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Life Dipped in Myth

Drawing Hearts and Minds to Christ
through the Imagination

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To my father, who taught me how to write, fish, and tell stories.

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INTRODUCTION

In any contemporary discussion of the imagination among Western intellectuals, one feels the immediate need to prove that the imagination and its objects belong in the circle of things reasonable people discuss; a sort of underlying sentiment suggests that the imagination belongs mostly in children's books and the fantasies of the weak-minded. This paper aims to help recover a robust understanding of the imagination and its role in apprehending truth—especially truths of Christian Revelation. Focusing on the models of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, the author hopes to offer a compelling argument that recovery of a proper understanding of the imagination and implementation of that understanding are critical to Christian life—especially apologetics, preaching, and parenting. Although the topic certainly deserves wider application, this paper focuses on addressing problems relevant to the environment with which the author is most familiar: the Western world of the twenty-first century.

The imagination helps facilitate meaningful encounters with truth. It is no secret that the Scriptures, including the teachings of Jesus himself, are filled with imaginative stories. Theological literature offers surprisingly little on the subject of imagination given how strongly the Scriptures appeal to the imagination. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are two recent giants in the field of imaginative literature. Although they differed somewhat in style, both used their literature to embody Christian ideas. In their fictional works, the reader is cordially invited to embrace the Christian imaginative vision.

The Roman Catholic Church of the twenty-first century faces extremely serious challenges. Some of these challenges are old, but many of them have taken the Church into uncharted waters. Among the many challenges are

rapid cultural shifts in basic assumptions, a loss of familiarity with truths of Revelation, and a tidal wave of ideas spearheaded by images and narratives rather than propositional arguments. A Western world that increasingly rejects Christianity is also highly educated, skeptical, and emotionally driven. A study of how the imagination works in the stories we tell about life, the Church, the world, and ourselves can help us understand the many true and false assumptions that we can absorb from our surrounding environment as twenty-first century Christians in the West. Ignoring a shift in basic assumptions leads to a disconnect between arguments and reality. Assumptions play an enormous role in the way information is interpreted. Underlying assumptions involve an imaginative framework. An apologist cannot reasonably hope to engage the intellect of an unbeliever without engaging his or her imaginative framework.

As the Church seeks to respond to the challenges of our times, she should always look to the examples found in the Scriptures of holy men and women who responded to the challenges of their own times. Their response often involved creative use of the imagination. Many messages of the prophets were fraught with rich imagery. To communicate the Word of God, Jeremiah broke a flask, Ezekiel made a model city, and Hosea married a prostitute (See Jer 19, Ez 4:1-3, Hos 1:2-3). Those were difficult times too. The message God spoke to his people in difficult times did not take the form of a purely intellectual treatise. It was a message that filled the imaginations of God's people.

Reason and imagination are twin faculties, both part of human nature—and both given to us by God our Creator!—that, together, allow for a fuller grasp of the truth. Both of them are necessary and valuable. But as we will see, it is the *imagination* that provides the foundation for the exercise of the reason—and the imagination has been sorely neglected in apologetics, evangelization, and catechesis.¹

Using the imagination to form a Christian counter-narrative to the narratives percolating in a secularized West is much more than just making preaching “more exciting.” Imagination plays an indispensable role in the work of guiding hearts and minds to Christ, especially in the contemporary world.

¹ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 10-11.

“Anti-revelation” also uses the imagination.² “The human imagination is never empty, and if it is not solicited and (in)formed by a divine revelation, it will be by other designs for other ends.”³ To resist the imaginative vision created by anti-revelation requires nourishing the imagination with images that embody the Christian imaginative vision. This involves both nourishing our own imaginations and employing our nourished imaginations to produce a compelling Christian counter-narrative where believers and unbelievers alike can encounter truth, goodness, and beauty.

We are called as Christians not just to recognize the new playing field, but to actually get onto the field and play. It is one thing to recognize a shift in basic assumptions, it is another to seek practical ways of helping secularized contemporaries connect with the eternal truths of the Christian Faith. As St. John Paul II puts it:

To teach the faith and to evangelize is to speak an absolute and universal truth to the world; but it is our duty to speak in appropriate and meaningful ways which make people receptive to that truth. [...] We should not simply repeat but explain. In other words, we need a new apologetic, geared to the needs of today, which keeps in mind that our task is not just to win arguments but to win souls, to engage not in ideological bickering but to vindicate and promote the Gospel. Such an apologetic will need to find a common “grammar” with those who see things differently and do not share our assumptions, lest we end up speaking different languages even though we may be using the same tongue.”⁴

St. Peter admonishes every Christian believer: “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” (1 Pt 3:15) Our call is to disarm hearts and minds for the sake of the Gospel, helping believer and unbeliever alike more deeply embrace the imaginative vision that underlies our Faith.

² N. STEEVES, *Grazie all’Immaginazione. Integrare l’Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 120. This book is in Italian. All translations of provided quotations are my own. Originally published in French as *Grace à l’imagination. Intégrer l’imagination en théologie fondamentale*.

³ N. STEEVES, *Grazie all’Immaginazione. Integrare l’Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 120.

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, «Address of his Holiness John Paul II to the Bishops of Western Canada on their ‘Ad Limina’ Visit», 6. See also Busse, “Telling a Surreal Story,” 18.

CHAPTER I

Framing the Discussion: Challenges, Scripture, and Philosophy

Every picture needs a frame. The contemporary situation of Christianity in the West, Scripture, and Philosophy form the frame of the picture this paper seeks to depict. Christianity finds itself in unprecedented times and facing new challenges. These challenges should not be ignored by theological discussion. The Scriptures, being normative, provide solid ground for a theology of the imagination. A look at philosophical tradition reveals the importance of the imagination for arriving at truth.

1. Contemporary challenges facing Christianity in the West

1.1. Secularity and the death of Christendom

There is a particular part of the world that was once strongly and predominantly Christian in culture and in practice but is no longer so. This region is primarily composed of western Europe, the United States, and Canada. This region, defined as the “North Atlantic” by Charles Taylor, is conventionally referred to as the West.⁵ The mass apostasy from Christian ideals has led to what can rightly be called a post-Christian culture in this region. In the post-Christian West, the Church faces some steep challenges.

Up until a few decades ago, Christianity was a cultural institution, which meant that most adults had a basic familiarity with Scripture and with the central ideas of Christianity, whether or not they believed. In this context, apologists could count on a certain level of meaning provided by cultural exposure. However, in the twenty-first century, with fragmented communities and a thoroughly secular

⁵ C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, 21.

educational system, even this limited degree of context has in many cases been lost.⁶

This loss of familiarity with the central ideas of Christianity means that the playing field has drastically changed for preaching and apologetics in the West. The challenge is made even steeper by the fact that the very people unfamiliar with these central Christian concepts likely think that they have already heard the Gospel: “and they don’t particularly want to hear any more about it. Many people have only a vague idea of Jesus, one that’s frankly not interesting enough to be worth bothering about; for them, Christianity is just one more option on the spiritual menu, and an outdated one at that.”⁷

“One more option on the spiritual menu.” Something new has leaked into the basic assumptions of the West; something that affects believer and unbeliever alike. Taylor calls it the “end of naïve acknowledgment of the transcendent.”⁸ Whatever it may be called, there can be little doubt that Christian ideas and Christian narratives have lost their former place of honor in the West. It is very much worth noting that this loss is not an intellectual rejection of Christianity based on arguments and reasoning. What contemporary Western Christianity faces is an intellectual skepticism towards Christianity based on a transformation of assumptions effected by a post-Christian culture.

A basic assumption impacts the way a person thinks: “We have a general view of existence, whether we like it or not; it alters or, to speak more accurately, it creates and involves everything we say or do, whether we like it or not.”⁹ Basic assumptions are often rife with latent ideas: “Every man in the street must hold a metaphysical system, and hold it firmly. The possibility is that he may have held it so firmly and so long as to have forgotten all about its existence.”¹⁰ Because the ideas present in basic assumptions are often latent, meaning that they are not usually given the energy it takes to reason through an idea, it can be difficult to address them by using an argument. Someone may not even really know what he believes and may not appreciate having someone else point out the logical consequences of his beliefs. “Assumptions are harder to resist than arguments.”¹¹ The Church’s response

⁶ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 19.

⁷ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 7.

⁸ C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, 21.

⁹ G.K. CHESTERTON, «Heretics», 112.

¹⁰ G.K. CHESTERTON, «Heretics», 113.

¹¹ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 80.

to a post-Christian West will need more than well-formed intellectual responses to convincingly present the Gospel.

Every society has a ruling vision. This ruling vision forms basic assumptions. In a Christendom culture, the basic assumptions or ruling vision are shaped by the Gospel. “When the Christian narrative of the human drama and its corresponding moral order have become prominent in a given society and have come to provide, at least largely, that society’s ruling vision, what emerges can be called a ‘Christendom culture.’”¹² While such a society does struggle with a host of its own problems, there are benefits, and some vestiges of those benefits remain in the contemporary West. Holly Ordway writes concerning Christmas carols: “I had neither the content of faith nor the practice of it, but the music formed a little space in my soul, like a cup waiting to be filled, that by its very shape suggested something was meant to go there.”¹³ In a Christendom culture, there is greater exposure to the sorts of things that make room for faith. When a Christendom culture collapses, preachers and apologists are called to more intentionally cultivate that space. The imagination is a powerful tool for cultivating such spaces.

A heavy bias towards scientific knowledge forms part of the fallout of a collapse of Christendom culture in the West. Ordway explains:

As a robust mode of knowing, imagination has been cut off from reason and neglected as a means of communicating truth. For the past several hundred years, but especially in the twentieth century, Western culture has increasingly accepted a very limited view of the world, in which only the things that can be measured or experimentally verified are considered to be real or true.¹⁴

Since faith necessarily falls beyond the realm of the scientifically verifiable, faith can be seen as less-than-reasonable or even opposed to reason. This is not on account of a robust argument on the part of an intelligent atheist philosopher. This is a basic assumption fueled by the tremendous discoveries of science over the course of the twentieth century. When philosophically confronted, the argument is weak. When implicit as an assumption, the idea that only the scientifically verifiable commands intellectual respect can keep a person from seriously considering the faith.

¹² J. SHEA, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age*, 13.

¹³ H. ORDWAY, *Not God’s Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*, 22.

¹⁴ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 18.

1.2. *Information Inundation*

It is no secret that the contemporary world is inundated with information. Particularly following the advent of the internet, the human mind regularly experiences exposure to an almost constant stream of input. “The media (including television, smartphones, and social media) has created an environment of constant overload of images, sound, information, and emotional response.”¹⁵ The overload consists not just of increased access to information, but of relentless efforts in electronic advertisement, which seeks ever to grab our attention, usually in the form of something ever flashier and louder. This creates several challenges, one of which is a deep loss of meaning. “The world is flooded with data, and it is fatally easy to be overwhelmed by it; and it may be that the last cry of those drowning in nonsense is ““What does it all *mean*?””¹⁶ The worldwide average of screen time was close to seven hours a day in early 2022, with social media use averaging almost 2½ hours a day.¹⁷ In an environment formed by this kind of media consumption, Christianity not only must compete with the incessant stream of stimulation, it must also preach to an audience that is often overwhelmed by this stream.

While this stream of media is overwhelming and competitive, it also tends not to be neutral vis-à-vis Christianity.

This extraordinary development in the applied sciences, especially in the area of electronic technology, has brought in its train an unprecedented explosion of images and information assailing each individual mind, even the youngest child’s, laced with assumptions about how to be successful and what it means to live a good life. The denizen of the modern world is incessantly hounded and cajoled by gospels of various kinds, schemes of salvation and routes to happiness wrapped in highly attractive but often deceptive clothing.¹⁸

The challenge of the current inundation with information runs deeper than merely overwhelming people. The inundation is forming the basic assumptions of massive numbers of people in a way that can impede acceptance of the gospel. The mind that is filled by gospels that contradict or offer alternatives to the Gospel will be more difficult to convince of the Christian imaginative vision.

The “unprecedented explosion of images and information” is popularly called “development.” But towards what is mankind developing? Social

¹⁵ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 75.

¹⁶ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 19.

¹⁷ S. KEMP, «Digital 2022: Global Overview Report».

¹⁸ J. SHEA, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age*, 3-4.

media like TikTok, X, and Instagram put out endless content. Yet who can honestly call this progress? J.R.R. Tolkien's words, spoken nearly eighty years ago, hold truer now than ever: "It is indeed an age of 'improved means to deteriorated ends'."¹⁹ Perhaps it is fitting to close this section with a poem by Ordway, which she wrote about the loss of meaning in the contemporary West:

"Unmaking Language"

'Repentance.' 'Virtue.' 'Sin': Words as relics
Of a weird, less sophisticated time,
A time that's wholly past and derelict,
Which we can only now bring back to mind
Enveloped in protective irony.
We've cordoned off our past and its 'concerns'
In the name of making us feel more free;
We *must* re-phrase—it's how our freedom's won.
And so we slice our bodies with no pain;
We grope in loveless sex with no release;
We search for self, though nothing there remains;
We make a ceaseless noise and find no peace.
Unmaking language, nothing left to say:
Blind impulse speaks, and wordless we obey.²⁰

1.3. *Counter-Narrative and Conversion*

Culture is shaped by narrative. If we want to evangelize culture, we will need to engage foundational narratives with counter-narratives. The culture of death has an underlying narrative. The culture of shame has an underlying narrative. The culture of moral license has an underlying narrative. "A compelling Christian narrative is called for, one that provides a counter to the secular vision, that helps Christians understand and fend off false gospels."²¹ As we will see, imagination plays an indispensable role in offering such a compelling Christian narrative.

Speaking of early Christianity, Shea points out that there is nothing new in linking conversion and imaginative vision.

During this time [the first three centuries of Christianity] the Church functioned in an apostolic mode, by which is meant that she was making her way against

¹⁹ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 72.

²⁰ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 78.

²¹ J. SHEA, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age*, 4-5.

the current of the wider society and needed to articulate and maintain a distinct and contrasting vision. Those who were brought into the Church did more than embrace a set of moral principles or doctrinal statements. There was a need for a profound conversion of mind and imagination such that they saw *everything*, viewed the whole, differently.²²

Shea goes on to explain that this Christian way of seeing everything came into power as the ruling imaginative vision in the West for a great deal of time. Having now seen the collapse of such a ruling imaginative vision, it is critically important to realize its loss when we are talking about conversion in the West in the twenty-first century. The vision that was a presupposition for St. Peter Damian, St. Bernard of Clairveaux, and St. Francis of Assisi is no longer a presupposition. Conversion of a secular heart and mind will involve a conversion of the imagination.

How should a contemporary Christian in the West engage these challenges? One possible solution is to focus on offering a strong and convincing counter-narrative. “There needs to be a counter-narrative to the overwhelming non-Christian narrative currently on offer. The Christian mythic vision (the true one) needs to be made available such that it can chase out the false myths of the day in the minds of believers and inquirers.”²³ There is a new and challenging framework in which Christians preach, teach, do theology, and offer apologetics. Fostering conversion always involves the imagination but now requires a much more intentional focus on the imagination.

2. Biblical Revelation: A Revelation of Story and Image

2.1. “Unless you become like a little child”

In Matthew 18:3 Jesus says to his disciples: “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” A child receives reality as something other—knowable and discoverable, yet always beyond complete comprehension. A child understands life mostly by living it. When a birdwatcher observes birds, part of the birdwatcher’s goal is to become invisible to the birds. In order to better grasp the reality of birds and their natural behavior, a birdwatcher must relinquish control of the situation—he must let the birds be themselves to understand them. The same holds true in a certain sense for reality. There is

²² J. SHEA, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age*, 13.

²³ J. SHEA, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age*, 69.

in a child a simultaneous desire to grasp reality and a hidden wisdom that allows reality to reveal itself. A man, especially technical man, is more prone to ask, “What use is this?” A child asks the deeper question—what *is* this? The wonder and awe of childhood allow for pure discovery. Mysteries can be encountered in a way that one becomes more familiar with the mystery without destroying it. A healthy friendship, a good marriage, a fruitful prayer life—all become better acquainted with a person, which is to say a mystery, without destroying the mystery.

This is not to say that intellectual growth is not important to a mature faith. “A child’s level of understanding does not set a limit to the complexity of reality.”²⁴ We can continue to grow in knowledge about God without losing the qualities of a childlike faith. Jesus does not ask for childlike faith because there is little to learn about reality. A childlike approach to Revelation involves a trust that forms a passage to right understanding regarding the truths in question. Jesus’ admonition arms us against the danger of limiting reality to the scientifically knowable.

The Kingdom *is revealed* to those who receive it like children. (See Mt 11:25; Mk 10:15) For those who are willing to encounter the mystery of Jesus Christ without destroying the mystery, the Kingdom is revealed. To accept without despoiling, to reach without grasping, to touch without holding, to hold without restraining—the Christian seeks to know God and be known. There is an acceptance of factual truth, but this is like a bride knowing facts about her husband. The facts are like doorways to true knowledge. If you miss the door, you miss the deeper knowledge, but standing at the door does not bring about the mutual self-gift intended by the mystery of knowledge. Imagination can facilitate knowledge of a mystery that falls beyond the grasp of reason. Thanks to the imagination, a meaningful encounter can take place between the mind and mystery, one in which wonder is preserved.

2.2. *Biblical Narrative*

Human beings are naturally disposed to tell and listen to stories. Something about a story is naturally intriguing and engaging. It is no wonder then, that the Bible is full of stories.

The best indication of this innate human disposition toward narrative is that much of Scripture is in this form. The Scriptures could, if God had so intended, been inspired in such a way that the human authors would have written a purely

²⁴ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 95.

propositional book, with doctrine and guidelines for behavior. Instead, much of the revelation of God is presented through narrative.²⁵

Two realities go hand in hand. The God who made human beings created them for stories. Knowing this, God chose to reveal himself through stories. To more deeply explore these two realities, we will turn to the work of Jean-Pierre Sonnet.

In his book *Generare è Narrare*, Sonnet notes the anthropological importance of telling stories. “Even until the end of our life, we understand ourselves through the stories that we receive from human cultures.”²⁶ Stories help make sense of difficult realities and carry a sort of timelessness. The simple fact that I was born in time means that a story exists that is larger than my immediate experience and existence. Citing Terrence Malick’s film *Tree of Life*, Sonnet poses a child’s request to his mother: “Tell us stories before we remember.”²⁷ Stories open our world beyond the limits of our immediate temporal experience. I began to exist in time. If I wish to find out what came before me, I have need of a story.

Sonnet places a strong emphasis on the parental role of storytelling. Referring to Exodus 13:14 and Deuteronomy 26:5, Sonnet points out that it is the responsibility of the parents to tell the story of salvation to their children.²⁸ “Generating life, like generating faith, means to recount.”²⁹ Not only is Biblical Revelation largely in narrative form, it also includes an instruction to parents to tell the stories of God’s salvation. Telling the story of God’s salvation is not limited to theological experts or to the clergy. Every parent is called to share in the telling of the salvation story.

Sonnet calls the Bible “a sanctuary of narrative thought.”³⁰ A brief glance at the rich variety of literature within the Bible drives the point home. Psalms, Song of Songs, adaptations of near eastern myth in Genesis—these only scratch the surface of the imaginative beauty flowing through the Scriptures. “*The Bible, first of all and above all, tells stories.*”³¹ Woven throughout the imaginative beauty is a story—a story much bigger than any individual. The story turns out to be bigger than any people or nation on earth; it is a story that involves all of creation and its renewal. The Bible is not first and foremost a book of instructions, it is a cosmic story that, if accepted, involves

²⁵ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 103.

²⁶ J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 19-20. This book is in Italian. All translations of provided quotations are my own. See also Busse, “Telling a Surreal Story,” 36.

²⁷ J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 18.

²⁸ Cfr. J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 10.

²⁹ J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 13.

³⁰ J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 13. See also Busse, “Telling a Surreal Story,” 38.

³¹ J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 25.

a completely different way of seeing reality. Reality is caught up in a divine story. Theology should never lose sight of that story.

There are many characters throughout the plots and subplots of the great story of the Scriptures. Narrative has a unique ability to describe characters without objectifying them. Referencing the philosopher Paul Ricouer, Sonnet writes that he sheds “light on one of the properties of story, that of outlining the identity of a person while protecting the mystery: beyond every description or definition of *what* someone is, the *object* of his identity, there remains a *who*, a paradoxical subject, inseparable from a storyline.”³² Story is able to describe without destroying mystery, uniquely equipping narrative for the work of revealing and discovering identity. Thanks to stories, realities that surpass ready conceptualization, like a person, can still be known.

Biblical narrative does not lend itself to a neutral acquisition of knowledge. “Entering into the dynamic of biblical story, in the articulation of the plot and characters, means to discover how much we ourselves are beings whose identity is narrative.”³³ Sonnet uses the word “entering”—a beautiful reminder of the fact that a reader enters a different world when he reads a story. Entering into a Biblical story can remind me of the stories I believe about myself—the narratives that shape who I am in the eyes of others, in my own eyes, in God’s eyes. In fact, reading Scripture can deeply involve and affect the reader. “One who unites his more personal story with that of biblical story, especially the Gospel story, discovers that he too is a mysterious *who*, in the image of God, bound on a Paschal journey to follow Christ.”³⁴ The human identity is tied to stories. God gives us in the Scriptures the opportunity to see the kind of story he has in mind. We *belong* in the story we discover in the Scriptures.

Biblical narrative has a transgenerational quality. “The story of the Scriptures has the cohesive structure of a promise, which from generation to generation, seeks new recipients and beneficiaries.”³⁵ It is thus timelessness in historical form: the promise does not change per se, but each generation must pass the promise on to the next in a way that is historically meaningful. “The mystery of the God of Israel and that of Christ of the Gospel are entrusted in a surprising way to the resources of narrative and its ability to

³² J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 28.

³³ J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 30.

³⁴ J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 30-31.

³⁵ J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 33.

speak to all generations.”³⁶ Narrative mediates between the timelessness of divine truth and the historicity of those who are called to embrace such truth.

Hearken back to the natural human disposition for story. Narrative story captivates the human mind in a powerful way. Regarding God revealing his name in the burning bush, Sonnet writes: “One feels the suspense, the curiosity and the surprises that such a revelation heralds. To know it better, the reader can do nothing other than move forward in reading the story. It is in recounted story that God is revealed in truth, faithfully unforeseeable and unforeseeably faithful.”³⁷ God chooses to reveal himself through story. The story God tells through the Scriptures is a story that cannot be reduced to propositional statements. It is a beauty ever ancient and ever new. Many truths can be abstracted from that story, but we must never forget that it is first and foremost a story.

No one could have predicted God’s plan. God delivers and saves in ways that no human being could have predicted. In this way, God becomes an anchor of hope for those who trust in him. No matter how bleak the story, there is always hope in God who saves. Hope is not found in ignoring the bleakness of the story, but in remembering in the bleakness the unforeseeable salvation of a God who loves to save.

The Word must be spoken. Like John the Baptist, like the Apostles and Evangelists, we are called to provide a voice. When we carry on the narrative of Jesus Christ, he continues to be the Word spoken among men.

In conclusion, there is a need to recover a sense of the story the Bible tells. “The paradox is that theology itself has suffered from amnesia in its encounters with the literary power—and above all narrative [power]—of the Bible.”³⁸ Perhaps influenced by the scientific bias of the West, theology continues to fragment into more and more sub-specializations, making it easier than ever to lose sight of the great story of the Bible and turn instead to rote memorization of propositional truths—after all, this is all one needs to pass an exam. One need not know the bigger story, let alone believe it. There is a better way. It involves a recovery of something that never should have been lost, a bold step in the footsteps of the Savior. “Taking the step of narration means finding oneself at the side of the greatest of narrators who is Jesus: ‘A man had two sons...’ (Lk 15:11)”³⁹

³⁶ J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 12-13.

³⁷ J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 29.

³⁸ J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 26. See also Busse, “Telling a Surreal Story,” 38.

³⁹ J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 13.

3. Powerful examples of the use of imagination in the Scriptures

3.1. *Nathan and David*

A particularly poignant example of using imaginative storytelling in the Scriptures is found in 2 Samuel 12. King David has recently committed adultery with Bathsheba and, to cover the resulting conception, murders Bathsheba's husband Uriah. God sends the prophet Nathan to rebuke David, but not in the conventional fire and brimstone way we might expect.

And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared it for the man who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man' and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." Nathan said to David, "You are the man." [...] David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." (2 Sam 12:1-7; 13)

This passage offers a prime example of imaginative storytelling in the work of conversion. Nathan begins not with a rebuke, but with a story. Not just any story, but a story that would connect deeply with his audience (King David). David, having been himself a shepherd, would have had a strong protective instinct towards a poor shepherd and understood the connection between a shepherd and his sheep. David is drawn into the story in a way that evades all the protective barriers of self-justification provoked by guilt. Exiting his own world of rights and kingship and guilt and desire, he enters the fictional world of this rich man and poor shepherd boy. In doing so, he leaves much of his prejudice at the door and clearly sees not just the injustice, but the gravity of the injustice. The injustice provokes an emotional response in David that moves him interiorly. This interior movement includes a resolution to remedy the injustice. David has taken the bait—hook, line, and sinker. All Nathan needs to say now is "You are the man."

By using an imaginative, "fictional" story, Nathan bypassed the defense mechanisms of guilt to help facilitate a true conversion. This conversion involves an honest admission of guilt on the part of David—"I have sinned against the LORD." By taking David's situation out of the "real world" of

what actually happened and placing it in a “fictional” world, the prophet Nathan struck to the very core of David’s heart. The hallmarks of sincere conversion all appear: the recognition of injustice, the resolution to remedy the injustice, and the honest admission of guilt—all through a “fictional” story.

3.2. *Parables*

The prophet Nathan is not the only one in the Scriptures to use imaginative stories to strike the hearts of listeners and facilitate conversion. One of the strongest arguments for using such stories comes from the simple fact that Jesus used them—prolifically. The Gospels do contain moral teachings and historical accounts, but they are also filled with stories. As theologians, we cannot escape the fact that Jesus loved telling fictional stories to get his point across.

Jesus told many parables, but two of the most striking are the story of the Good Samaritan and the story of the Prodigal Son. Both are, by all appearances, completely fictional accounts, yet they strike at very deep realities. In fact, by being fictional accounts, they gain a certain tone of timelessness. Precisely *because* the man beaten and robbed is anonymous, we can see him in every beggar on the street. Precisely *because* the older and younger son in the Prodigal son are not “real people,” they can become millions of real people. These two parables convey deep truths about empathy, charity, conversion, and forgiveness. The truths are not lost to the reader because the story is fictional. Sometimes, life is seen more clearly when it is dipped in myth—at least Jesus seemed to think so.

3.2.1. The Good Samaritan

One of the most striking parables Jesus offers is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus preaches the parable in response to a question from a lawyer: “And who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10:29). Rather than simply instruct the rich young man that he should widen his conception of neighbor, Jesus tells a story. “Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead.’” (Lk 10:30) A priest and a Levite pass him by. “But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.” (Lk 10:33-34)

By all accounts the story is completely fictional. Jesus used his imagination to make the whole thing up. But when Jesus asks “Which of

these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers” (Lk 10:36), the lawyer’s response indicates a clear grasp of the point Jesus intended to make—“He said, ‘The one who showed mercy on him.’” (Lk 10:37) Jesus can now give the instruction “Go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37) knowing that the lawyer has more deeply understood the meaning of neighbor.

It is worth emphasizing that in the context of the parable, the lawyer who asks for clarification already knows the truth in propositional form: he is to love his neighbor. What is missing for this man is a sense of the *meaning* of the command. It is this meaning that Jesus provides, with the image of the wounded man and his Samaritan rescuer.⁴⁰

This new meaning unlocked a commandment the lawyer had probably recited since his childhood. The content of the commandment did not change, but through a fictional story, Jesus unlocked the commandment in a way that could bring about real conversion in the lawyer.

3.2.2. The Prodigal Son

The parable of the Prodigal Son is perhaps the most famous of all parables. The parable comes in the context of Pharisees and scribes complaining that Jesus “receives sinners and eats with them.” (Lk 15:2) Jesus responds with three parables—the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son—all of which portray an image of a God who rejoices in conversion and repentance. Against the murmuring of the scribes, Jesus offers a richer response than a propositional argument based on the necessary and intrinsic goodness of God. Instead, a father in a fictional story is Jesus’ chosen means of communicating how much God wishes to recover every fallen sinner.

4. Traditional conceptions of the imagination

While it is abundantly clear that the Scriptures make copious use of imaginative story and narrative, how have imagination, story, and narrative fared through Christian Tradition and various philosophical traditions? A very brief gloss over centuries of thought is hardly exhaustive, but it will help form an adequate notion of the imagination as well as demonstrate that the imagination was important to several of the most brilliant philosophers and theologians in history.

⁴⁰ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 54.

Western history of the imagination is divided into two worlds: Hebrew and Greek.⁴¹ Having discussed the use of the imagination in the Scriptures, little should be said here except that the overall Hebrew view of the imagination itself is decidedly neutral: “the man who imagines imitates God, for good or for ill.”⁴² The imagination is part of human freedom, which can be used well or abused. Imagination is decidedly powerful, but how that power is wielded depends on the wielder.

The Hebrew concept of imagination contrasts with that of the more philosophically developed Greek tradition: “Whereas the Hebrew imagination is above all ethical, that of Prometheus [i.e. Greek imagination] is first of all cognitive, a way of seeing and knowing, and subsequently projecting and realizing the possible.”⁴³ Greek philosophy began articulating the extremely important link between imagination and reason.

The two most developed articulations of this link are found in Plato and Aristotle. Although Plato expressed some hostility at times towards the imagination, he also proposed a form of the imagination called *dianoia*. “This poetic and philosophical imagination connects the sensible world to the world of Ideas.”⁴⁴ In other words, the imagination (*dianoia*) mediates between the visible and the invisible.

Aristotle takes this notion of mediation to another level, seeing imagination as a mediator between sense perception and reason. Aristotle goes so far as to say: “The soul [...] never thinks without images.”⁴⁵ This is because the mental images produced by imagination form a vital link in the chain of thought. It goes like this: the senses take in various data, this data is stored in the memory, the *imagination* then uses memory to produce mental images, which form the raw material for thought.⁴⁶ Aristotle generally emphasizes embodied existence, and there is reason to think that this contributes to his view of the imagination as an essential mediator between sense perception and reason. “The realist metaphysics of Aristotle push us to

⁴¹ Cfr. N. STEEVES, *Grazie all'Immaginazione. Integrare l'Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 24.

⁴² N. STEEVES, *Grazie all'Immaginazione. Integrare l'Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 25.

⁴³ N. STEEVES, *Grazie all'Immaginazione. Integrare l'Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 27.

⁴⁴ N. STEEVES, *Grazie all'Immaginazione. Integrare l'Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 32.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *De Anima*, III, 3, 428a, 82. Cited as found in N. STEEVES, *Grazie all'Immaginazione. Integrare l'Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 36.

⁴⁶ Cfr. N. STEEVES, *Grazie all'Immaginazione. Integrare l'Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 36.

greater trust in the imagination.”⁴⁷ The connection between a hylomorphic, or embodied view of reality and a robust view of the imagination will serve us well in understanding much later Christian thinkers.

The Christian Tradition did not by any means univocally accept Aristotle’s view of the imagination, but it did find a place among several important Christian thinkers. St. Thomas Aquinas is probably the most notable Christian scholar to follow the Aristotelian tradition, but evidence suggests that St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure also believed in the mediatory role of imagination in thought.⁴⁸

Imagination is the human faculty that assimilated sensory data into images, upon which the intellect can then act; it is the basis of all reasoned thought as well as all artistic, or what we could call ‘imaginative,’ exercise. C.S. Lewis, who was first and foremost a scholar of Medieval and Renaissance literature, draws on this more robust understanding of the imagination.⁴⁹

This “robust understanding of the imagination” forms a bridge between the Western philosophical tradition and two of the greatest fiction-writers of the twentieth century. In the creative thought of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, we will continue to discover the richness of the imagination. When a Christian uses imagination to create stories full of truth, goodness, and beauty, these stories can facilitate conversion. The imagination can help one move from notional to real assent and establish meaning for Christian truths that are subjectively locked in dusty safes of the mind.

Where does imagination stand in the contemporary picture? In a Christendom society, imaginative work is everywhere echoing a Christian narrative. It is very much present, but much more *culturally* present. Art, architecture, plays, novels, and poetry all resound with a Christian worldview. It is in an Apostolic age that Christianity itself—that is to say Christian teaching, preaching, and theology—need to recover the art of telling stories and to consciously contrast the Christian narrative with that of the surrounding world.

⁴⁷ N. STEEVES, *Grazie all’Immaginazione. Integrare l’Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 37.

⁴⁸ Cfr. H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 16.

⁴⁹ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 16.

CHAPTER II

Imagination, Meaning, and Recovery

1. A deeper look at the imagination

1.1. *Imagination in Tolkien and Lewis*

One of the difficulties of writing about the imagination is that imagination involves so many different aspects of human life, understanding, and creativity. Imagination touches everything from basic mental images to writing creative fiction and poetry. This can be confusing for a reader. A student of Lewis or Tolkien finds himself wading through a sea of beautiful ideas wrapped in imprecise definitions. Fantasy, fiction, creativity, imagination, myth, story—the list of terms goes on. However, it is important to establish from the outset that Tolkien and Lewis saw the imagination and its creative aspects as deeply involved with the “real world.” Imagination is involved with reaching important truths, even if its varied faculties and expressions may be difficult to conceptually capture or precisely define.

The twentieth century was blessed with an abundance of extremely talented Christian writers in the English language. Perhaps the greatest of these figures are C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, who developed in both theory and practice a robust view of the imagination. The work of Tolkien and Lewis is not limited to essays. Both were themselves prolific authors of fiction. Lewis’ most famous work is the *Chronicles of Narnia*, a series of seven books in which characters from the real contemporary world (contemporary to the time the books were written) interact with an alternate world. This alternate world has its own time and its own collection of rational creatures—talking animals, centaurs, fauns, etc. Lewis also managed to write a space trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, *That Hideous Strength*), which involves an imaginative exploration of human interaction with

extraterrestrial life. *The Great Divorce*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *Till We Have Faces* completes a mention of his major works of fiction.

One of the things that stands out in the fictional work of Lewis is the clear relationship between the contemporary world and the mythical world. Characters in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the space trilogy realistically depict people who lived in Great Britain in the mid-twentieth century. *The Great Divorce* imaginatively portrays heaven, hell, and purgatory via a fictional bus trip filled with very believable characters. Only *Till We Have Faces* departs from this pattern, creatively retelling the Greek myth of Psyche and Eros and avoiding any depiction of contemporary characters. Lewis' works often contain allegory. Allegories are written with a very purposeful sense of interpretation—the author wants the reader to see something in real life through the lens of an imaginative story. Allegory thus narrows the field of interpretation for the reader. The clearest example of allegory in Lewis' work is the figure of Aslan, a lion who is clearly meant to be seen as a figure of Jesus Christ. The words “meant to be seen” capture the essence of an allegory. When an author uses an allegory, he means for the reader to see something very specific.

Tolkien, in contrast, disliked allegory. In his foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien distinguishes his style of creative authorship.

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse ‘applicability’ with ‘allegory’; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.⁵⁰

Rather than write a story with an obvious connection to the contemporary world, Tolkien chose instead to create an entirely distinct world, which he called “Middle Earth.” This world comes complete with its own myths and fictional history. Nevertheless, the story of *The Lord of the Rings* is applicable to ordinary life. Tolkien believed that by avoiding allegory, he gave his readers greater freedom to find themselves in his story.

The connection between the real world and Middle Earth is less immediately obvious than the connection between the real world and Narnia, but in fact the two places bear a very similar strength. A fictional world is not related to the real world because there is some connection between an imagined “normal” contemporary world and the mythical world created by the author. The mythical world itself has a relationship with the real world.

⁵⁰ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *The Lord of the Rings*, xvii.

Since the reader is living in the real world, what he encounters in the mythical world either helps or hinders his understanding of reality. A truth enmeshed in a mythical world is a truth that will affect the real world because a reader in the real world reads the truth therein.

If myths affect the reader in the real world, the question then becomes whether or not a myth or fictional story accurately conveys truth. Lewis and Tolkien certainly did not uncritically approve of stories. Tolkien, in fact, created a very critical hierarchy of stories according to genre and type, believing very firmly that some stories are much better than others.⁵¹ Lewis opined “Is mythopoeia, after all, not the most, but the least subjective of activities?”⁵² To be good, a myth, a fairy-tale, a fantasy novel must be internally consistent and full of truth.

Commenting on Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis makes the case for a deep connection between good fantasy and the real world.

‘But why’, (some ask), ‘why, if you must have a serious comment to make on the real life of men, must you do it by talking about a phantasmagoric never-never land of your own?’ Because, I take it, one of the main things the author wants to say is that the real life of men is of that mythical and heroic quality. One can see the principle at work in his characterization. Much that in a realistic work would be done by ‘character delineation’ is here done simply by making the character an elf, a dwarf, or a hobbit. The imagined beings have their insides on the outside; they are visible souls. And Man as a whole, Man pitted against the universe, have we seen him at all till we see that he is like a hero in a fairy tale?⁵³

Dipping man in myth enlightens anthropology. Man cannot be reduced to the scientific or the practical. Myth teaches us to look anew at human life, putting it into the context of a much larger story.

While Lewis is perhaps clearer in his overall treatment of the imagination than Tolkien, both agree on several very important points, including the cognitive importance of the imagination: “The human mind is capable of forming mental images of things not actually present. The faculty of conceiving the images is (or was) naturally called Imagination.”⁵⁴ This robust notion of the imagination supports the claim that the imagination concerns reality. “In this broad sense [that taken by Tolkien and Lewis], imagination is constantly at work in everyone, whether we realize it or not.

⁵¹ Cfr. J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*.

⁵² C.S. LEWIS, «The Gods Return to Earth: J.R.R. Tolkien The Fellowship of the Ring», 103.

⁵³ C.S. LEWIS, «The Dethronement of Power: J.R.R. Tolkien, The Two Towers and J.R.R. Tolkien, The Return of the King», 107-108.

⁵⁴ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 59.

It is not possible to have even a minimal grasp of propositional knowledge without the effective working of the faculty of imagination.”⁵⁵

Tolkien takes us a step further, applying the term imagination both to cognitive function and to foundational aspects of artful expression.

The mental power of image-making is one thing, or aspect; and it should appropriately be called Imagination. The perception of the image, the grasp of its implications, and the control, which are necessary to a successful expression, may vary in vividness and strength: but this is a difference of degree in Imagination, not a difference in kind.⁵⁶

Tolkien’s insight into the imagination provides a foundation for what he calls sub-creation. Being made in the image and likeness of God, it is natural for a human being to create. This creativity of man is a sort of expressive faculty of the imagination. Importantly, Tolkien asserts that it is one and the same imagination that is involved in thinking and in expression.

It should be clear at this point the academic seriousness of questions concerning the imagination. Many perhaps brush aside the imaginative fiction of Tolkien and Lewis as pleasure reading—purposed for wholesome entertainment and nothing more. *Sed contra*, these two authors embodied in their fiction a Christian view of the world. They consciously put their readers in touch with goodness, truth, and beauty. They appealed to readers at the level of emotion and basic assumptions as well as intellect—and they understood what they were doing. Like the prophet Nathan, like Jesus, like many others in salvation history, Tolkien and Lewis wrapped the “Good News” in story.

1.2. *Imagination and Truth: Developing an Understanding of the Cognitive Role of Imagination.*

The imagination would be meaningless if it had nothing to do with the real world. But can imaginative fiction or any sort of imagined thing really have a robust relationship with reality? As we have seen, Tolkien and Lewis would certainly respond in the affirmative, likely going even further to echo Owen Barfield: “Only by imagination [...] can the world be known.”⁵⁷ The connection between imagination and reality is supported by following Aristotle in giving a cognitive role to the imagination. “At the most basic level, the imagination is what allows us to conceive in our minds the image

⁵⁵ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 18.

⁵⁶ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 59.

⁵⁷ O. BARFIELD, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*, 26-27. Ordway cites this passage in *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 17.

of something that is not present [...]”⁵⁸ Since mental images are essential to most meaningful thought, so is the imagination. However, imaginative fiction faces a curious problem: “no other speech is in the same unhappy position as imaginative literature, for all other speech claims from the outset to deal with a real world.”⁵⁹ Because it departs from the way things are in the real world, fiction faces a prejudice that Lewis seeks to overcome.

Lewis makes this attempt by tying the faculty of the imagination to hypothetical reasoning. In an essay titled “Image and Imagination”, he explains how, although something imagined may not exist in present reality, the thing imagined is still related to reality. Using the example of a real tower, Lewis notes:

We turn a mere sense-datum into a tower by attributing to it a context. In the case of sense data, then, in taking any sense datum as a ‘thing’, we assert categorically certain connections between it and the rest of our real world. Our problem is to find the parallel process whereby we take a mere image as an imagined ‘thing’.⁶⁰

In the case of a real thing that I perceive through the senses, I take it to be that thing based on its connection with the real world. When I see a dog, I take it to be a dog because of everything I know about dogs in the real world. In the case of the imagination, when I imagine a tower, I still maintain this connection with the real world, but the connection is hypothetical: “The context does not actually exist: it is hypothetical. But all hypothesis rests on some actuality.”⁶¹ In other words, imaginary things in fiction depend on a connection to how things would or could be if the real world were so. “That is, what is really implicit in imagination is *hypothetical assertion*: and all hypothetical assertion is about reality.”⁶² These hypothetical contexts and hypothetical assertions connect with reality, but bear a sort of freedom: “You may change, as much as you please, the character which your objects would have in reality: but reality furnishes both that which is changed and that by which you change it.”⁶³

So, even though fiction does not describe actual events, it both depends upon and provides an encounter with reality. “What we do when we imagine, then, is to suppose (with or without the support of explicit images) a reshuffling of universals taken from the actual world.”⁶⁴ This reshuffling

⁵⁸ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 15.

⁵⁹ C.S. LEWIS, «Image and Imagination», 46.

⁶⁰ C.S. LEWIS, «Image and Imagination», 46.

⁶¹ C.S. LEWIS, «Image and Imagination», 48.

⁶² C.S. LEWIS, «Image and Imagination», 49.

⁶³ C.S. LEWIS, «Image and Imagination», 52.

⁶⁴ C.S. LEWIS, «Image and Imagination», 49.

happens according to the creativity of the writer and it causes the reader to encounter a tower in the story in a way that is understandable based on a connection between the imagined tower in the story and real towers in the real world.

Always the real world is the bank on which the poet draws his cheques; and though a metaphysical lyric may be a fine and private place, all the meanings embraced within it are but passengers who come there from the public, eternal, objective world of reality and haste [sic] thither again. Aristotle was right. Poetry presents οἷα ἂν γένοιτο, things that might be—it recombines elements which belong to the real, and to appreciate poetry involves at every moment a knowledge of those elements and therefore of the real.⁶⁵

Not only does Lewis make a strong argument for a connection between the real world and imaginative literature, he also does something very important in connecting it to the hypothetical. The hypothetical has to do with what might be, and so ties directly to conversion. Conversion is not a decision deduced from one's life lived so far, it involves a consideration of what might be. Christians living well, the Word preached, and imaginative literature that embodies Christian truths can all provide an encounter with the new possibilities involved in conversion. Once the possibilities involved in conversion are encountered, the choice to follow Christ becomes a hypothetical consideration: "What would life be like if *I* chose to follow Christ?"

C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien enjoyed a lifelong friendship and shared many ideas. Although Lewis produced extremely popular fantasy, Tolkien surpassed him in that category, becoming arguably the most successful fantasy writer of all time. Lewis, on the other hand, produced a much larger collection of nonfiction than Tolkien. While they differed somewhat in style, they shared a tremendous love for good literature and for truth. While Tolkien primarily wrote fiction, he never considered his work inimical to the truth: "Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make."⁶⁶ Worth recognizing is the fact that Tolkien sees fantasy as a *natural human activity*. He gives it a clear place in anthropology, but he does not worship fantasy. Like all human activity, fantasy can do good or do harm.

⁶⁵ C.S. LEWIS, «Image and Imagination», 49-50. Lewis cites From Aristotle's *Poetics*, 1451b, see Perseus Digital Library:
<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0055%3Asection%3D1451b>

⁶⁶ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 65.

Fictional worlds need reality. “Fantasy does not blur the sharp outlines of the real world; for it depends on them.”⁶⁷ However, imagined worlds engage the hypothetical—that which might be. This makes them unchained to the hard facts of science or the particulars of history: “Creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it.”⁶⁸ Fictional worlds may operate according to a different set of rules than the real world, but fantasy is realistic when it remains internally consistent to its own set of created rules.

Drawing on his own childhood experience, Tolkien describes his own encounter with Western bias against fantasy:

I was keenly alive to the beauty of ‘Real things’, but it seemed to me quibbling to confuse this with the wonder of ‘Other things’. I was eager to study Nature, actually more eager than I was to read most fairy-stories; but I did not want to be quibbled into Science and cheated out of Faërie by people who seemed to assume that by some kind of original sin I should prefer fairy-tales, but according to some kind of new religion I ought to be induced to like science. Nature is no doubt a life-study, or a study for eternity (for those so gifted); but there is a part of man which is not ‘Nature’, and which therefore is not obliged to study it, and is, in fact, wholly unsatisfied by it.⁶⁹

Though perhaps not as philosophically precise as Lewis, Tolkien appeals to his own childhood intuitions to invite the reader to see the connection between fantasy and reality. The point made here touches on anthropology. Tolkien counts on the reader to intuit that there is more to man than what can be scientifically explained. Fantasy plays on the transcendent doorway found in the heart of every man.

1.3. *Mystery and wonder: imagination meets inexhaustible truth.*

Not only is imaginative literature connected to reality, it is better equipped to convey inexhaustible truths than propositional logic is. “Poetry is sane because it floats easily in an infinite sea; reason seeks to cross the infinite sea, and so make it finite [...] The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.”⁷⁰ This is not to disparage the use of logic, which is indispensable, but to recognize the limitations of human reason in the confrontation with truths that are too good, too true, too beautiful for the

⁶⁷ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 83.

⁶⁸ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 65.

⁶⁹ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 81.

⁷⁰ G.K. CHESTERTON, «Orthodoxy», 123.

human mind to grasp—grasp in the way of acquisition. Many truths of Revelation are like this—there is no “figuring out” the Incarnation like one can figure out the molecular makeup of a rock. A truth like the Incarnation cannot be locked inside the hoard of acquired knowledge and remain truly itself. It is a truth that can be encountered—must be encountered and indeed held firmly—but never completely grasped. The imagination is an adept means of repeatedly encountering deep truths that, because of their richness, can never be completely captured by a propositional statement. The heavens are not less real because they do not fit into man’s head.

Metaphor and story are “open-ended” or incomplete.⁷¹ They surpass propositional statements in communicative richness partly because they engage the reader differently.

The reader’s response is part of the experience; there is always more to be understood, more to be engaged with. A story that conveys truth and beauty will show more of its truth and beauty each time the reader comes to it, and in a different way, because the reader will be different, coming to the text with new experiences, different moods, different questions.⁷²

This has led the Church through the centuries to creatively and imaginatively engage and pass down the truths entrusted to Her by Jesus Christ—a task that has included a strong emphasis on imagery. “Figurative language is one of the primary modes by which, past and present, the Church communicates truth to her people, in Scripture, Christian art, and the liturgy.”⁷³ A Church that is called to embody the truths handed down by Christ in each generation continues and should continue to pass these truths down in a way that is communicatively rich, inexhaustible, and engages the subject in ongoing conversion.

The imagination does not merely put us in contact with shallow truths, as Ordway puts it: “Literature and the arts provide ways to illuminate questions of suffering and joy in ways that argument cannot.”⁷⁴ Suffering and joy are tied to the deepest questions of the human heart. Imagination is uniquely equipped to illuminate these questions because they do not have an immediate answer. Revelations 21:1-5 presents an image of a new heavens and a new earth, where Christ will “make all things new” and where God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” We need to wait until the eschaton to truly “make

⁷¹ Cfr. H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 108.

⁷² H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 108.

⁷³ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 41.

⁷⁴ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 124.

sense” of suffering and to realize ultimate joy. In the meantime, human life remains filled with paradox. Rendering the Christian view of suffering compelling will always require imagination. This is because imagination opens to worlds and perspectives beyond the immediately perceivable and so lets the mind more readily embrace paradox.

Imagination helps one embrace paradoxical truth without forfeiting the principle of non-contradiction. Without devaluing the use of reason, it allows for recognition that the human heart and mind can come into contact with truths that exceed total comprehension. This is important in the encounter with Divine Revelation because God shows his superabundant love in “vouchsafing to tell what cannot wholly be told [...]”⁷⁵ The truths revealed by God are inexhaustible and beyond complete human comprehension. Even though they are truths illuminated by God himself for the human mind and heart, “[...] The light of the Gospel does not remove mysteries in religion.”⁷⁶ This leads to a paradox, as the very act of Revelation presents the human mind with unsolvable mysteries. John Henry Newman elaborates:

It is indeed a remarkable circumstance, that the very revelation that brings us *practical and useful* knowledge about our souls, in the very *act of doing so*, nay (as it would seem), in *consequence of doing so*, brings us mysteries. We gain spiritual light at the price of intellectual perplexity; a blessed exchange doubtless, [...] still at the price of perplexity.⁷⁷

Since imagination allows one to recognize the limitations of reason without despairing of its use, it aids the mind in exploring revealed truths when the mind reaches logical limits and arrives at perplexity.

There are great advantages to using the productive imagination to help others arrive at truth. Figures of speech like metaphors and similes are products of the human imagination that can communicate truth in a way that the reader perhaps could not understand in any other way. “The beauty of figurative language, used well, is that it can communicate truth both directly and intuitively, by its fittingness of image and meaning, even if the reader doesn’t consciously understand it.”⁷⁸ The contemporary reader may be inundated by an onslaught of secular images that affects his basic assumptions. But a Christian response that uses figurative language can work at the level of basic assumptions, counteracting secular false gospels, even without philosophical debate. Fittingness can allow an arrival at the truth and meaningful acceptance of the truth without recourse to argument. Many

⁷⁵ J.H. NEWMAN, «Mysteries in Religion», 207.

⁷⁶ J.H. NEWMAN, «The Christian Mysteries», 205.

⁷⁷ J.H. NEWMAN, «The Christian Mysteries», 208.

⁷⁸ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 47.

readers may not consciously understand the truths they intuit through fitting imagery, but they can develop a taste for the truth by encounters with such imagery. Good imaginative literature can form basic assumptions to align more closely with the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

Knowledge has broad meaning in Biblical and philosophical contexts. Knowledge bears a relationship to truth, but not every sort of knowledge fits into neat epistemological categories. In fact, extremely important types of knowledge for human flourishing escape ready categorization. Knowledge of another person is the easiest example, but there are others. How do I know that someone loves me? How do I know that I can trust someone? Knowledge bears a relationship to truth. Truth bears a relationship to reality. But reality often exceeds the limits of the demonstrable. Indemonstrable realities are not less real or less important because they are indemonstrable. “Religious faith has always taught man not only to know, but to be able to live in waiting, in a kind of darkness, making war on the desire of men to reduce the whole of reality, supernatural and natural to his own limited ways of knowing.”⁷⁹ By helping cultivate wonder, imagination works against reductionism and cold skepticism. The Creator at the heart of reality is an unsolvable mystery. Yet this unsolvable mystery has chosen to reveal himself.

In Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, one of the Catholic characters responds to the protagonist’s jibe against her own wealth. The protagonist glibly paraphrases Matthew 19:24, where Jesus remarks that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the Kingdom of heaven. The Catholic character responds: “‘But of *course*,’ she said, ‘it’s very unexpected for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, but the gospel is simply a catalogue of unexpected things. [...] it’s all part of the poetry, the Alice-in-Wonderland side, of religion.’”⁸⁰ One look at the parables of Jesus confirms a Biblical preference for the unexpected. In this regard, fantasy contains some seeds of the Gospel. There is an “arresting strangeness” in fantasy.⁸¹ The unexpected, the surprising, leads to wonder. Wonder can foster a knowledge that does not spoil the mystery.

If we solve a mystery, it is no longer a mystery. God is an Infinite Mystery that cannot be solved—but God can be known. In fact, God makes himself known. When approaching the mysteries of Revelation, imagination helps one encounter truth such that the truth is allowed to reveal itself. Engaging with a work of fiction requires a “suspense of disbelief.”⁸² This is analogous to a healthy approach to Revelation. The wonder and suspense of disbelief

⁷⁹ W. LYNCH, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless*, 113.

⁸⁰ E. WAUGH, *Brideshead Revisited*, 127.

⁸¹ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 60.

⁸² J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 12.

cultivated by reading fiction can open the door to a meaningful encounter with truth, including truths of revelation.

2. Imagination and meaning

St. Augustine writes concerning the mission of John the Baptist “take away the word, the meaning, and what is the voice? Where there is no understanding there is only a meaningless sound.”⁸³ While St. Augustine was speaking about the preaching of John the Baptist, he provides a useful image for an age immersed in meaningless sound. Information is nothing unless it holds meaning for the one informed: “Only when something has meaning, which is generated by the imagination, can we begin to use our reason to judge whether it is true, or false.”⁸⁴ The use of the imagination is a precondition to determining the truth of something. “We cannot think unless we have things to think about, and it is the imagination (recognized or unrecognized) that brings meaningful images to our intellect.”⁸⁵ Grasping meaning and generating meaning are both facilitated by the imagination and are essential to conversion, preaching, and apologetics—now more than ever before. This section will rely heavily on Ordway’s treatment of meaning across her two major works and one of her essays.

2.1. *Organ of meaning*

Establishing meaning involves connecting the objective and the subjective in a way that neither is destroyed. “‘Meaning,’ referring to the degree, or nature, of an individual’s grasp of a concept, is both subjective in the sense of being personally experienced, and also objective in the sense that it is still related to the text and to the [originally] intended meaning.”⁸⁶ Ordway compares this to the ancient notion of the four senses of Scripture: literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical. The last three senses depend upon the first. The literal sense is fixed or crystallized in a way that the other senses are not. To break with the literal is to break with the text itself. But going beyond the literal without rejecting it allows for new meaning, new application. The new meaning needs the crystallized meaning, but without the imagination, we are left with the objective sense alone. Without imagination, a text becomes only

⁸³ ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Sermo* 293,3. PL 1328-1329; Cited as found in the American Edition of the English Breviary, Office of Readings, Second Reading for Gaudete Sunday.

⁸⁴ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 29.

⁸⁵ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 150.

⁸⁶ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 30.

the author's original meaning, crystallized in time and perhaps irrelevant in the face of a changing world.

Ordway's discussion of meaning closely parallels Newman's concept of real apprehension.⁸⁷ In his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Newman defines apprehension as "an intelligent acceptance of the idea, or of the fact which a proposition enunciates."⁸⁸ He then distinguishes between real and notional apprehension: "[...] In the one [real apprehension] we take hold of objects from within them, and in the other [notional apprehension] we view them from outside of them; we perpetuate them as images in the one case, we transform them into notions in the other."⁸⁹ While real apprehension primarily comes from experience, an imaginative encounter can provide the opportunity to really apprehend something one has not experienced.⁹⁰ "It is in human nature to be more affected by the concrete than by the abstract [...]. Experiences and their images strike and occupy the mind, as abstractions and their combinations do not."⁹¹ Vividness of apprehension leads to strength of belief.⁹² Real apprehension is more "vivid and forcible," making it more closely tied to action.⁹³

Since it is tied to real apprehension, the imagination is also tied to action. Newman explains the connection between the imagination and action thus:

Strictly speaking, it is not imagination that causes action; but hope and fear, likes and dislikes, appetite, passion, affection, the stirrings of selfishness and self-love. What imagination does for us is to find a means of stimulating those motive powers; and it does so by providing a supply of objects strong enough to stimulate them.⁹⁴

In summary, real apprehension leads to stronger belief and practical adherence to an idea. For concepts that have not been subjectively experienced, real apprehension can be reached through the imagination. Thus the imagination can be employed by a preacher or apologist to help foster stronger belief and practice of the faith.

Real apprehension closely parallels Ordway's (and Lewis') concept of meaning. Of course, to be subjectively meaningful, an idea must have an objective meaning, but for Ordway something becomes meaningful by

⁸⁷ Cfr. H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 24.

⁸⁸ J.H. NEWMAN, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 20.

⁸⁹ J.H. NEWMAN, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 34.

⁹⁰ Cfr. J.H. NEWMAN, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 27.

⁹¹ J.H. NEWMAN, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 37.

⁹² Cfr. J.H. NEWMAN, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 79.

⁹³ J.H. NEWMAN, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 11.

⁹⁴ J.H. NEWMAN, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 82.

gaining “traction” on the reason and will of the reader.⁹⁵ In contrast, for something to be meaningless signifies irrelevance at the subjective level. When something has subjective meaning, there is interest, an intuited sense of importance, and a gradual realization of potential implications. Words are mere “tokens in a game” if they lack meaning.⁹⁶ A meaningful idea is one the “can be grasped” and is “worth grasping.”⁹⁷ This implies a connection with the individual, subjective experience of the reader in a way that the reader (not just the author!) can apprehend the truth presented and recognize the subjective value of that truth. It involves a vividness, memorability, and connection to action that abstract argument alone does not provide.

Using the imagination in preaching and apologetics can help facilitate movement from notional to real apprehension of Christian truths. This is especially important to remember as regular contact with Christianity diminishes in a secular West. Newman could take for granted that his nineteenth century British audience was familiar with the Scriptures.⁹⁸ A twenty-first century preacher in the West can make no such assumption—not even regarding his own congregation. With a lack of general exposure to Scripture and Christian faith practice (liturgy, prayer, etc.), a twenty-first century popular concept of any given Christian truth can hardly fail to be notional. In the absence of experience, the role of the imagination increases in importance, as preachers and apologists seek to help their audience really apprehend that which they likely have never experienced.

C.S. Lewis draws a fundamental connection between imagination and meaning: “Reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition.”⁹⁹ One of the functions of the imagination is that it produces figurative language, like similes and metaphors. “Similes and metaphors are potent because they can hold a great deal of meaning packed into a very small space.”¹⁰⁰ This power can be used for good or for ill: “While figurative language is a vehicle to convey meaning, the underlying reality is reflected by, not created by, the use of language.”¹⁰¹ The reality exists independently of the image, and the reflection can distort, enhance, embody, or obscure the reality.

⁹⁵ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 22.

⁹⁶ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 28.

⁹⁷ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 29.

⁹⁸ Cfr. J.H. NEWMAN, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 56.

⁹⁹ C.S. LEWIS, «Bluespels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare», 265. Cited by Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 16. See also Busse, “Telling a Surreal Story,” 42.

¹⁰⁰ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 48.

¹⁰¹ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 46.

Recall the earlier section on mystery, wonder, and inexhaustible truth. We saw there that figurative language is rich in meaning. But establishing meaning is more than just using figurative language; it also involves facing a serious obstacle to contemporary Western preaching and apologetics.

To those who do not know Christ, and unfortunately also to many who do, much ‘Christian language’ rings empty. Although words like ‘grace,’ ‘sin,’ ‘heaven,’ and ‘hell’ point to reality, for many listeners they might as well be empty slogans or the equivalent of the user’s agreement on an upgrade to your phone’s operating system: words that are received without attention, and without a grasp of their meaning. It is this lack of meaning, rather than disagreement with Christian doctrine properly understood, that often presents the most significant barrier to any serious consideration of the Faith.¹⁰²

Philosophy comes up short in this case in providing a way forward for the preacher or apologist.

Original meaning and subjective experience should never be separated in the work of fostering conversion. Acceptance of life-changing truth comes in a meeting of the objective and the subjective.

The work of creating meaning, then, can be understood broadly as a spectrum of engagement, operating in different ways for different purposes; it is as valuable inside the Church as outside. A more meaningful grasp of essential Christian concepts like forgiveness, peace, love, patience, chastity, hospitality, and so on can enable people to recognize them as vivid and beautiful truths, not just abstract theological points. Imaginative engagement with biblical and doctrinal language can thus help to lead people into personal experience of the reality these words represent, and to grow spiritually as well as intellectually.¹⁰³

Establishing meaning looks great on paper, but what about in practice? Two witnesses come to our assistance. Decades apart from each other, two academic atheists accepted Christian truth through discovered meaning.

2.2. *Two conversions*

C.S. Lewis grew up loosely Christian but quickly abandoned his faith. By the time he reached adulthood, he had embraced atheism. His conversion was slow, involving an intellectual aspect, personal connections to devout Christians, and mysterious workings of grace. However, a part of his conversion that often goes unnoticed is the need he had to establish meaning for certain Christian ideas: “What has been holding me back [...] has not been so much a difficulty in believing as a difficulty in knowing what the

¹⁰² H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 21-22.

¹⁰³ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 31-32.

doctrine *meant*: you can't believe a thing while you are ignorant of *what* the thing is."¹⁰⁴ Lewis came to conversion partly because his good friends (one of whom was Tolkien) helped him establish meaning for Christian terms, especially that of sacrifice.¹⁰⁵ By the time he converted, Lewis had already learned more about Christianity than most faithful Christians learn in their lifetime, but although this information was an essential part of his conversion, it was not enough for intellectual assent. "He was struggling not with missing facts, but with missing *meaning*."¹⁰⁶

Years later, another academic atheist embraced Christianity, partly through the imaginative work of Tolkien and Lewis. Holly Ordway describes her conversion in *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*. Through the influence of an intellectually formed, polite, and devout Christian friend, Ordway learned a great deal about the truths of the Christian Faith. This intellectual formation was absolutely essential to her conversion, but she needed more. "I could understand the definition of the word 'Incarnation' but not grasp its meaning. It seemed unimaginable that God would come close enough to be touched, would become man."¹⁰⁷

It seemed unimaginable—where could Ordway turn for help? Thankfully, someone else who had struggled with missing meaning had left her a key and Ordway knew where to turn: "I picked up *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: this time, not to analyze it for my dissertation, but to enter Narnia like a little girl again. And I encountered Aslan."¹⁰⁸ A childlike entrance into a fictional world helped foster conversion. "In Narnia, I found that the Incarnation was not a bizarre idea, out of place in the world."¹⁰⁹ By creating a fictional world with analogous ties to the Incarnation, Lewis helped Ordway engage the idea of the Incarnation in a hypothetical way. This was certainly not enough by itself for conversion, but it played a crucial role: "In Narnia...but here, in real life? It might not be true that God was involved with his world; it might not be likely that Jesus was God incarnate...but it was no longer unimaginable."¹¹⁰ The journey from unimaginable to imaginable established meaning and opened a door to conversion.

Both Lewis and Ordway also had profound moments of grace that go beyond any sort of human agenda or strategy. There is no substitute for grace and it will always be the primary agent in a conversion. However, we know

¹⁰⁴ C.S. LEWIS, «Letter to Arthur Greeves». Cited in Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Cfr. H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 8.

¹⁰⁶ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ H. ORDWAY, *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*, 86.

¹⁰⁸ H. ORDWAY, *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*, 87.

¹⁰⁹ H. ORDWAY, *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*, 87.

¹¹⁰ H. ORDWAY, *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*, 88.

that God's grace is poured out freely, and that the elements of fostering conversion within human control involved three essential things for Lewis and Ordway—friends, knowledge, and imagination. It was the imagination that allowed each to make a meaningful assent of the intellect to the truths of the Christian Faith. These truths of the Christian Faith are themselves extremely rich, as Ordway discovered in her faith journey: “the phrases of the Nicene Creed were both precise and poetic, theologically robust and imaginatively resonant.”¹¹¹ It is up to Christians and especially theologians today to avoid cheating ourselves and others out of the imaginative richness and deep meaning of Christian truths. We can do so, with imagination.

2.3. *Generating meaning*

In her book *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, Ordway applies her notion of establishing meaning to the world of apologetics, saying: “We need above all to cultivate an environment in which belief is both *reasonable* and *meaningful*.”¹¹² Ordway does not advocate abandoning philosophy—far from it. She has noticed that philosophical reasoning alone is inadequate to the task of apologetics. To generate meaning means to mediate between truth and understanding. The Christian is called not simply to grasp the meaning of doctrine, but to help others arrive at meaning. This is important when confronting unbelievers, but is also important within the Church itself. “We must embrace the challenge of helping people to generate robust, accurate, full meanings for every aspect of the faith—a task that will benefit believers and skeptics alike.”¹¹³ Recall Tolkien's words “the keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make.”¹¹⁴ Reason is necessary to keep meaning accurate; story and imagery render meaning full and robust.

Having just explored the impact of imaginative literature in the lives of two atheist converts, it makes perfect sense to posit here that a powerful way to help someone generate meaning for a Christian truth is by *producing* imaginative literature. “Imaginative literature is a particularly valuable means of creating meaning for ideas, as well as for conveying these ideas to people who would be resistant to them if presented as arguments.”¹¹⁵ Creating Christian imaginative literature helps people generate meaning, including people who may not be open to intellectual debate. Part of the challenge of preaching to a post-Christian West is a firm resistance to

¹¹¹ H. ORDWAY, *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*, 150.

¹¹² H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 14.

¹¹³ H. ORDWAY, «Truth, Meaning, and the Christian Imagination», 63.

¹¹⁴ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 65.

¹¹⁵ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 39.

arguments in many circles. For whatever reason, the collapse of Christendom left behind a culture completely allergic to intellectual conflict of any kind.

Life in the contemporary West can sometimes resemble the Borg of Star Trek, but multiplied. The “Borg Bubbles of the West” we might call them. No disagreement is tolerated within these bubbles, causing them to drift further and further apart. Social media reinforces these bubbles by using algorithms that present material the user is more likely to agree with and therefore more likely to read. Everyone likes to be affirmed, and reading something that reinforces my own position is more pleasant than engaging someone who disagrees with me and risking the need to rethink my own position. In such a world, a presentation of the Gospel can sometimes achieve more by using a very non-threatening and wide-reaching form of communication like imaginative literature. Imaginative literature can also engage people of different intellectual and philosophical formation. Seldom does an imaginative novel feel “over someone’s head,” and great novels will never be too shallow, even for the keenest intellect.

Writing imaginative literature is one way to generate meaning, but most do not have the time or talent to write great works of fiction that embody truth. However, it is much easier and much more universal to tell a story. Generating meaning using stories and figurative language is not limited to great authors of fiction. Generating meaning is especially important for preaching and apologetics, but recalling Sonnet’s insights from Chapter I, it is also important for raising children in the Faith. Looking ahead to Chapter III, we will discuss in further detail what it means to generate meaning in the context of preaching, apologetics, and parenting.

2.4. *Incarnation and meaning*

The Incarnation is central to Christian Faith. However, the Incarnation is not just a historical reality of the distant past; it shows us the importance of not leaving the spiritual to the realm of the purely abstract. “In order for the unseen, spiritual world to become a living force in our minds, this invisible world needs to be visibly incarnated in space and time.”¹¹⁶ There are various ways of incarnating the spiritual world. Many of them require imagination.¹¹⁷ When the fathers of the Second Council of Nicaea denounced iconoclasm, they did so on account of the Incarnation.¹¹⁸ It is according to the logic of the incarnation that fitting images are used to make the unseen present. Images

¹¹⁶ J. SHEA, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age*, 48.

¹¹⁷ All English quotations of conciliar texts are from the official English translation available on the Vatican website.

¹¹⁸ Cfr. SECOND COUNCIL OF NICAIA, «Letter of the Synod to the Emperor and Empress».

help connect people to God, whether these images are physical in the form of art, participatory as in beautiful liturgy, or literary. Literary images can render the unseen a living force. It is in the Incarnation that these images find their logic and their power.

Incarnating truth in literature, preaching, or apologetics frequently necessitates the use of language. Language, however, always involves some risk. “Language is not mathematics, and attempts to force language into a kind of mathematical precision will always fail.”¹¹⁹ The apparent imprecision of language can lead to skepticism regarding its usefulness for theology. After all, if we are going to talk about the most important things, shouldn’t we be precise? Certainly errors about the Christian Faith can cause great damage and have historically abounded. Nevertheless, one of the most essential truths of that same Christian Faith is the Incarnation. In the Incarnation, we see the unchanging, perfect truth of God’s Love embodied in the fragile and ever-changing Body of Christ. The incarnational logic of God shows us that God would rather risk misinterpretation than leave the world dark and cold. God has set an example for those who wish to continue embodying Christian truth. “In the richness of language, we find not a problem, but an opportunity for creating meaning, because God has so made us that we can continue to create imaginative literature to body forth meaning in words.”¹²⁰

Tolkien and Lewis set an example for those who wish to continue incarnating the Christian vision in imaginative literature. They “created stories that *embodied* Christian ideas.”¹²¹ Lewis’s essay “Image and Imagination” uses an analogy of form and matter, or really embodied form, to describe the creation of a character: a fictional character is “embodied in these words and no others.”¹²² This hylomorphic vision of fiction can be seen on a grander scale than the scale of characters. When an author writes a piece of fiction that presents the Christian imaginative vision, that vision is “embodied in these words and no others.” A piece of imaginative literature, like the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, embraces a limitation in order to become present. Limitation and risk of misinterpretation are the conditions of making the Christian imaginative vision present. It takes courage and charity to let the spiritual become a vital force in the contemporary West.

The incarnational quality of imaginative literature concretizes the abstract and appeals to the entire person. “One of the characteristics that makes literature incarnational is that it has the power to evoke emotion in the

¹¹⁹ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 36.

¹²⁰ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 37.

¹²¹ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 40.

¹²² C.S. LEWIS, «Image and Imagination», 53.

reader.”¹²³ The characters in a story for whatever reason evoke a certain sympathy in the reader. The reader can easily find himself emotionally invested in the characters and moved by fictional beauty as if they were real. When the reader enters into a story, he enters into something that involves categories that would engage his emotions and senses if they were real. This hypothetical realism and emotional appeal engage the reader in a powerful way. “The imaginative approach can help draw in someone who would otherwise never seriously consider doctrine of philosophy, and it can [...] ‘incarnate’ abstract ideas so that a person can more deeply and fully engage with them.” An idea is more appealing and more readily understood when the preacher dips it in imagination.

Imaginative literature is a form of art that can be used for good or ill. Tolkien calls fantasy good when it possesses the “inner consistency of reality.”¹²⁴ In other words, the imagined world is believable, internally consistent, and applicable. But for good art to embody Christian truth requires more. In the case of allegory, it is clear how imaginative literature contains Christian truth, but what about pure fantasy like Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*? In answer, Tolkien coins the word *Eucatastrophe* and puts it at the heart of how fantasy can embody Christian truth.

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe [eucatastrophe], the sudden joyous ‘turn’ (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially ‘escapist’, nor ‘fugitive’. In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance: it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.¹²⁵

This joy “has the very taste of primary truth” and points to the greatest eucatastrophe of the Gospels.¹²⁶ Eucatastrophe, which is the pinnacle of Christian fantasy, imitates the Gospels in depicting joy on the other side of terrible suffering and in doing so it awakens hope and longing that only find their fulfilment in Christian Revelation. Eucatastrophe deserves its own treatment, which it will receive in Chapter III.

¹²³ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 101.

¹²⁴ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 77.

¹²⁵ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 75.

¹²⁶ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 78.

This chapter's treatment of meaning leads to a simple exhortation: "Every Christian should cultivate a healthy, strong faculty of the imagination, and nourish it with materials that partake of truth, goodness, and beauty. In this way, we will have a solid grasp of the meaning of our own faith, and thus be better able to share it, in word and witness."¹²⁷ Nourishing the imagination involves making conscious choices in what kind of media one consumes, paying attention to the messages implicit in what one reads, watches, and listens to. Consciously choosing media (literature, music, film, art, etc.) that embodies Christian truths and values not only provides a condition for deeper faith, it also helps one communicate that same faith.

3. Imagination and recovery

One of the most powerful conceptions Tolkien employed in his fiction is the notion of recovery. According to Tolkien, the things with which we are most familiar can become things we see distortedly or entirely fail to see.

Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view. I do not say 'seeing things as they are' and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them'—as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness. [...] We say we know them [the things we have appropriated, legally or mentally]. They have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring ceased to look at them.¹²⁸

The size of the hoard makes no difference. When something bears the veil of familiarity, it lies locked away and rotting. Tolkien urges us to go about "unlocking the hoard," but how?¹²⁹ Tolkien suggests that one way to do so is by reading fantasy. "Creative fantasy [...] may open your hoard and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds."¹³⁰

In a review of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis picks up on the theme of recovery, claiming that life is seen more clearly when it is dipped in myth.

By putting bread, gold, horse, apple, or the very roads into a myth, we do not retreat from reality, we rediscover it. As long as the story lingers in our mind, the real things are more themselves. This book applies the treatment not only to

¹²⁷ H. ORDWAY, «Truth, Meaning, and the Christian Imagination», 64.

¹²⁸ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 67.

¹²⁹ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 67-68.

¹³⁰ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 68.

bread or apple but to good and evil, to our endless perils, our anguish, and our joys. By dipping them in myth we see them more clearly.¹³¹

So much for fantasy having nothing to do with the real world! Lewis believed that *The Lord of the Rings* helped readers more accurately see reality in a way that a work of nonfiction likely would not have. Something about a story gives a reader the mental space he needs to encounter the old and familiar in a new way.

The veil of familiarity can easily fall on truths of the Faith. The knowledge presented in the Baltimore Catechism at the second grade-level is extremely rich and meaningful, but it can easily become something that loses its flavor. A question as rich as “Why did God make me?” can be forgotten when one finds himself moving from task to task, busy about the “important” and the “pressing” and the “urgent.” There are times when one must set aside the urgent to look again at life and rediscover the meaningful.

The value of the myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by ‘the veil of familiarity.’ The child enjoys his cold meat (otherwise dull to him) by pretending it is buffalo, just killed with his own bow and arrow. And the child is wise. The real meat comes back to him more savoury for having been dipped in a story; you might say that only then it is the real meat.¹³²

The Faith too becomes more itself when it is dipped in a story. The story may be from Scripture or the life of a saint. The story may also be completely fictional. Either way, a story can bring about recovery of clear vision regarding an important truth. One might object: “why don’t we just stick to telling stories of the saints and Bible stories?” Certainly these stories are important, but we should go beyond a simple retelling of saint and Bible stories in part because the saints and the Bible itself did not simply retell old stories. To effectively mediate between Eternal Truth and contemporary meaning means to tell new stories as well as old.

Ordway ties Tolkien’s concept of recovery to accepting Jesus’ exhortation to become like a child. “Jesus said that unless we become like little children, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Part of being childlike is to see things afresh: to look at God’s creation and see it as his handiwork, to be able to read the words of Holy Scripture and be deeply moved at what we find.”¹³³ Imaginative myth can have the remarkable effect of reinstilling a childlike

¹³¹ C.S. LEWIS, «The Dethronement of Power: J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* and J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*», 108.

¹³² C.S. LEWIS, «The Dethronement of Power: J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* and J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*», 108.

¹³³ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 90.

wonder in the reader. This wonder can lead one closer to the heart of reality. It is a mistake to dismiss as unreal all that falls beyond the grasp of human reason. At the heart of reality lies something infinitely beyond the grasp of reason. The wondering child expects that there is much more to life than what he understands. He perfectly understands that he does not fully understand.

When an adult begins reading a fantasy novel, some semblance of this sacred instinct reawakens. How could I know and understand everything about this world? After all, didn't someone else create this world? Consciously stepping into a world, even an imaginary one, which the reader must admit he did not create can help remind the reader that neither did he create the "real" world in which he daily lives.

Recovery plays a critical role in forming an adequate Christian response to the challenges of a secular post-Christian culture.

We need stories that allow people (Christians as much as non-Christians) to recognize the potential to be made whole in their own lives: for marriages, families, and friendships to be healthy and shaped as God made them to be; for our 'daily bread' to be tasted and savored once again; for the possibility of divine love and forgiveness.¹³⁴

Potential, made whole, savored again—these phrases capture the importance of recovery for Christian life. Recall the relationship between the hypothetical and the imagination. Imagination allows exploration of alternatives. Presenting an alternative in a story that embodies Christian truth allows someone to see what life would be like if lived in greater conformity to the Gospel. A Christian story well-told can become a compelling story of hope that allows people to see new possibilities.

Recovery must be part of the counter-narrative offered by Christians to the contemporary West.

We live in a culture that is paradoxically both jaded by and ignorant about Christianity. People think they know who Jesus is, what the Church is, what it means to have faith...and they think it's boring, or stupid, or irrelevant. We need to help people recover a fresh view of the truth—to see Jesus for the first time, and really see him; to actually see the reality of sin, and the beauty and brokenness of the world, not to just gloss over it.¹³⁵

"Not just to gloss over it..." Any faithful Catholic parishioner will hear that God loves him thousands of times in his life. If he stops to think about this instead of glossing over it, he will realize it again with shock. Each term has meaning—God, Love, Me. Who is God? What is love? Who am I? To help

¹³⁴ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 89-90.

¹³⁵ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 88.

us realize the profundity of meaning in this simple phrase, God gives us an image: Jesus Christ, the “image of the invisible God.” (1 Col 1:15) God gives us an Image who told stories and whose life comes to us in a story—his Son born on earth, crucified, and risen. To help us understand his love, God gives us an image and invites us into a story. Each of us, made in the image and likeness of God, is called to be a living image, to create images, and to tell stories that will allow others to encounter the living God.

CHAPTER III

Man as Sub-Creator: Offering a Compelling Counter-Narrative

Chapter one pointed out the death of Christendom and the contemporary dominance of secularity in the West. It also pointed to the Biblical foundations of narrative and briefly outlined some philosophical approaches to the imagination. Chapter two argued for a connection between the imagination and reality, explored the cognitive role of the imagination, and linked the imagination to truth, meaning, and conversion. “Imagination can help us to restore meaning to the language that we use, to find fresh ways to communicate the truth, to develop a more incarnational approach to apologetics, to address the problem of pain and suffering, and to build on the innate human longing for beauty as we help people come to Christ.”¹³⁶ This chapter seeks to build a bridge between the thought and work of Lewis and Tolkien and the contemporary need for a Christian counter-narrative in response to a secularized West.

To build such a bridge, chapter three will begin by unpacking Tolkien’s concept of sub-creation. It will discuss how imaginative story awakens the longing in every human heart for God, which fosters a receptivity to the Gospel in the reader. Fictional story offers a gentle approach to helping someone encounter the Christian imaginative vision.

Great Christian fiction imitates the artistic excellence and sublime truth of the Gospels. Artistic excellence is realized in a believable story that can be easily related to the life of the reader. Although the Gospel can never be

¹³⁶ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 149.

outdone, human beings are made in the image of a Creator, and so they are disposed by nature to create. Their sub-creations must always be subject to Divine Truth to accomplish any good, but God calls human beings to be his children, not his robots. As his children, it gives glory to God to use our creativity well. Continuing to create stories also helps mediate the truths of the Gospel to a biased populace and it helps people see that Gospel joy belongs in stories that are not within its own history; it even belongs in our own stories.

This chapter will also recall challenges from the first chapter. Many secular narratives contradict the Christian message with images and narratives rather than with coherent arguments. Christians in the contemporary West find themselves in a battle for the imagination. They are called to respond with a compelling counter-narrative that invites believers and unbelievers alike to real apprehension of Christian doctrine and ever-deepening conversion.

Finally, this chapter will discuss the practical applications of the entire paper, advocating for practical use of the imagination, especially in the work of preaching, apologetics, and parenting. Effectively engaging unbelievers means inviting them into a whole new way of seeing the world. The counter-narrative proposed by this chapter aims at sincere conversion, which is fueled by well-nourished imaginations.

1. Faithful sub-creation: artistic excellence in imitation of the Gospel

Part of what makes an imaginative response to a secular narrative effective is that it awakens longing. Tolkien ties fiction to longing: “primal ‘desires’ [...] lie near the heart of Faerie.”¹³⁷ Prior to Ordway’s conversion, her experience of poetry, particularly that of Gerard Manley Hopkins, awakened a longing; she states that it made her “hungry for something I couldn’t name.”¹³⁸ By speaking of other worlds, fairy-stories play on the human desire to transcend this world and this life.

If we accept the Christian assumption that God is the only being who can fulfill the deepest desires of the human heart, there is a longing in every human heart for God.

Christian apologists need to awaken that longing from its slumber, to awaken people from the numbness of over-stimulation and distraction. Literature, the

¹³⁷ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 36.

¹³⁸ H. ORDWAY, *Not God’s Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*, 41.

arts, and architecture will serve us well here, helping to show the beauty of Christ, to give a glimpse into the kingdom: just a glimpse, but enough perhaps to waken curiosity, or a longing for that peace that passes all understanding.¹³⁹

The longings of the human heart can easily be misplaced in created things and various idols. Good Christian fiction can both awaken longing and help it find direction.

We live in a world that deadens “our desire for the transcendent.”¹⁴⁰ An effective response will cultivate “‘holy longing’ [...] through stories that evoke joy and make our Christian joy *credible*.”¹⁴¹ Who doesn’t long for credible joy? Two of the most-often depicted scenes in early Christian art are the story of Jonah’s deliverance and the story of Susanna (See Jon. 1:17-2:10, Dan. 13). These stories could have been chosen for a number of reasons, but they *were* chosen. Out of the myriad of Scriptural stories the early Christians could have chosen to depict, they chose to spend a sizeable portion of their limited artistic resources depicting these two stories. One of the probable reasons these stories were chosen is they contain a sudden and unexpected “turn of grace.” They immediately call to mind Christian hope in the resurrection—so precious to Christians under threat of persecution. These stories and the images they produced reminded the Christian faithful of their hope in God who saves. Good Christian art and literature can do the same: “The best Christian art and literature provides a eucatastrophic vision, one that suggests that [sadness and wrath] are not the only options: we can have a realistic hope for something more.”¹⁴² In his treatment of sub-creation, Tolkien offers some guidance on how we can go about creating such art.

Tolkien uses the term sub-creation to describe writing fictional stories. Very important to good sub-creation is the internal consistency of the fictional work. When an author sub-creates, “He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.”¹⁴³ An author loses credibility if the laws of his sub-created world are contradictory or inconsistent.

¹³⁹ H. ORDDAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 129.

¹⁴⁰ H. ORDDAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 139.

¹⁴¹ H. ORDDAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 139.

¹⁴² H. ORDDAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 141-142.

¹⁴³ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 52.

Tolkien also draws a distinction between applicability and allegory. Recall C.S. Lewis's tendency to use allegory and Tolkien's dislike of allegory. "[*The Lord of the Rings*] is not intended as an allegory, nor should it be interpreted as one: insofar as there are Christ-figures in the book, it is because, as Hopkins puts it, 'Christ plays in ten thousand places.'"¹⁴⁴ Allegory bears the advantage of greater objectivity in the author's purpose and the reader's interpretation. Applicability bears the advantage of subjective appeal. Despite the absence of allegory, an applicable work of fiction maintains a connection with normal life: "What shows we are reading myth, not allegory, is that there are no pointers to a specifically theological, or political, or psychological application. A myth points, for each reader, to the realm he lives in most. It is a master key; use it on what door you like."¹⁴⁵ Although Lewis did not write pure allegory and much of what he wrote can rightly be called myth, Tolkien more carefully attended to the subjective freedom of his readers. His mythological presentation of the Christian imaginative vision has a wider audience than the works of Lewis, probably partly because there is more subjective appeal and less direct reference to overtly Christian ideas. Nevertheless, both Tolkien and Lewis achieved artistic excellence in the way their stories can be applied to normal life. Their fictional worlds are believable.

A work of fiction is believable when it is integrated. This is a term used by Ordway to describe the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Hopkins' world was integrated: it held pain, doubt, depression, and fear, but also joy and beauty and the sheer exultancy of being embodied."¹⁴⁶ A world that is integrated has the "inner consistency of reality" mentioned in chapter two.¹⁴⁷ It is a story that, although fictional, is believable in a way that resonates with the reader. Not that history becomes confused with fiction, but, as Ordway puts it: "I realize now what I did not, then: [*The Lord of the Rings*] has the indefinable flavor of reality because it is somehow true, not historically, but spiritually and morally."¹⁴⁸ The "indefinable flavor of reality" is indispensable to artistic excellence in sub-creation. Integration in a story

¹⁴⁴ H. ORDWAY, *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*, 38. Ordway is referring to Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "As Kingfishers Catch Fire."

¹⁴⁵ C.S. LEWIS, «The Gods Return to Earth: J.R.R. Tolkien *The Fellowship of the Ring*», 102.

¹⁴⁶ H. ORDWAY, *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*, 31.

¹⁴⁷ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 77.

¹⁴⁸ H. ORDWAY, *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*, 38.

permits a powerful connection between story and reader. An integrated piece of literature can stir emotion, thought, conscience and longing in the reader.

Integration is part of what attracted Ordway to the fiction of Tolkien and Lewis. During her journey towards conversion, she noticed that *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings* are stories that contrasted with other fantasy insofar as she felt that she could realistically imagine *herself* in the story.¹⁴⁹ The artistic excellence of their work achieved integration. There was no need to imagine a dressed up, unrealistic version of herself in the story. Tolkien and Lewis recounted stories in which she seemed to belong. The human heart longs to belong to a story and man's very identity is linked to narrative.¹⁵⁰ The Gospels are the most beautiful stories on earth, not only because they really happened or declare eternal truths, *but also because I too belong inside that story*. The real me belongs. Not a disembodied soul or a version of myself I could be—my real self belongs in the Gospel narrative. Embracing the Gospel narrative establishes a Gospel identity. The Gospel story is the greatest eucatastrophe, the true myth, a story in which each of us belongs.

The term “true myth” comes from C.S. Lewis: “Now, the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*.”¹⁵¹ Lewis is making the point that the story of Christ affects the reader more powerfully than mere history. While Lewis certainly affirmed the historicity of the Gospels, he noticed that the subjective engagement of someone reading the Gospels closely emulates that produced by reading a myth.

In a similar vein, Tolkien makes a bold connection between the Gospels and fairy tales:

The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: ‘mythical’ in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The

¹⁴⁹ Cfr. H. ORDWAY, *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*, 24-26.

¹⁵⁰ Cfr. J.-P. SONNET, *Generare è Narrare*, 30.

¹⁵¹ C.S. LEWIS, «Letter to Arthur Greeves», 976. See also Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 8.

Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy.¹⁵²

Three points should be made here. First, the Gospels work powerfully on the reader, much like an imaginative story. Secondly, the Gospels join the objective and the subjective in a beautiful and artistic way—myth and history meet. Thirdly, when Christian authors sub-create, they can take the Gospels as their model, not only in the realm of values, but also in artistic excellence, integration, and eucatastrophe.

Human beings are intrinsically disposed to keep telling stories and listening to stories. “We have an innate need for meaning in our lives. Because we are creatures who inhabit time and—importantly—who perceive the passing of time, we need to have this meaning expressed in a fundamentally narrative form.”¹⁵³ In telling and listening to stories, we move from meaning of words to meaning in life. “In fact, the mental experience of making meaning from the narrative elements (‘Oh, so that’s why...’) echoes and reinforces the ongoing discovery of meaning in our own lives.”¹⁵⁴ A sub-creator has the potential to do much more than entertain readers and sell lots of books. An author who sub-creates in a way that is faithful to the example of the Gospel story can help someone discover meaning in his or her life.

The sub-creating artist should never see his work as divorced from spiritual realities. The Church’s Magisterium in the Second Vatican Council affirms a connection between sub-creation and the spiritual life of Christians:

Christians should rather rejoice that, following the example of Christ Who worked as an artisan, they are free to give proper exercise to all their earthly activities and to their humane, domestic, professional, social and technical enterprises by gathering them into one vital synthesis with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are harmonized unto God's glory.¹⁵⁵

This emphatically applies to the creation of new stories, which as mentioned, can cultivate healthy spiritual longing and foster discovery of meaning in life.

When God created Adam and Eve, mankind was given dignity and responsibilities not shared with other animals. Man is made in the image and likeness of God and called to till the garden, fill the earth, and subdue it (See

¹⁵² J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 77-78.

¹⁵³ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 102-103.

¹⁵⁴ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 103.

¹⁵⁵ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

Gen 1:27-30; 2:15). “Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”¹⁵⁶ The Gospel tells the greatest story ever told. It can never be outdone by any sub-creation.

But in God’s kingdom the presence of the greatest does not depress the small. Redeemed Man is still man. Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the ‘happy ending’. The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed. So great is the bounty with which he has been treated that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation.”¹⁵⁷

The goal as a Christian is not to create our own little false gospels, but instead to faithfully sub-create as creatures in the image and likeness of a Creator. Every sub-created story must recognize and submit to the great eucatastrophe of the Gospels. Nevertheless, it still belongs to man to continue sub-creating using the faculty of the imagination.

Tolkien’s concept of sub-creation clearly indicates myth-making, but the concept is related to other acts of human creativity. The image and likeness of a Creator implies that we are beings who by nature are meant to create. The imagination allows us to produce more than just myths: poetry, analogy, metaphor, and many types of art share some of the qualities of sub-creation. These products of the imagination may not work exactly like a myth, but they can help enrich creation, and they can help Christians offer a compelling counter-narrative to the dominant secular narratives of the West. So, even though most individuals do not have the time or talent to write excellent fiction, there are other ways to continue using human creativity for the sake of the Gospel.

Why go on sub-creating? First, because we are creatures who by nature create. Second, because the children of God are children, not robots. In his goodness, God allows the free activity of man to contribute to the work of salvation. Third, because a contemporary secular West has created prejudice against Christian preaching, which means that efforts to engage unbelievers can finish before they start. Bypassing that prejudice by wrapping the Gospel

¹⁵⁶ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 66.

¹⁵⁷ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 78-79. Effoliate can mean either opening into leaf or the removal of leaves from a plant. Context suggests the former usage. See Oxford English Dictionary.

in fiction disarms individuals who would likely recoil at the mention of Jesus. These are the same people that the apologist presumably wants to reach. Fourth, because Gospel joy belongs in stories that fall outside the historical boundaries of the Old and New Testament. Envisioning and depicting Gospel joy in a fictional story gives a reader hope that the same joy can be part of his own life story.

2. Counter-narrative: responding to the challenges of secularity

2.1. Limitations and strengths of an imaginative response to the challenges of a post-Christian West.

This section aims to show how the imagination, although it cannot stand alone, offers real advantages in the work of creating a Christian counter-narrative to address the problems encountered in the post-Christian environment of the contemporary West. The hope is to demonstrate that Christians find themselves faced with a battle of images and narratives. To be effective in this battle will require Christians to construct a counter-narrative with the help of imagination.

Recall from the first chapter some of the challenges facing Christianity in the contemporary West. Many basic assumptions have changed, including assumptions about Christianity, which is now seen as one among many spiritual options. Many have lost familiarity with Christian beliefs and values—even many who still claim to be Christian. Advances in technology have created an environment of information overload. Some of this overload includes ideas and narratives that contradict the Christian message. These narratives are using imagination to shape hearts and minds to reject the Gospel or crowd it out with false gospels. Additionally, a noticeable lack of hope permeates life in the West, especially among the young. Because secular challenges have transformed basic assumptions, traditional lines of argument in favor of Catholicism tend to fall on deaf ears and leave hearts unchanged.

Chapters one and two support the argument made here, namely that the imagination ought to be a significant part of the Christian response to a secularized West. Christians are operating in a world that requires a counter-narrative to be effective. While this is true, the imagination alone cannot offer an adequate response. Using the imagination to preach and evangelize relies on intuition and appeals to the subjective (which is ever in flux). Because many of the desires of the human heart are twisted by sin, objective

ways of inviting a subject to accept truth must be rooted in proper Christian theology. It is not enough to be popular or appealing. The Christian seeks to lead others into truth, and this will always involve some instruction in doctrine: “The imaginative approach must be paired with argument; it cannot stand alone.”¹⁵⁸ Using the imagination as a tool for conversion requires first knowing what conversion means. Imagination is a weapon for truth or for falsehood. Therefore, the imagination must always be subservient to the truths of Revelation if it is to do any good at all.

It is very difficult to explain why story works so well in engaging a broad audience of subjects. “The ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guesses from evidence that is inadequate and ambiguous.”¹⁵⁹ Arguments in favor of employing imaginative story for the sake of the Gospel will be, as this paper has been, largely heuristic and *a posteriori*, relying on the examples of good fiction writers like Lewis and Tolkien. Nevertheless, as shown by Tolkien and Lewis, imagination does much good in the right hands.

Coherence belongs to propositional argument; “imaginative expression” renders an argument “compelling.”¹⁶⁰ Both are important, but the latter has seen unjustified neglect, especially in Christian preaching, apologetics, and theology. There are times when a coherent argument may as well be presented to stuffed animals. To render a coherent argument compelling, one must ever dip it anew in imagination. The Christian counter-narrative to the secular narratives of the West should never abandon propositional argument, but it could stand to be much more compelling.

Many current secular narratives are very compelling. They subjectively appeal to emotion and empathy. A ready example is the recent weaponization of pregnancy horror stories to promote pro-abortion legislation in recent U.S. election cycles.¹⁶¹ Such arguments compelled large numbers of people to

¹⁵⁸ H. ORDDAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 149.

¹⁵⁹ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *The Lord of the Rings*, xvii.

¹⁶⁰ H. ORDDAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 160.

¹⁶¹ For example, see N. EL-BAWAB – *al.*, «Meet 18 Women who Shared Heartbreaking Pregnancy Journeys in Post-Roe World». Note especially the labeling of Trisomy-18 as “incompatible with life.” Per Cleveland Clinic (<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/22172-edwards-syndrome>), many children with the condition are born alive, although few live beyond one year. While there can be no doubt that there is tragedy and, in several cases, most likely serious mismanagement on the part of medical staff, the story blames anti-abortion legislation for the problems encountered, failing to question the legitimacy of several very

vote in favor of legalizing and deregulating abortions, even in places far-removed from the particular situations of the affected women. Facts mattered less than emotional connection in those arguments. Western media incessantly retold those stories in a way that obscured the truth of actual events. Though serious, this is a relatively small example of something that has happened on a much larger scale. The minds of many are being poisoned not by facts but by narratives. Pornography has a narrative. Gender ideology has a narrative. Abortion advocates have a narrative. Euthanasia advocates have a narrative. These narratives do not generally produce coherent arguments; they poison the mind through the imagination. Secular narratives weaponize the imagination for falsehood. We are not simply in a war of ideas, “nor of intellectual convictions, but of the imaginary and of the capacity to reimagine.”¹⁶² In this case, Christians do not have the luxury of picking the battlefield. The enemy has chosen the battlefield of the imagination.

2.2. *Battle for the imagination*

As demonstrated in chapter one, using the imagination to narrate and counter-narrate is rooted in Scripture and anthropology. The Book of Revelation provides a very striking example of this. “Revelation offers a different way of seeing the world, guiding men to oppose and distrust the effects of the dominating ideology. [...] The Church is always called to be counter-cultural.”¹⁶³ Because man is fallen, the dominant ideology will always contain error, even in a Christendom culture. This is all the more true in a secular culture. Either way, part of the Church’s mission involves recognizing the errors of the dominant ideology and opposing them with images that conform to the truth.¹⁶⁴

It is not without images, but through correct images inspired by God that the Scriptures war against idolatry. Theologians who are wary of the imagination

questionable decisions made by medical professionals and the women seeking treatment, and altogether failing to mention things like the intrinsic dangers of miscarriage and the risks of IVF. The only clear purpose of the story is to fuel animosity towards abortion-restricting legislation.

¹⁶² N. STEEVES, *Grazie all’Immaginazione. Integrare l’Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 96.

¹⁶³ N. STEEVES, *Grazie all’Immaginazione. Integrare l’Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 95.

¹⁶⁴ N. STEEVES, *Grazie all’Immaginazione. Integrare l’Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 96.

need to be converted on this point: when the “battle of images” is abandoned—for example, adopting a propositional model of revelation—there is a risk of losing the “war of faith.”¹⁶⁵

Taking the Book of Revelation as a model, Christian preachers, apologists, and sub-creators of every kind should seek to produce images that contradict the false gospels of today. Referring to the choice of Adam and Eve to sin, Steeves writes: “The wicked *yesser* [imagination] deplored by Genesis is healed by the good *yesser* of the Gospel.”¹⁶⁶ The imagination wounded by sin and false gospels is healed through the imagination.

Christians should never stop engaging unbelievers at the level of the imagination. Engaging someone’s interest and helping him move from notional to real apprehension will often require the use of the imagination. Real apprehension leads more readily to action, which is the main goal for a preacher or apologist. Scripture again sets an example: “The divine imagination at work in the inspired text and in its human words aims, as an instrument of revelation, to activate the human imagination so that the *auditor verbi* might be moved to acts of faith.”¹⁶⁷ Divine Revelation aimed for more than notional apprehension of eternal truths. A Christian counter-narrative should follow suit.

Lewis and Tolkien show that the Christian imaginative vision can be offered in a compelling and appealing way. Not everyone who reads Lewis or Tolkien will embrace Christianity, but every myth presents a vision of the world.¹⁶⁸ The vision of the world encountered in Tolkien and Lewis is the Christian imaginative vision. That vision cannot be completely ignored in the encounter with their work; it will impact the reader.

Architecture, art, music, and literature all have in common, as well, that they invite but do not impose. The skeptic is enabled to take a step inside, literally or figuratively, and to be involved in some way with this beauty. It may well speak to the longings of his heart: saying ‘Look, here you will find what you seek.’ Or it may unsettle him, provoke him to questioning and wondering. If we have been able to offer real beauty, the one thing that we can say is that he will not leave

¹⁶⁵ N. STEEVES, *Grazie all’Immaginazione. Integrare l’Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 96-97.

¹⁶⁶ N. STEEVES, *Grazie all’Immaginazione. Integrare l’Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 114.

¹⁶⁷ N. STEEVES, *Grazie all’Immaginazione. Integrare l’Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 114-115.

¹⁶⁸ N. STEEVES, *Grazie all’Immaginazione. Integrare l’Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 98.

the church, or close the book, entirely unchanged. Literature and the arts have much to offer us in our apologetics work. It is not the same thing as making an argument in the form of a story; rather, at its best, it *shows* the truth and helps us desire it. It is not a substitute for teaching about doctrine, but it helps us see what doctrine *means*, and suggests that we might want to discover whether it is really true.¹⁶⁹

In the difficult terrain of using the imagination effectively for the sake of the Gospel, it is helpful to have companions on the journey both to show the way and to provide material that partakes of truth, goodness, and beauty. Reading Tolkien and Lewis shows us how they went about providing an encounter with truth in their fiction, giving us both an example to follow and material that shapes our own imaginations. Artistic excellence and right worldview meet in the works of Lewis and Tolkien.

2.3. *Practical applications to preaching, apologetics, and parenting*

This section wraps up the overall argument of the paper, pointing out some clear practical lessons from the discussion. Myth-making is just one way, albeit a very effective way, of making the Christian imaginative vision present to the world. There are other practical uses of the imagination that can help us in the work of leading people to Christ. Nourished imaginations nourish imaginations. Consuming media that reflects a Christian imaginative vision nourishes the Christian imagination, which strengthens it for the work of faithful sub-creation, in the broad sense of using our human creativity to touch hearts and minds with the Gospel.

Not everyone will write excellent fantasy like Tolkien and Lewis. Some people should, but few have the talent necessary for such an enterprise. So why bother discussing the imagination? What does recognizing the importance of the imagination have to do with a theologian? The two readiest applications of what has been said are to the worlds of preaching and apologetics. There are many more applications, but these two stand out and ought to be clearly outlined.

Knowledge of one's audience is extremely important for connecting the objective and the subjective to offer a compelling counter-narrative.

Every culture and time needs fresh images and metaphors. Many of Lewis's metaphors still work every bit as well today as they did in the 1940's. But not all of them—nor would he have expected that they would. He was not

¹⁶⁹ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 146.

communicating to a generic audience, but to the very specific audience of men and women in wartime Britain. What images will work best today, in twenty-first-century America and Britain and the rest of the world? That is up to us to find out, and to put them to good use.¹⁷⁰

Jesus also used imagery, often agricultural and pastoral (in the cattle-herding sense of pastoral), that connected with his audience. Contemporary, suburban-dwelling Catholics in Lansing, Michigan generally know very little about agriculture and far less about shepherding. To know what images will connect well with a parish congregation in Lansing requires having some familiarity with their experience.

However, if a preacher does know his audience, he can move from one meaning to another. He can take something that has rich meaning for someone and use it to shed light on a less familiar topic. For example, if I know a given audience is very familiar with freshwater fishing, I can draw an analogy between evangelization and different methods of fishing. There are stick-and-move spinner tactics of the sort employed by Jim Bedford, where an angler moves quickly through fishable water, seldom offering more than three quick casts in any given spot.¹⁷¹ Then there is “soaking bait” fishing where a couple of guys in a boat leave a bluegill under a bobber for hours waiting for a hungry bass or pike to come find it. Both methods are effective, but you have to know the water and your target species to find success. “Right time, right place, right bait.”

Knowing the right time and the right place are like knowing your audience. Knowing the right bait is similar to using the imagination to present ideas in a way that will resonate with the audience. Good theology ensures that we are pulling fish into the right boat! Too many theologians are in the right boat but, when they try to evangelize, get the time, the place, or the bait wrong—or worse yet, they forget to fish. Imagination is clearly not the end all and be all for the Christian life, but any fisherman can tell you that it helps to bait your hook.

Knowing an audience is important in the case of preaching, but even more so in the case of apologetics, where the audience is likely one person. Listening to the perspective and experience of that audience is crucial to effective evangelization. “What is the most important difference between the apologist and his audience? It is not merely that the apologist knows facts

¹⁷⁰ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 57.

¹⁷¹ Jim Bedford is a Michigan trout fishing legend in both the fly-fishing and spinner-fishing communities.

about God or Christian doctrine that the skeptical audience doesn't know (though that is often the case). It is that the Christian and the skeptic *have a different understanding of what they see.*"¹⁷² Effectively engaging an unbeliever in the secular West involves inviting him into a perspective as much as it involves providing him with information. "Much of what it means to be converted in mind is to receive and embrace the Christian imaginative vision of the cosmos: to see the whole of the world according to the revelation given in Christ, and to act upon that sight with consistency."¹⁷³ This vision includes seeing creation as the work of a loving Creator, seeing man as made in the image and likeness of that Creator—created good but fallen. It involves seeing man as fundamentally in need of redemption. It involves receiving the eucatastrophes of the Incarnation and the Resurrection. To help others fully embrace a Christian imaginative vision, it is important to really apprehend that vision and provide opportunities for others to really apprehend that vision. This will require using our imagination.

Recounting stories that form the imagination is not solely the work of clergy and theologians. "Since they have an active role to play in the whole life of the Church, laymen are not only bound to penetrate the world with a Christian spirit, but are also called to be witnesses to Christ in all things in the midst of human society."¹⁷⁴ Every Christian is called to witness to Christ, but this is especially so in the case of parents. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that parents are the first educators of their children, and this includes teaching them about the Faith and forming their imaginations.¹⁷⁵ As discussed in chapter one, part of this sacred role involves recounting the story of salvation to one's children (See Ex 13:14). Basic assumptions are more easily formed in early years of human development, increasing the need for Christian parents to take seriously the sort of material that their children consume. Telling and reading stories that present the Christian narrative of creation, grace, and redemption forms young minds to have a taste for truth, goodness, and beauty. It allows them to more easily recognize false gospels and to embrace the true Gospel.

¹⁷² H. ORDDAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 79.

¹⁷³ J. SHEA, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age*, 8.

¹⁷⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

¹⁷⁵ Cfr. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2223.

Offering a Christian counter-narrative is not about re-establishing Christendom. Instead, it aims at inviting others to sincere conversion and consists of equipping ourselves and others to tell the story of salvation in a compelling way. We do so by first allowing our own imaginations to be formed by practice of the Faith and consumption of good Christian literature like that written by Tolkien and Lewis. With our imaginations nourished and transformed, we are better equipped to share the story of salvation in a compelling way. This story is not meant to be told solely from the pulpit. The stories from the pulpit only reach those who have first bothered to go to church. Stories that embody the Christian imaginative vision form the heart of the counter-narrative that Christians should offer in response to the secular West. These stories can be told by everyone who seeks to follow Christ.

While the Scriptures are normative and communicate unchanging truth, the members of the Body of Christ still living in the world continue to live and grow. Every single person is meant to find his or her place in the story of salvation. And they are invited. God came in the flesh to do more than make history. The story of salvation goes on and we belong as characters. The Gospel remains unchanged, but the story of redemption it tells continues to play out “in ten-thousand places.” Though the Gospel is fixed in history, those still living belong within the fabric of its story.

The part a Christian plays in living out the Gospel is a story that has not reached its end. Our part in the Gospel story doesn’t look exactly like the stories in the Gospel. Part of the reason to continue telling stories is to help envision what it looks like for us to live out the Gospel. Our story cannot deny the possibility of *dyscatastrophe*—eternal loss of the victory won by Christ, vanity in our sufferings, the triumph of death. Yet neither can it deny the possibility of *eucatastrophe*—living in the eternal victory won by Christ, labor not in vain, “O Death, where is thy sting” (See 1 Cor 15). *Eucatastrophe* in a fictional story gives me hope that the *eucatastrophe* found in the Gospels belongs in other stories. The *eucatastrophe* I find in the Gospels may be the ending of my own story.

CONCLUSION

Many reasons testify to the importance of the imagination. The imagination plays a critical role in the ability to reason. The imagination can preserve a sense of mystery and wonder in the encounter with inexhaustible truth. The Scriptures are filled with images, songs, poetry, and imaginative stories. Jesus taught using images. Through the imagination, the Faith can become more personally meaningful as individuals really apprehend Christian doctrine. As the organ of meaning, the imagination lends to propositions vividness, memorability, and connection to action. Imagination can concretize the abstract and increase emotional connection to an idea. This helps an idea become a living force in a person's life.

The argument made in this paper focused on the literary dimension of the productive imagination, but there is room for much wider interpretation. The productive imagination helps us produce art, music, films, and many other things that can provide people with opportunities to more deeply experience the truths we believe. There is ample room for exploring how the Liturgy shapes and touches the Christian imagination. *Lectio Divina* and Ignatian spirituality involve the imagination. What we choose to put in Catholic school curricula should absolutely take into account how course material can reflect the Christian imaginative vision to form the imaginations of students. The hymns chosen at Mass shape the imagination of the congregation for better or for worse. The word does have a privileged place in the act of faith, but anything that touches the imagination will impact one's understanding of the Faith. Formation of the mind and the imagination go hand in hand. To form the imagination is to form the mind.

We are called to illuminate the godless imagination of the secular West with narratives of hope and joy, rooted in the Gospels. But constructing a

counter-narrative that effectively engages a secularized West is no easy task. Holding fast to the unchangeable deposit of the Faith, the Christian must seek to disarm opponents without destroying them. A skeptic can drift further away from the truth by losing a debate with a Christian. Effective apologetics must involve a gentle invitation to “see what we mean” when we explain our Faith. Like Newman, we should balance the imaginative and rational aspects of faith and Revelation, helping unite the objectivity of Divine Truth to the subjective receptivity of the individual.¹⁷⁶ For apologetics to be more than an exercise in self-affirmation, the subjective disposition of the unbeliever must be taken into account. Using imagination in our work of apologetics increases the likelihood of successfully guiding an unbeliever to real apprehension of Christian truth and genuine conversion.

The conversions of C.S. Lewis and Holly Ordway testify powerfully to the importance of the imagination in conversion. It makes sense to connect the imagination to conversion, not only because it can invite instead of demonstrate, but also because it is linked to hypothetical reasoning. The imagination helps us imagine the possible: what life could be like. Changing our lives is often preceded by envisioning and desiring a change. The imagination allows an unbeliever to envision what life would be like as a Christian. Christian apologists should take heed. If we want to help people convert to Christianity, we should help them imagine life as a Christian.

There is another way that imagination and conversion are linked. Conversion involves the whole person, and conversion of the person will always mean a conversion of the imagination. Imagination plays a powerful role in shaping basic assumptions and the way we interpret information. Our imaginations must receive the Gospel if we are to live life fully for Christ. A converted imagination helps us understand and live what we believe. This is what it means to embrace the Christian imaginative vision.

When we nourish our own imaginations with stories that embody the Christian imaginative vision, we are better equipped to use the productive dimension of our imagination to effectively sub-create in a way that nourishes the imaginations of our contemporaries. When we teach, preach, and evangelize with imagination we engage our audience at the level of their basic assumptions. This corresponds to the needs of our time. We can bypass ready misconceptions and biases against Christian doctrine when we use the productive imagination to engage hearts and minds.

¹⁷⁶ Cfr. N. STEEVES, *Grazie all’Immaginazione. Integrare l’Immaginazione in Teologia Fondamentale*, 129.

Even for those who have already heard the Christian message, imagination plays a role in ongoing conversion. Effective sub-creation helps a person dust off acquired truths to recover their meaning. “Good stories and poetry help us to see more clearly when we close the book and re-enter ordinary life.”¹⁷⁷ In today’s environment, even the most beautiful Christian truths can fall victim to a “doom scrolling” mentality, where people gloss over information without absorbing meaning. With imagination, we can dust off the deep meaning of Christian doctrine to see it and show it more clearly.

A return to imaginative ways of teaching, preaching, thinking, and evangelizing is both timely and timeless. The God who made human beings made them for stories and revealed himself through story. This God is the Author of the greatest story, but he still invites his children to keep telling stories—stories of truth and salvation. We are God’s children, not his parrots. We play a part. We belong in the story of salvation and we invite others into the story. A good father teaches his son the family trade. The trade of God’s family involves using our faculties, including the imagination, to mediate the truth, goodness, and beauty of the Faith to the surrounding world. This is how we become “other Christs,” fully living in our identity as sons and daughters of God.

At the end of this paper, I would like to include a very heartfelt exhortation. *The Lord of the Rings* captures a sentiment often encountered among Christians today: “I wish it need not have happened in my time.”¹⁷⁸ The wise character Gandalf responds: “So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”¹⁷⁹ Gandalf’s reply affirms the intense difficulty of the situation, but it does not fuel complaining. No matter the difficulty, the time we have is a gift. There is wisdom here for the contemporary Christian in the West. We do not get to pick when we are born. Our mission is not accomplished by complaining about the fall of Christendom. Nor is it accomplished by closing ourselves off from the world. Jesus calls his disciples to be fishers of men. When eternal life is at stake, rough waters are no excuse to stop fishing. Fish are not caught by endlessly practicing our cast on the shore or by painting our boat a new color. To catch something, we must put out into the deep. John’s Gospel provides a fitting

¹⁷⁷ H. ORDWAY, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 89.

¹⁷⁸ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50.

¹⁷⁹ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50.

conclusion: “Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’” (Jn 21:3) It’s time to go fishing.

TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

1 Col	First Letter of St. Paul to the Colossians
1 Cor	First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians
1 Pt	First Letter of St. Peter
2 Sam	Second Samuel
<i>al.</i>	<i>alii</i> (That is “others”)
cfr.	confer (That is “compare”)
Dan	Book of Daniel
Ex	Book of Exodus
Ez	Book of Ezekiel
IVF	<i>In vitro</i> Fertilization
Gen	Book of Genesis
Hos	Book of Hosea
Jer	Book of Jeremiah
Jn	Gospel of John
Jon	Book of Jonah
Lk	Gospel of Luke
Mk	Gospel of Mark
Mt	Gospel of Matthew
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
U.S.	The United States of America

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