



# **WHO WAS C.S. LEWIS, AND WHY SHOULD CATHOLICS CARE?**

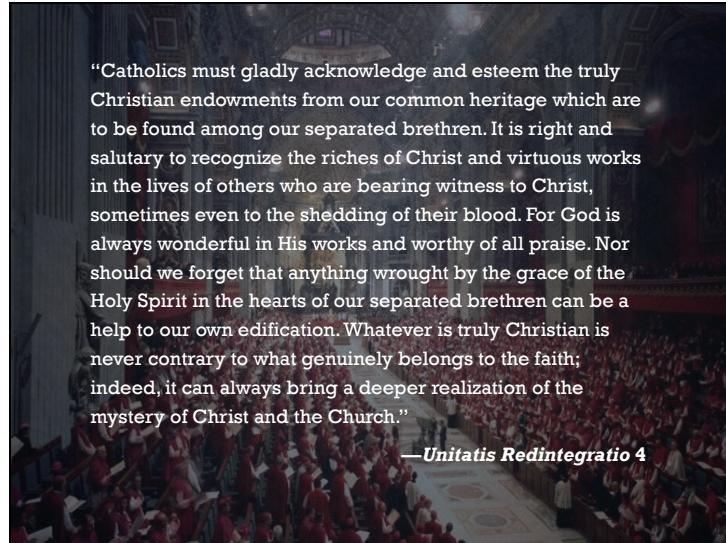
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Theology on the Rocks—West

12 January 2026

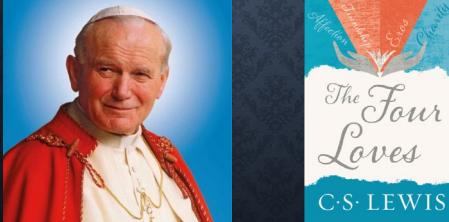
## **WHY SHOULD CATHOLICS CARE ABOUT C. S. LEWIS?**

- We can and should learn from non-Catholics



## WHY SHOULD CATHOLICS CARE ABOUT C. S. LEWIS?

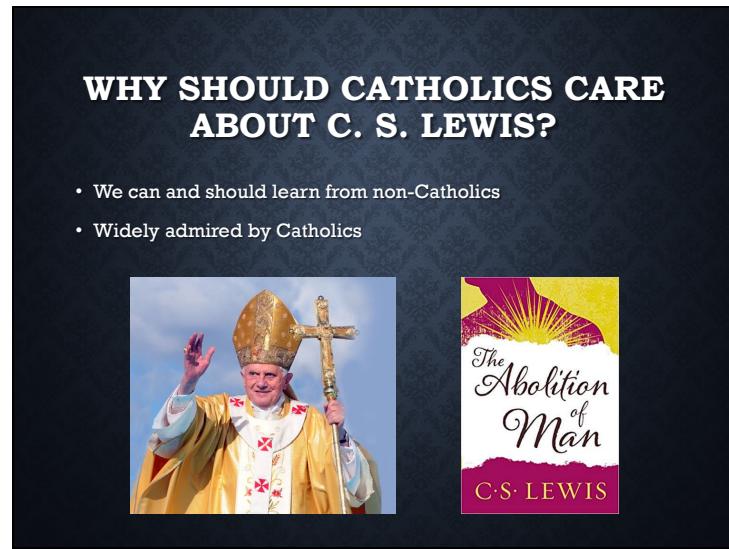
- We can and should learn from non-Catholics
- Widely admired by Catholics



The image contains two photographs. On the left is a portrait of Pope John Paul II, an elderly man with white hair, wearing a white skullcap and a red papal vestment. On the right is the front cover of the book 'The Four Loves' by C.S. Lewis. The cover is white with blue and red text. At the top, it says 'Affectionately, Eros, Creatively'. The title 'The Four Loves' is written in a large, elegant, cursive font. Below the title, 'C.S. LEWIS' is printed in a smaller, serif font.

## WHY SHOULD CATHOLICS CARE ABOUT C. S. LEWIS?

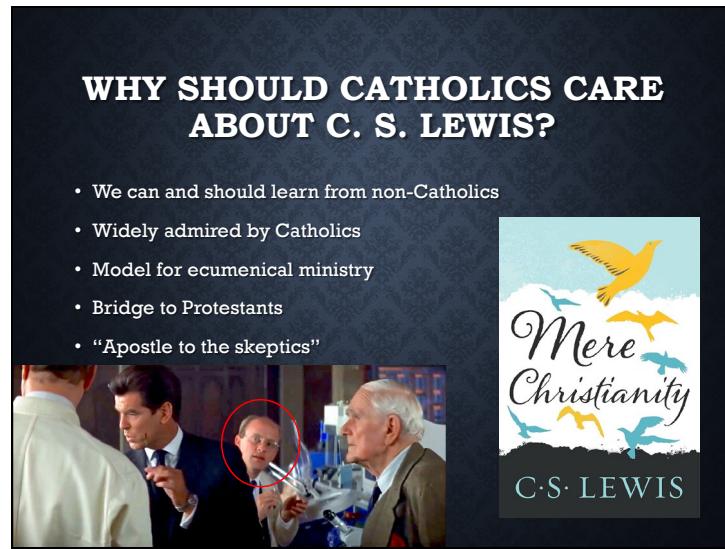
- We can and should learn from non-Catholics
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Note the consonance between Ratzinger's discussion of hell in *Introduction to Christianity* and Lewis's depiction in *The Great Divorce*

Pope Francis quotes this book in his 2024 letter “On the Role of Literature in Formation”

Bishop Barron quotes him a lot; William Mattison cites *Mere Christianity* so much that I’m adding it to my moral theology class; spend any amount of time at all engaging with orthodox Catholic thinkers—books, podcasts, etc.—and you’re bound to hear quotations from Lewis.



#### MODEL FOR ECUMENICAL MINISTRY

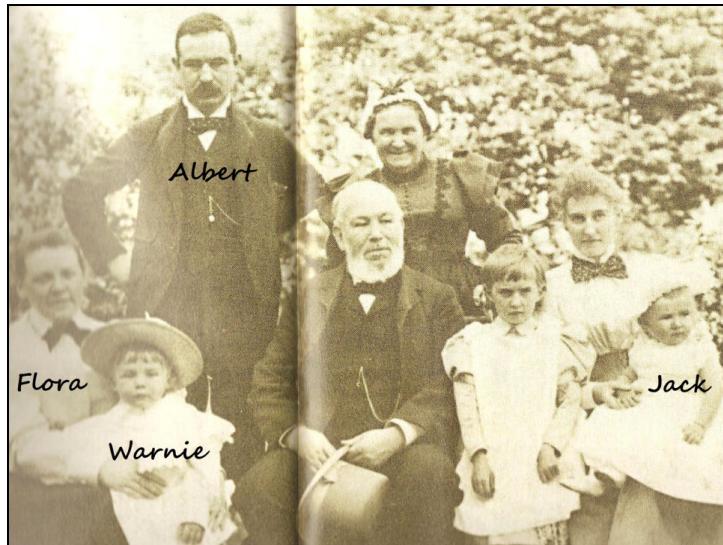
- “mere” Christianity
- Answering “the new Paganism” requires “vigorous cooperation on the basis of what even now is common” (8 May 1939 letter to Dom Bede Griffiths)
- “if reunion is ever to come, it will in my opinion come from increasing charity” (6 May 1963 letter to Fr. Peter Milward)

#### BRIDGE TO PROTESTANTS

- He sounds Catholic: Real Presence, purgatory, prayers for the dead, harmony of faith and reason, nature of hell, inclusivistic view of salvation
- Proof is in the pudding: examples include Francis Beckwith, Ross Douthat, Peter Kreeft, Fr. Dwight Longenecker, Carl Olson, Walter Hooper... the list goes on. (Also from outside Christianity to Catholicism: Lorraine Murray went from atheist to Catholic and cites Lewis; Bobby Jindal went from Hindu to catholic)
- Douthat: “You start reading C.S. Lewis, then you’re reading G.K. Chesterton, then you’re a Catholic.” (This quote and the examples of converts I gave are from a 2013 story from *the Catholic World Report* titled “C. S. Lewis and Catholic Converts”):  
<https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2013/11/19/c-s-lewis-and-catholic-converts/>
- [Tell my 2013 Michael Ward story – the Bond movie is *The World Is Not Enough*]



**So who was this guy?**



## Irish

Born 29 November 1898 to Albert & Flora Lewis of Belfast, Ireland

Solidly upper middle class; Albert was a successful attorney, Flora was, by all accounts a very brilliant woman, especially gifted at mathematics.

Strong anti-Catholic influences from an early age (nurse's exhortation not to step in the "wee little popes")

"Me, Jacksie!"



Moved to Little Lea in 1905 (Jack age 6)

Flora died in summer 1908  
(Jack age 9)



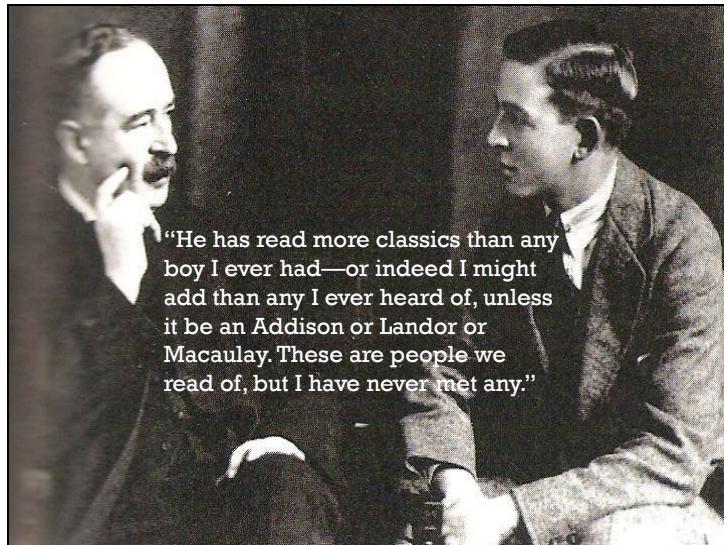
- 1908 Wynyard School
- 1911 Cherbourg House & Malvern College
- 1914 "The Great Knock"

Less than a month after Flora's death, Jack was sent away to boarding school in England, at Wynyard School.

Jack had the good fortune to be on the headmaster's side, at least, and neither boy suffered from his very worst – evidently their father's relatively high social standing kept them relatively safe. It's also important to note that Wynyard is where Jack first genuinely embraced Christianity, as distinct from the merely cultural Anglicanism of his younger childhood. (He had prayed for his mother's recovery, but looking back as an adult, he didn't see her death as having particular religious importance for him; his thinking about God was too mechanical, too much like a divine vending machine, for the failure of his prayers to have enormous import.)

He eventually followed Warnie to Malvern College, where he gave up the nominal Anglicanism of his childhood and became an atheist.

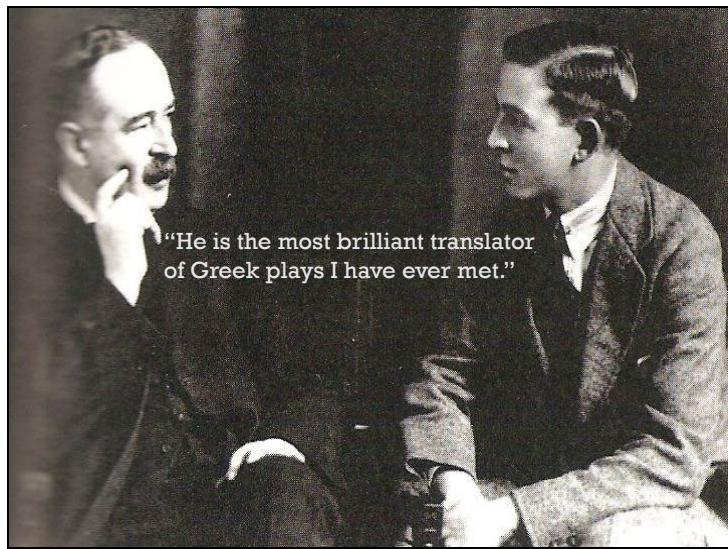
In 1914, at the age of 15, he was sent to study with his father's old tutor, William Kirkpatrick

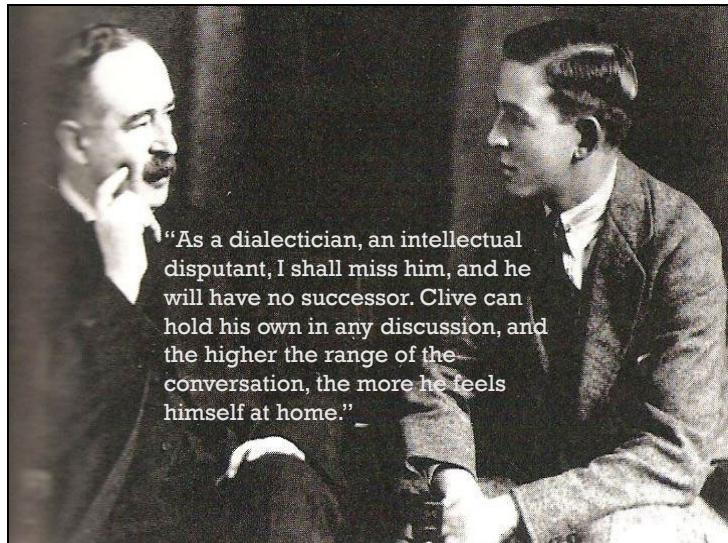


The man in the photo here is Alberrt Lewis, not William Kirkpatrick, but it's from that time period: ca. 1915

Lewis's atheism was no doubt confirmed under Kirkpatrick's tutelage, but it was not *caused* by it – Lewis makes this clear on page 102 of *Fern-Seed and Elephants*. Nevertheless, Lewis allowed himself to be confirmed in the Anglican church in December 1914, fully conscious that he believed none of what he was asserting. Later in life, he would look back on this false public profession as one of the worst things he'd ever done (Jacobs, p. 48).

A letter from CSL to his father dated 5 October 1914 has an interesting juxtaposition between “yes I go to church every Sunday” and a comment about Nietzsche not being to blame for WWI.







His studies with Kirkpatrick prepared Lewis well for the Oxford University entrance exam, which he passed in December 1916; he was admitted to University College. (Upon his first visit to Oxford, he wrote in a letter, “The place has surpassed my wildest dreams: I never saw anything so beautiful” (Jacobs, 64).) He had to return in the spring of 1917 for further exams, and this posed a serious problem: he couldn’t pass the math portion.

During this time, Jack remained a committed atheist; here’s a passage from a letter he sent to his friend Arthur Greeves sometime in 1917...

“The man Yeshua or Jesus did  
actually exist ... but all the  
other tomfoolery about virgin  
birth, magic healings,  
apparitions and so forth is on  
exactly the same footing as  
any other mythology.”

Jacobs, p. 62





Jack was sent to the front in late 1917 and contracted trench fever in January.

He returned to the trenches in March 1918. Soon thereafter, he was badly wounded by friendly fire and sent to the hospital. He would not see combat again.

Effects of WWI on C. S. Lewis:

- Certainly did not undermine his atheism; if anything, the horrors of the trenches reinforced it. Consider these lines from a poem written by Second Lieutenant Lewis...

**Come let us curse our Master  
ere we die,**

**For all our hopes in endless  
ruins lie.**

**The good is dead. Let us curse  
God most High.**

- 1919 Returns to Oxford
- 1921 Chancellor's Prize



#### UNDERGRADUATE YEARS

Because he'd served in the army, he was exempt from the mathematics examination. Jane and Maureen Moore.

Starting to show more openness to something like belief in God. Wrote in a letter to Leo Baker...

“You will be interested to hear that in the course of my philosophy—on the existence of matter—I have had to postulate some sort of God as the least objectionable theory: but of course we know nothing.”

Letter is quoted on p. 101 of Jacobs, *The Narnian*.

And to his brother...

“The trouble about God is that  
he is like a person who never  
acknowledges your letters and  
so in time you come to the  
conclusion either that he does  
not exist or that you have got his  
address wrong.”

Letter quoted in Sayer, *Jack*, p. 158; it's to Warnie and mentions that the “wrong address” line is something CSL “once said to Baker” (1 July; p. 555 of the *Collected Letters*).

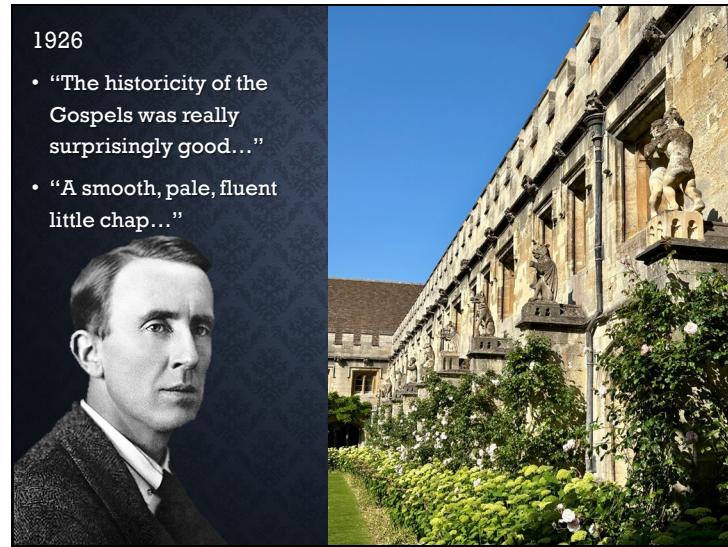
- 1922 Earns degree in Greats
- 1923 Earns degree in English Literature
- 1924 One-year position teaching philosophy at University College
- 1925 Elected to a fellowship in English Language and Literature at Magdalen College



1922 -- took a double first in Greats (i.e., classical philosophy and history); began work on a BA in English, partly, at least, because he thought it would be easier to obtain an Oxford fellowship in English than in philosophy

1923 -- took a first in English; passed over for several teaching positions; cobbled together a meager income through private tutoring

Taught at Magdalen until 1954

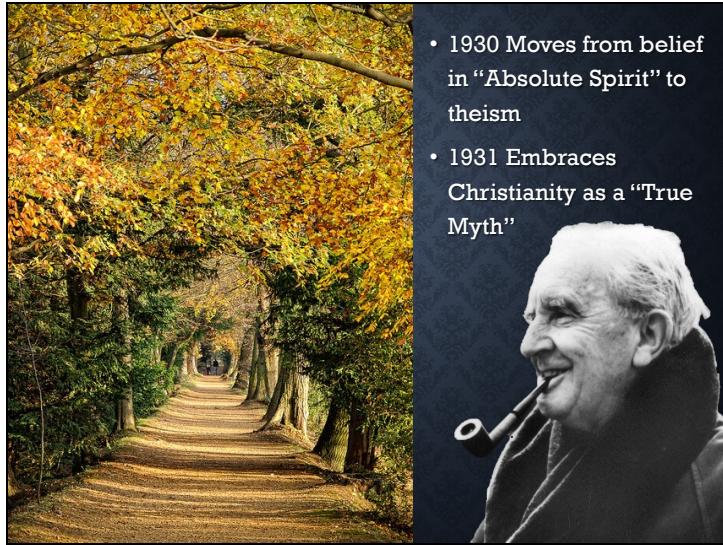


## Two seminal events occurred in 1926:

“Early in 1926 the hardest boiled of all the atheists I ever knew sat in my room on the other side of the fire and remarked that the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was really surprisingly good. ‘Rum thing,’ he went on. ‘All the stuff of Frazer’s about the Dying God. It almost looks as if it had really happened once.’ To understand the shattering impact of it, you would need to know the man (who has certainly never since shown any interest in Christianity). If he, the cynic of cynics, the toughest of the toughs, were not – as I would still have put it – ‘safe,’ where could I turn? Was there no escape?” (*Surprised by Joy*, pp. 122-23).

May 11, 1926: Lewis met another member of the Oxford English faculty. He recorded his initial impression of this colleague in his diary: “He is a smooth, pale, fluent little chap.... No harm in him: only needs a smack or so.”

“At my first coming into the world I had been (implicitly) warned never to trust a Papist, and at my first coming into the English Faculty (explicitly) never to trust a philologist. Tolkien was both.”



- 1930 Moves from belief in “Absolute Spirit” to theism
- 1931 Embraces Christianity as a “True Myth”

“I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ – in Christianity... my long night talk [on 19 Sept] with Dyson and Tolkien had a good deal to do with it.”

Dyson and Tolkien helped Lewis to see that myths convey deep truths

Reason **and** imagination rather than reason **or** imagination

- 1933 Inklings begin to meet
- 1936 *The Allegory of Love*
- 1938 *Out of the Silent Planet*
- 1940 *The Problem of Pain*
- 1941 BBC talks
- 1942 *Screwtape Letters* & *A Preface to Paradise Lost*

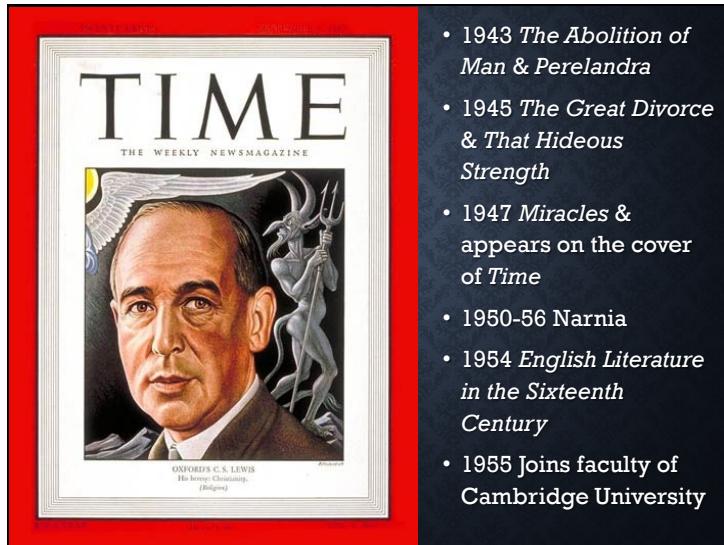


In the fall of 1933, Lewis and Tolkien began to meet regularly (Tuesdays at 11:00 at The Eagle & Child; Thursday evenings in Lewis's rooms) with a small group of fellow literary-minded Christians, a group known as "the Inklings."

Among other things, *The Lord of the Rings* is among the Inklings' legacy – were it not for their (not quite universal; see Dyson, Hugo) enthusiasm for Tolkien's "Hobbit story," the books might never have actually been written.

*The Allegory of Love* – this work helped to establish Lewis as a world-class scholar of medieval literature; one reviewer wrote that "Out of the multitude of volumes on literary criticism there arises once or twice in a generation a truly great work. Such, I believe, is this study." (p. 142 of *C. S. Lewis: Images of His World*)

Note: In 1938 Lewis was 40 years old, and more or less entirely unheard-of outside his own scholarly circles.



- 1943 *The Abolition of Man* & *Pere landra*
- 1945 *The Great Divorce* & *That Hideous Strength*
- 1947 *Miracles* & appears on the cover of *Time*
- 1950-56 Narnia
- 1954 *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*
- 1955 Joins faculty of Cambridge University

- 1956 *Till We Have Faces*
- 1957 Marries Joy Davidman
- 1958 *Reflections on the Psalms*
- 1960 Joy dies
- 1961 *A Grief Observed*
- 1963 Jack dies



**“HOW GLORIOUSLY  
DIFFERENT  
ARE THE SAINTS”**

- “The most thoroughly converted man I ever met”
- Reasonable faith
- Imagination & Myth
- Beauty, longing, and joy

A black and white portrait of C.S. Lewis, an elderly man with a shaved head, wearing a dark suit and tie, looking slightly to the right of the camera.

Full quote: “How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been; how gloriously different are the saints”

Tempted to end with “lessons for Catholics,” but there’s just too much to say. This quote from *MC* expresses where I think Lewis’s real genius lies: his Christianity, like all authentic forms of Christianity, and like Catholicism in particular, is **holistic**. Lewis the man and Lewis the author are both extraordinary expressions of this idea.











