTERTON'S FAITH

Novelist's Wife Reported to Have Joined Him as Catholic

London, Nov. 6—Mrs. G.K. Chesterton, wife of the famous English writer who became a Roman Catholic, has adopted her husband's faith, according to a report here.

Mr. Chesterton is one of England's leading Catholics and has crossed pens many times on questions of faith with other intellectuals such as G.B. Shaw and H.G. Wells.

It seems a disproportionate amount of interest to be paid to a personal decision regarding religious affiliation. Further, it may appear bizarre that so monumental a figure as her husband be reduced to "the famous English writer who became a Roman Catholic". The nature of the environment in which they lived, however, truly made this a remarkable characteristic and doomed to be noticed. Though the spiritual fervor that had so electrified the English public seventy-five years earlier at the conversion of John Henry Cardinal Newman was now dulled by the growth of liberal secularism, the entrenched bigotry retained its keenness. Chesterton, following several generations on the heels of the mid-Victorian century rush of conversion, now could engage publicly and proudly as "one of England's leading Catholics". Nevertheless, the stigma still remained: to be Catholic was somehow to be a threat to all that was truly English.

Frances was embarrassed by the publicity. She went to a church one day and discovered a large poster with her picture on it, announcing her conversion. She requested that the poster be removed. Fr. Basil Maturin, another Anglo-Catholic who converted to the Roman Catholic faith, described the feelings of a new convert:

I have never been able to understand the mental attitude of people who speak of their reception in a state of exaltation. The more real the English Church has been to you, and all your past experiences in it, the more terrible the wrench. And there is added a kind of uncertainty as to what you will find after you are received, the fear of the unknown—and with me, and probably with you, moments of mental agony, lest through some unknown act of your own you are, after all, making a mistake and doing wrong. I had such feelings up to the last moment, and went through the reception like a stone. . . . At such a moment one feels utterly alone, and how little help one can get from anyone else!¹³

The poignancy of that one line: “The more real the English Church has been to you. . . .” must have resonated with Frances. Indeed, the English Church had been very real to Frances. She followed that Church in good faith and with affection.

Her struggle remained, even weeks later when, on December 19, she received her First Holy Communion and Confirmation. A few days later, she wrote O’Connor:

(December 23) Just a line of Christmas Greeting. I have been ill and all my Christmas letters, etc. are in arrears. You will I know be glad to hear that I received my first Communion at

¹³Maisie Ward, *Father Maturin: A Memoir* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1920), 38-39.

Wycombe last Sunday and was confirmed in the Cathedral in the afternoon—I am very happy—though the wrench was rather terrible—It was hard to part with so many memories and traditions.

Pray for me please that I may make a good Catholic. Love from us both. . . .

Many people asked Frances over the years “who” converted her to the Catholic faith. The expected response was, of course, her husband. Frances, however, always replied: “The devil.” This was not simply a witty rebuff; Frances shared with Gilbert a sense that sin was the one thing about religion that could be proved.¹⁴

Though the spiritual turmoil of day-to-day life was always ahead of them, at least this great battle was fought and won. Gilbert’s happiness joined with that of his wife. Once again, the couple walked their spiritual path hand-in-hand.

¹⁴ *The Collected Works* Vol. 1, 217.