J. R. R. Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings: “The Prayers at the Foot of the Altar” and The Dark Night of the Soul

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Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic who understood that the conqueror’s weapon is the Cross.

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The landscape and illumination of J.R.R. Tolkien’s mind exposes far more than a vast and expansive fantasy world, but also a glimpse into a Catholic mind which understood implicitly that ‘The Conqueror’s Weapon is the Cross’. Without revisiting Tolkien’s quotes regarding his faith, it is not possible to unravel the hidden Catholic code woven within The Lord of the Rings. For the uninitiated the following quote leaves us with no doubt that The Lord of the Rings is a Catholic work…

“The Lord of the Rings is, of course, a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.”

It is clear, as he stated himself, that his seminal work is not a straightforward allegory of the life of Christ, despite the fact that some allegorical aspects are present. The Lord of the Rings is rather an allegory of the Christian life. The quote which provides us with illumination to his inner spiritual life and spiritual inspiration for the book is as follows…

“I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so I do not expect history to be anything but a long defeat, though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory. “The Lord of the Rings, as such, can be seen as the story of the spiritual life portrayed in the “Prayers at the Foot of the Altar” from the Traditional Latin Mass, as well as the spiritual pathway of the Dark Night of the Soul by spiritual master and Doctor of the Church, St. John of the Cross.

Tolkien was an extremely devout practicing Roman Catholic who attended the Traditional Latin Mass daily. When the vernacular Novus Ordo Mass was first said in his own Church, he famously remonstrated the changes by shouting the original Latin over the English. Beyond this, if you do not believe that Tolkien was a devoutly practicing Catholic, then it may be of interest to learn that the cause for his canonization has recently begun.

Firstly, it is imperative to understand what the Catholic Church definitively teaches us concerning the true way of the Christian journey. The primary place to observe this teaching is in the Traditional Latin Mass, which is the greatest prayer of the Church. As someone who was fluent in Latin, Tolkien implicitly understood the direct translation of Psalm 42, which is known as the “Judaica Me”. The “Judaica Me” is part of the “Prayers at the Foot of the Altar” which reveal and teach us all about the true way and trials of the Christian life. The “Judaica Me” also reflects St. John’s Dark Night of the Soul spiritual pathway. The “Prayers at the Foot of the Altar” are the first prayers of the Tridentine Mass, a Mass passed down from the apostles and developed slowly over 2000 years. At this point we are not looking for a direct link with the Mass and The Lord of the Rings, but, rather, the links between the battle of the spiritual life and our everyday battles with evil, in which Tolkien was well versed.

Psalm 42 reveals all…

“Judge me, O God, and distinguish my cause from the nation that is not holy: deliver me from the unjust and deceitful man.

“For Thou, O God, art my strength: why hast Thou cast me off? and why do I go sorrowful whilst the enemy afflicteth me?

“Send forth Thy light and Thy truth: they have led me and brought me unto Thy holy hill, and into Thy tabernacles.

“And I will go in unto the Altar of God: unto God, Who giveth joy to my youth.

“I will praise Thee upon the harp, O God, my God: why art thou sad, O my soul? and why dost thou disquiet me?

“Hope thou in God, for I will yet praise Him: Who is the salvation of my countenance, and my God.”

Spiritually-minded traditional Catholics will instantly recognise this psalm as the basis of the true spiritual battle within the authentic Catholic life. It is also the battle set out in 2 Esdras 7 where it clearly states why God’s people must suffer at some points along the narrow path. This liturgical, spiritual, and biblical narrative can be seen to also be the template for the unfolding battles and trials of The Lord of the Rings. Tolkien implicitly understood that the Christian life is one of a constant battle with evil, but in the same way that Psalm 42 warns us of our impending struggles, it also instructs and guides us to hope in God, to praise God, and to plead for light and truth. If we pray for light and truth, and have been purified through the confessional, Holy Communion, and an amendment of life, then we will be eventually released from the purgative stage of spiritual development, and into the light and truths of the Illuminative and Unitive stages as discussed by St. John of the Cross. Other saints write about the same pathway, but sometimes use different language. For instance, St. Francis de Sales and St. Catherine of Sienna (and others) refer to the purgative stage which Catholics must pass through to attain sainthood and heaven. St. John’s way is simply the template which leads us in the fullness of the spiritual life.

“Send forth thy light and thy truth…. why do I go about sorrowful while the enemy afflicteth me… deliver me from the unjust and deceitful man…”

These words underpin Tolkien’s work, and Frodo and Sam’s choice is either to believe in something greater, whilst undergoing great trials, or submit to evil. This is an allegory of the TRUE Christian life in which there is a final overarching destination which must be attained through an arduous battle with evil.

Having very briefly looked at the basic theology underpinning The Lord of the Rings, it is now time to scrutinise the larger scale battle of the great Catholic saints, mystics, and martyrs and how their life reflects the unfolding spectacle of Tolkien’s vision.

The Lord of the Rings is not one ongoing episode of suffering. The story is punctuated with moments of providence in the form of rescues by eagles, and moments of peace such as at Rivendell. Tolkien, in his quote (above) tells us that Christianity is a constant battle, but one interspersed with glimpses of victory. In our Catholic lives, God will give us what are known as ‘spiritual favours’ (i.e. answer to prayer) if we earnestly pray for what we need and not what we want, but if we develop in the spiritual life, then we start to receive even greater gifts known as consolations. St. John teaches Catholics that we are not supposed to be chasing the “consolations of God” i.e. a constant request for spiritual favours and answer to prayer and asking for our own will, but we are supposed to be searching for the “God of Consolations”. It is in these consolations freely given by God (which we do not ask for, nor deserve) that we encounter these greater glimpses of victory, which will even amaze us. We see through hope and prayer that God is a “God of Consolations”. We should eventually stop praying for what we want, and accept God’s will for us. If we are faithful to Christ (which ultimately means receiving Holy Communion in a state of grace with no known past or present sins and truly amending our lives), then God will give us these glimpses of victory and gifts and we will be at peace, because we understand in a deeper way that God truly loves us.

Contrary to the worldly meaning, a spiritual consolation is not second best, but the very best as it is chosen by God rather than man. God’s consolations are far greater than anything we could ever imagine for ourselves. This long battle and journey, interspersed with great victories along the way, is the true story of The Lord of the Rings, but in the true spiritual life consolations can be far more than just victories…

In the most famous example of a spiritual consolation (though there are many different ones) we find a young St. Therese of Lisieux on her day of profession. Her interior trials since childhood have been hard since her mother died. Her favourite thing is snow, something which never appears in Lisieux, but after her profession she steps outside to see the convent grounds covered by snow. She is clear that she recognises this as a “consolation” from God, in which God has moved the heavens to show her how much He loves her. Only someone who has been through much of the purgative stage of spiritual development would recognise this. It is important to recognise the consolations in our lives. How many times are our heroes in The Lord of the Rings snapped from the jaws of death and experience little victories, before the one final victory?

The Christian life is a tough spiritual battle to attain sainthood in which God will give us victories and gifts along the way to keep our spirits up. This is the true story of The Lord of the Rings.

Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic who understood that the conqueror’s weapon is the Cross. Tolkien was in some way, and to some degree, telling the story of his own interior spiritual life within the pages of The Lord of the Rings.