

Frank Sheed (1897-1981) | Ignatius Insight Author Page

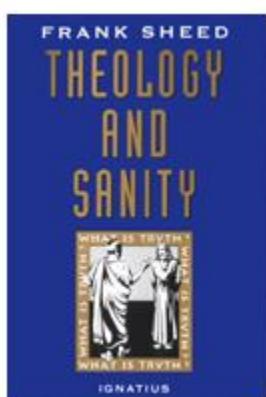
Frank Sheed was an Australian of Irish descent. A law student, he graduated from Sydney University in Arts and Law, then moved in 1926, with his wife Maisie Ward, to London. There they founded the well-known Catholic publishing house of Sheed & Ward in 1926, which published some of the finest Catholic literature of the first half of the twentieth century.

Known for his sharp mind and clarity of expression, Sheed became one of the most famous Catholic apologists of the century. He was an outstanding street-corner speaker who popularized the Catholic Evidence Guild in both England and America (where he later resided). In 1957 he received a doctorate of Sacred Theology *honoris causa* authorized by the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities in Rome.

Although he was a cradle Catholic, Sheed was a central figure in what he called the "Catholic Intellectual Revival," an influential and loosely knit group of converts to the Catholic Faith, including authors such as G.K. Chesterton, Evelyn Waugh, Arnold Lunn, and Ronald Knox.

Sheed wrote several books, the best known being *Theology and Sanity, A Map of Life*, *Theology for Beginners* and *To Know Christ Jesus*. He and Maise also compiled the *Catholic Evidence Training Outlines*, which included his notes for training outdoor speakers and apologists and is still a valuable tool for Catholic apologists and catechists (and is available through the Catholic Evidence Guild).

All of his writing possessed a rare erudition, a strong philosophical knowledge, and a comprehensive grasp of Catholic doctrine. They are also full of practical advice and common sense. For example, in the introduction to his *Training Outlines*, Sheed observes that "proof has ceased to be the apologist's principal weapon" and goes on to explain that first an unbeliever "must understand quite clearly what the thing is that you are trying to prove" and then, secondly, "he must realize that it is important — and important for him." And, finally: "He must want it."



Such common sense and insight permeates *Theology and Sanity*, perhaps Sheed's most important book. It is a particularly helpful work for the apologist since every part of it had been, Sheed states, "tried out on forty or fifty outdoor audiences before I got it down on paper." (*Theology and Sanity*). The result is an enjoyable and fulfilling theological meal, served with the natural ease and clarity which marks Sheed's writing.

One topic that Sheed repeatedly emphasized is the balanced perspective humans need to have of the material and spiritual realm. This is particularly important in explaining the meaning and necessity of the sacraments to non-Catholics and poorly catechized Catholics. Two errors or skewed perspectives often hinder people from rightly gauging the place and value of the physical realm, and therefore of the sacraments. On one hand many people downplay or even condemn man's physical nature (i.e. Fundamentalists, "New Agers," etc.), while others live as though their physical desires and impulses are of the utmost

importance (secularists, hedonists, etc.). But Catholic teaching claims that the whole man — a spiritual and physical creature — is called to worship and to communion with God:

Religion is the act of man — the whole man, soul and body. It is not the act of the soul only, for man is not only soul . . . The supernatural does not ignore the natural or substitute something else for it. It is built upon or built into the natural. Sanctifying grace does not provide us with a new soul; it enters into the soul we already have. Nor does it give the soul new faculties but elevates the faculties that are already there, giving intellect and will new powers of operation. God-as-Sanctifier does not destroy or bypass the work of God-as-Creator. What God has created, God sanctifies. (Theology and Sanity, 300-301).

God uses material elements of his creation, such as wine, bread and water, to convey supernatural life, or grace. He meets us where we are at, as people composed of bodies and souls: "The sacramental principle, continually reminding man of his body, will keep his feet firmly planted upon the ground and destroy pride in its strongest root; sanctifying his body will make it the fit partner of a soul indwelt by God. The giving of supernatural life by way of sacrament, then, corresponds with the structure of man." (*Theology and Sanity*).

The link between the Incarnation, our human nature and the sacraments is critical in speaking with those who devalue the material realm. By emphasizing that humans are not just disembodied spirits, but also flesh and blood — just as our Savior was also truly flesh and blood — we can begin to point them towards a fuller appreciation of all that God has done for us: He "emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, . . . being made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7). If we are able to better comprehend and communicate this vital truth, we will be doing our part to demonstrate that true theology and mental sanity go hand-in-hand, as the great Frank Sheed explained so well.

(Biographical essay by Carl E. Olson. Originally published in a different form in the November/December 1999 issue of *This Rock*.)