

Tolkien and the Roman Catholic Church

By Bradley J. Birzer, The Imaginative Conservative, November 6, 2021

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In 1900, much to the dismay of her family, Mabel Tolkien was confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church. Her family strongly disapproved of her decision—though they tended to be only nominally Protestant—cutting her and the boys off from all family monies and support. Four years earlier, her husband had died, leaving her a widow with two boys, Ronald and Hilary, to raise. Four years after her conversion to Roman Catholicism and the resulting ostracization from her family, Mabel died of diabetes, a disease which might have easily been treated with sufficient finances. She “was a gifted lady of great beauty and wit, greatly stricken by God with grief and suffering, who died in youth (at 34) of a disease hastened by the persecution of her faith,” Tolkien remembered in 1941. It would be impossible to stress too much the influence her death had on Tolkien. He was almost thirteen when she died, and she had served, effectively, as his only parental figure to this point in his life. She had influenced him in everything, and Ronald attempted to live up to her memory for the rest of his life. This was especially true in his religious devotions. “I witnessed (half-comprehending) the heroic sufferings and early death in extreme poverty of my mother who brought me into the Church,” he reflected in 1963. The impress of his mother’s death lay on him his entire adult life, and it permeated his academic work as well as his mythology.

With her untimely death, Mabel left Ronald and Hilary to the care of a Roman Catholic priest at John Henry Cardinal Newman’s Birmingham Oratory. Though he struggled with him at times, especially over dating his future wife Edith, Ronald considered his legal guardian, Father Francis Morgan, his true father. Indeed, Tolkien credited Father Morgan with solidifying the faith into which his mother brought him. “I first learned charity and forgiveness from him,” Tolkien wrote in 1965, and Morgan’s example and teaching “pierced even the ‘liberal’ darkness out of which I came, knowing more about ‘Bloody Mary’ than the Mother of Jesus—who was never mentioned except as an object of wicked worship by the Romanists.” At the Oratory, importantly, Tolkien absorbed Newman’s profound presence and shaping of the institution. Newman had been the most famous Catholic of the English-speaking world in the nineteenth century, with his *Apologia* and his *Idea of the University* serving as core texts in the Catholic world. Additionally, Newman was a devout follower of St. Augustine who served as a significant influence on Tolkien as well. Tolkien was also intimately familiar with the teachings of Sts. John and Thomas Aquinas.

From his mother and Father Morgan, Tolkien learned a traditional, Tridentine Roman Catholicism. The church grew like a tree, Tolkien argued, changing over time and branching out. Like all Catholics of his generation, Tolkien believed in scripture, tradition, and the power of the Magisterium (the Catholic Church’s teaching over and through time). The Protestant fascination with the early, primitive Christian church, Tolkien wrote, simply resulted in a morbid fascination with ignorance, as the church needed time to grow. By entering time, Christ sanctified history, and his sacraments continue the Incarnation across the ages. To trap the church in one era as

the Protestants attempt to do, means the retardation of the Church and the denigration of the Incarnation and sacraments. In essence, by denying tradition, Protestants paradoxically forced the Church into stasis or regress.

Tolkien was greatly disappointed with the Catholic Church at the end of his life. The changes brought about by the Vatican II Council (1962-1965) disturbed him. Clyde Kilby described one of reactions to the changes:

Worst of all briar patches was what [Tolkien] persistently regarded as the spiritual decay of our times and particularly of his own Roman Catholic church, of which he was a longtime and devout member. The Church, he said, 'which once felt like a refuge now feels like a trap.' He was appalled that even the sacred Eucharist might be attended by 'dirty youths, women in trousers and often with their hair unkempt and uncovered' and, what was worse, the grievous suffering given by 'stupid, tired, dimmed, and even bad priests.' An anecdote I have heard involved his attendance at mass not long after Vatican II. An expert in Latin, he had reluctantly composed himself to its abolishment in favor of English. But when he arrived next time at services and seated himself in the middle of a bench, he began to notice other changes than the language, one a diminution of genuflection. His disappointment was such that he rose up and made his way awkwardly to the aisle and there made three very low bows, then stomped out of the church.

Though disturbed by the changes, Tolkien remained publicly quiet regarding his disappointment and continued to attend mass until he died. "I know quite well that, to you as to me, the Church which once felt like a refuge, now often feels like a trap. There is nowhere else to go!" he wrote to his son John. "I think there is nothing to do but to pray, for the Church, the Vicar of Christ, and for ourselves; and meanwhile to exercise the virtue of loyalty, which indeed only becomes a virtue when one is under pressure to desert it."

Though never as public about his Christianity as was his closest friend, C.S. Lewis, Tolkien never hid his faith, and his Catholicism manifested itself in a number of profound and often surprisingly public ways. First, Tolkien was always quite open about his faith with his friends. With his closest friends, such as C.S. Lewis and the various members of the Inklings, he discussed issues of faith and theology often. But, even in front of typically agnostic or atheistic academic audiences, Tolkien openly confessed that he rarely held "strong views" about his major subject of scholarship, philology, as he deemed it "[un]necessary to salvation." To his literary friends, those beyond the Inklings, Tolkien frequently admitted his fondness for scripture. Tolkien willingly expressed his religious fervor to his students as well. Once, after distributing the beginning to St. John's Gospel written in Anglo-Saxon, he informed his students that "English was a language that could move easily in abstract concepts when French was a still a vulgar Norman patois." With the exception of Lewis, most English academics kept their religious proclivities a private matter. Tolkien, like Lewis though, embraced it, making it inform and determine the questions and directions of his scholarship, if not the answers to his questions. Indeed, he argued that one must always seek truth first, alone and unhindered by fundamentalist zealotry. When an overly-eager Roman Catholic sought to uncover the Catholic heritage of a particular place in England, Tolkien objected strongly to the man's method. "With reference to the letter of 'H.D.' on the subject of COVENTRY I am at a loss to know how the etymology of any place-name can be

pursued 'in keeping with Catholic tradition,' except by seeking the truth without bias, whether one ends up in a convent or not." This proves a telling example.

Due to the example set by his mother and Father Morgan, Tolkien also strove to live out the forms and good works necessary for sanctification within the Roman Catholic tradition. He told his son Christopher, for example, to memorize a variety of prayers as well as the entirety of the mass in Latin. "If you have these by heart you never need for words of joy," Tolkien advised. Considering his strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary discussed below, he most likely said the rosary frequently. He kept one by his bed, even during his nights spent on watch for Nazi bombings of Oxford during World War II. In addition to his strong devotion to Mary, Tolkien often asked for the prayers of various saints. Tolkien also believed that God answered his prayers directly, even miraculously healing ills and sickness.

Most importantly for his prayer life, he believed in frequent reception of the Eucharist and even more frequent confession. The Eucharist, fully the Blood and Blood of Christ in Catholic theology, especially had meaning for Tolkien. "I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament," Tolkien wrote to his son Michael. "There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth." Tolkien even once experienced a profound vision. During Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament (praying before the transubstantiated Bread and Wine which Catholics believe to be the actual Body and Blood of Christ), he revealed, "I perceived or thought of the Light of God and in it suspended one small mote (or millions of motes to only one of which was my small mind directed), glittering white because of the individual ray from the Light which both held." Tolkien claimed to have witnessed his guardian angel in the vision, not as a go-between but as the personalization of "God's very attention." Further, Tolkien only had one "dry" period in his religious life, sometime during the early 1920s. It was his love of the Eucharist, he claimed, that brought him back to the Church. "But I feel in love with the Blessed Sacrament from the beginning—and by the mercy of God never have fallen out again: but alas! I did not live up to it," he admitted to his son Michael. "I brought you all up ill and talked to you too little. Out of wickedness and sloth I almost ceased to practice my religion—especially at Leeds, and 22 Northmoor Road. Not for me the Hound of Heaven, but the never-ceasing silent appeal to the Tabernacle, and the sense of starving hunger" (Letter 250). Perhaps most tellingly, Tolkien believed that Pope Pius X's call for frequent communion and attendance at daily mass would reform the Church far more than any of the official reforms of the second Vatican Council.

The mythological equivalent of the Eucharist finds its place in Tolkien's legendarium as the Elvish *lembas*. Properly translated from the Elvish, *lembas* means "journey bread" in Sindarin and "life-bread" in Quenya. With the normal reception of the Eucharist in the Catholic mass, the Body of Christ is referred to as the "bread of life." During the reception of last rites or extreme unction, most likely the last sacrament a Catholic will ever receive before dying, the Eucharist is known as the *Viaticum*, "food for the journey."

Tolkien also held a profound devotion for the Theotokos, the mother of God or the Blessed Virgin Mary. Having lost his own mother, Tolkien especially felt a closeness to Mary. He spoke of her often in conversation with friends, and Mary appears frequently in Tolkien's letters, and even in some of his writings of the legendarium, most notably in Tolkien's own commentary and notes

regarding his piece, "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth." Mary provided him with his sense of "beauty in majesty and simplicity." From Tolkien's perspective, God offered the Image and life of Mary to the world as worthy of devotion to "refin[e] so much our gross manly natures and emotions, and also of warming and colouring our hard, bitter, religion." The very idea that she served as the human tabernacle for the Second Covenant, the Christ, meant that she must be impeccably and awesomely beautiful, Tolkien argued. Anything, therefore, of beauty that Tolkien created, he claimed, came from his own limited notions and understanding of Mary. "There is something missing from any form of 'Christian thought' that could make such an omission. A failure (I think) to accept fully all the consequences of the Incarnation-story as it is told to us in scripture," Tolkien wrote in an unpublished letter to Clyde Kilby. In his attitude, Tolkien reflected the decisions of some of the earliest ecumenical church councils. They proclaimed the dogmas about Mary not to elevate Mary, but to elevate Christ. Without an understanding of the Incarnation, Tolkien argued, one could never fully understand that the Incarnate Word was both fully God and fully man.

Mary, as the only "unfallen human," also demonstrates for Tolkien what death was to have been like prior to the fall of Adam and Eve. The "'assumption' [of Mary] was the natural end of each human life, though as far as we know it has been the end of the only 'unfallen' member of Mankind." Strangely, this finds its fullest expression in the "death" of Aragorn, when Aragorn chooses his time to leave the world. Here, he follows, almost exactly, the Catholic understanding of Mary's assumption into Heaven.

One can also find several Marian figures in the legendarium, in addition to Aragorn. Certainly, none actually holds a one-to-one correspondence to Mary, but they often share a number of things in common with her. Galadriel, the Elven queen of Lorien, a timeless realm she created and sustained with the ring Nenya, is probably the most obvious representation of Mary. Galadriel spent much of the second and third ages resisting the power of Sauron. She also created the White Council, the council dedicated to overthrowing the darkness. Even though she must repent for her blasphemy against the Valar in the First Age, Tolkien wrote, "it is true that I owe much of this character to Christian and Catholic teaching and imagination about Mary." Elbereth serves as another significant Marian figure in the legendarium. The angelic wife of Manwë and maker of light and stars, she serves, like Mary in Roman Catholic theology, as the "Queen of Heaven" and "Star of the Sea." The Elves invoke her in prayer and revere her more than any other of the Valar. In turn, she listens to their prayers. Her graces flow to more than just the Elves, though, as she answers the prayers of Hobbits, including Sam's pleas for aid during battle with Shelob. Wielding the Phial of Galadriel, for example, Sam receives strength from Elbereth when attacking the spawn of Ungoliant, Shelob. Together with Manwë, Elbereth sends Gandalf to aid in Middle-earth against Sauron. Prior to the "Last Battle," Tolkien's mythological equivalent of Ragnarok and St. John's Apocalypse, the final triumph of Ilúvatar and his allies over Morgoth and all forms of disorder and evil, Elbereth forms the constellation of Menelmakar as a sign of coming of the Last Battle. Chapter Twelve of the "Apocalypse of St. John" reads: "A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and crown of twelve stars on her head." In Roman Catholic thought, the woman "clothed with the sun," ready to give a second birth to the messiah, is Mary. Other female Vala have attributes of Mary, as well as the Fairy Queen in Tolkien's non-Middle-earth work, "Smith of Wootton Major."

Though Tolkien said that the Roman Catholicism only entered *The Lord of the Rings* consciously in its revision, one finds prayer, notions of hierarchy, and Catholic sacramental elements in the earliest conceptions of the legendarium. In Tolkien's *Qenya Lexicon*, written and compiled in the 1910s, for example, he already included words for crucifixion, monks, demon, Father (as in the "1st Person of the Blessed Trinity"), saint, Christian missionary, gospel, nun, and crucifix. Tolkien even describes "Eldamar" as "the rocky beach in Western Inwinóre (Faëry), whence the Solosimpeli have danced along the beaches of the world. Upon this rock was the white town built called Kor, whence the fairies came to teach men song and holiness." Tolkien also gives the names for Christ (*Ion*) and the Holy Spirit (*Sā*).

None of this, however, should suggest that Tolkien meant any of his legendarium as mere Christian propaganda. Tolkien rejected all propaganda as an insult to the dignity, complexity, and freedom of the human person. Instead, he argued for a Christian art, a sub-creation, as he described in his "On Fairy-Stories." Art or sub-creation should glorify God, creation, and the human person. In this, Tolkien followed one of the oldest traditions on the Roman Catholic Church, the Sanctification of the Pagan. St. Paul first used this in his speech and actions on Mars Hill in Athens. While challenging the philosophies of the Stoics and Epicureans, Paul congratulated the Athenians for being religious. Specifically, he noted, he was impressed with their statue to the "unknown God." Christ, he told them in no uncertain terms, was their unknown God. All of their religion, philosophy, and culture had pointed them to Him. Paul even quoted approvingly, though sanctifying the meaning, of two Stoic philosophers and poets, Aratus and Cleanthes, in Acts 17:28: "In him we live and move and have our being" and "For we are indeed his offspring." Such became the model for the Christian Church. One finds its clearest expression in the commands of St. Gregory the Great to St. Augustine of Canterbury: "But if you have found customs, whether in the Church of Rome or of Gaul or any other that may be more acceptable to God, I wish you to make a careful selection on them, and teach the Church of the English, which is still young in the Faith, whatever you have been able to learn with profit from the various Churches. For things should not be loved for the sake of places, but places for the sake of good things. Therefore select from each of the Churches whatever things are devout, religious, and right; and when you have bound them, as it were, into a sheaf, let the minds of the English grow accustomed to it." Hence, one finds elements of Christ, Odin, and St. Michael in Gandalf. One finds elements of the Arthurian Lady of the Lake and the Blessed Virgin Mary in Galadriel.

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