The Lord of the Rings: A Traditional Catholic View

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Mr. Tolkien’s unique vision was directly shaped by recurring images in the Catholic culture which shaped JRRT.

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Mr. Paul Edwin Zimmer, of Greyhaven, remarked to me once that most analysis of the work of J.R.R. Tolkien was undertaken from the Evangelical Protestant or from the Anglican point of view. As Tolkien himself was a fervent Catholic, he reasoned, a Catholic critique might shed new light. Thus encouraged, I began.

It will be the contention of this article that much of Mr. Tolkien’s unique vision was directly shaped by recurring images in the Catholic culture which shaped JRRT, and which are not shared by non-Catholics generally. The expression of these images in Lord of the Rings will then concern us.

To begin with, it must be remembered that Catholic culture and Catholic faith, while mutually supportive and symbiotic, are not the same thing. Mr. Walker Percy, in his Lost in the Cosmos, explored the difference, and pointed out that, culturally, Catholics in Cleveland are much more Protestant than Presbyterians in say, Taos, New Orleans, or the South of France. Erik Ritter von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, points out that the effects of this dichotomy upon politics, attributing the multi-party system in Catholic countries to the Catholic adherence to absolutes; he further ascribes the two-party system to the Protestant willingness to compromise. However this may be, it does point up a constant element in Catholic thought—the pursuit of the absolute.

Here we must make an aside in regard to the U.S. Catholic culture in America is practically non-existent, except in attenuated form among such peoples as the Hispanos and Indians of Northern New Mexico, the Cajuns and Creoles of Louisiana and the other Gulf States, and the old English Catholic settlements of Maryland and Kentucky. Elsewhere the Faith was brought by immigrants, and its attendant culture has, like all imported ones in the States, veered between preservation and assimilation. This was exacerbated by the fact that Catholic leadership in the United States was early committed to a programme of cultural melding. In addition, this leadership was primarily Irish, a nationality which had been deprived of much of its native culture by centuries of Protestant Ascendancy. Hence it has been extremely difficult for Americans, even American Catholics, to understand or appreciate the Catholic thing (as Chesterton described it) in a cultural context. I am reminded of the astonishment of a classmate of mine (from a typical American Catholic High School) at seeing an anthology of Catholic poetry. This situation has been greatly accentuated in the past twenty years by the changes occurring after Vatican II.

This being so, it will be necessary to describe a little of the uniquely Catholic world view. In fine, it is a sacramental one. At the heart of all Catholic life is a miracle, a mystery, the Blessed Sacrament. Surrounded traditionally by ritual and awe, it has been the formative aspect of Catholic art, drama, and poetry. The coronation of Kings, swearing of oaths, marriages, celebrations of feast-days, all have a Eucharistic character. Before the advent of Cartesianism, it was held (among other and higher things) to be the highest act of Magic, before which all other acts of theurgy, goetia, or sympathetic magic were as nought. It was the unitive force of the Catholic world, mystically uniting in sacrificial bond all the altars across the globe.

This great miracle was held to be prefigured by the sacrifice of the Jewish temple, and indeed to have been foreseen in some dim way also by the mysteries and philosophies of the ancient world. Hence nothing that was not evil in these older faiths was rejected out of hand, although a clear distinction was made between them and Catholicism.

Under this influence, Catholic societies were societies of wonder. Life was held to be a series of miracles. With God Himself appearing on the altar, in consumable form, how difficult were wizards, elves, or the change of seasons? As Aragorn replied to Eothain: “The green earth, say you? That is a mighty matter of legend, though you tread it under the light of day!” So might reply any European of the past, or a Cajun, Galwayman, Sicilian, Micmac, Tagalog, Alfur, or Baganda of today. It is this quality which leads us to dub those peoples “mythopoeic,” and their modern equivalents “superstitious” or “backward.”

Politically, traditional Catholic culture has been hierarchical. Feudalism itself was formed in great degree by the Faith, as is shown by the great difference between the Feudal system of European history, and its equivalents in the India of the Mughals, the Japan of the Tokugawa, and the China of the Warring States. Ideas of Chivalry and Hierarchy suggested by the Church did not merely shape European Catholic polity, but continue to determine political structures in such settings as Catholicised African tribes, ethnic Catholic Asian settlements, and Latin America. The relationships of King to Subject, of Lord to Vassal, of Comrade to Comrade-in-Arms remain, though often under other names.

In traditional Catholic societies, the King is, in a lessened sense, the Vicar of God. While not approximating the Sacral Kingship of non-Catholic peoples, the Catholic Monarchy nevertheless retains a certain sacredness. This remains the case, even when in conflict with the Church. After the calamities of the Reformation, English Civil War, Glorious, French, Industrial, and Russian Revolutions, etc., the King became more than that; he became the exiled leader of the faithful, whose return alone would bring a return to the old ways, and an end to change and unrest.

These various themes continue to affect Catholic consciousness today. We will observe how far Tolkien was a cultural as well as a doctrinal Catholic (despite being raised in a Protestant land) and how these themes emerge in Lord of the Rings.

The Birmingham Oratory which provided the backdrop of JRRT’s life from 1904 to 1911, was founded by Cardinal Newman and remained a stronghold of cultural Catholicism. Fr. Francis Morgan, JRRT’s guardian, he described as a “Welsh-Spanish Tory,” surely as Ultramontane a combination as one could wish for. Even today, with some few exceptions, the houses of the Oratory around the world are renowned for both orthodoxy and learning. It was here that our author’s religious sense was formed, and during this time that his literary and linguistic interests began. Later, his studies were confined primarily to works of the pre-Reformation. Beyond Chaucer, he had little interest. Judging by his later work, his early environment and studies supplied that which would have been supplied had he lived in a Catholic country. Had he lived away from the Oratory, a living example of Catholic culture, one wonders what the effect on his work would have been.

In the sphere of doctrine, of course, the influence of Catholicism upon JRRT is readily apparent. In this regard he himself admitted as much, when he wrote in a letter to Deborah Webster of 25 October 1958, “far greater things may colour the mind in dealing with the lesser things of a fairy-story.”

The Blessed Sacrament was very much at the heart of JRRT’s devotional life. As he informs his son on p. 339 of his Collected Letters:

I myself am convinced by the Petrine claims, nor looking around the world does there seem much doubt which (if Christianity is true) is the True Church, the temple of the Spirit dying but living, corrupt but holy, self-reforming and rearising. But for me that Church of which the Pope is the acknowledged head on earth has as chief claim that it is the one that has (and still does) ever defended the Blessed Sacrament, and given it most honour, and put (as Christ plainly intended) in the prime place. “Feed my sheep” was His last charge to St. Peter; and since His words are always first to be understood literally, I suppose them to refer primarily to the Bread of Life. It was against this that the W. European revolt (or Reformation) was really launched—“the blasphemous fable of the Mass”—and faith/works a mere red herring.

This one finds echoed in the figure of lembas, which “had a potency that increased as travelers relied on it alone, and did not mingle it with other foods. It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure…” (Vol. III, p. 262). This is all very reminiscent of the large literature of Eucharistic miracles, and of such people as St. Lydwine, St. Francis Borgia, and Theresa Neumann, who lived off only the Blessed Sacrament.

Another unique feature of Catholic life which distinguishes it from that of other Christians is the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which JRRT shared enthusiastically. As an example, we cite a letter to Robert Murray, S.J., in which he speaks of “…Our Lady, upon which all my own small perception of beauty, both in majesty and simplicity is founded.” To a degree in the figure of Galadriel, but more particularly in that of Elbereth may one discern the shadow of Mary:

Snow-white! Snow-white! O Lady clear!

O Queen beyond the Western Seas!

O Light to us that wander here

Amid the world of woven trees!

Gilthoniel! O Elbereth!

Clear are thy eyes and bright thy breath,

Snow-white! Snow-white! We sing to thee

In a far land beyond the sea.

O stars that in the Sunless Year

With shining hand by her were sown,

In windy fields now bright and clear

We see your silver blossom blown!

O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!

We still remember, we who dwell

In this far land beneath the trees,

Thy Starlight on the Western Seas.

One is immediately reminded of the English hymn by John Lingard, with which JRRT was certainly familiar:

Hail, Queen of Heaven, the ocean star,

Guide of the wand’rer here below:

Thrown on life’s surge, we claim thy care—

Save us from peril and from woe.

Mother of Christ, star of the sea,

Pray for the wanderer, pray for me.

Sojourners in this vale of tears,

To thee, blest advocate, we cry;

Pity our sorrows, calm our fears,

And soothe with hope our misery.

Refuge in grief, star of the sea,

Pray for the mourner, pray for me.

As earlier observed, the Catholic view of the world is a sacramental one; the centre of Catholic life, according to C. G. Jung, “…is a living mystery, and that is the thing that works…” Opponents of the Church have often claimed that the sacraments are “mere” magic. The phrase hocus pocus is a parody of the words of consecration, Hoc est enim corpus meum. As Galadriel observes, “…this is what your folk would call magic, I believe; though I do not understand clearly what they mean; and they seem also to use the same words of the deceits of the enemy.” Indeed, one may go so far as to say that the effect of magic, wielded for good, is in Lord of the Rings the same as that of the Sacraments upon the life of the devout Catholic. Protection, nourishment, knowledge, all are held to flow in supernatural abundance from them. In his prayer after communion, St. Thomas Aquinas asks that the Blessed Sacrament be “…a strong defence against the snares of all enemies, visible and invisible.” St. Bonaventure declares it to be “…the fountain of life, the fountain of wisdom and knowledge, the fountain of eternal light…” In a word, as the Sacraments are the means of Grace in the Catholic world, magic—wielded by the wise—is the means of Grace in Middle Earth.

The Sacraments are the centre and cause of all authentic Catholic Mysticism, and the Saints have owed their remarkable careers to them. Certainly, in terms of the physical phenomena of Mysticism (Eucharistic miracles; ecstasies; the stigmata; levitation; bilocation; luminous irradiance; supernatural fragrances; infused knowledge; vision through opaque bodies; supernatural power over objects, etc.) the great mystics have often performed wonders worthy of Gandalf and Elrond (one thinks of St. Jean Vianney, the Cure d’Ars, for example, or of Padre Pio). This too is something of which JRRT would have been aware. As Arthur Machen observed, the only realities are sanctity and sorcery.

From the realm of Myth, Magic, and Mystery, we now descend to that of history. There is a particularly Catholic view of history, summed up by JRRT in a letter to Amy Ronald of 15 December 1956: “actually, I’m a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that 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.”

In the range of modern Catholic history, there are certain archetypes, which, it may be argued, are reflected in Lord of the Rings, in the manner he described. The ones we will examine are: a) the age of Faith, or the organic state; b) Church versus State; c) the great King; d) the onset of modernity and the martyr-King; e) the Restoration (successful or otherwise).

The concept of society as an organic whole, without class conflict, with a communal structure, is one that has characterised Catholic social thought since the Roman Empire. In many ways the Shire expresses perfectly the economic and political ideals of the Church, as expressed by Leo XIII in Rerum novarum, and Pius XI in Quadragesimo anno. Traditional authority (the Thain), limited except in times of crisis; popular representation (the Mayor of Michel Delving), likewise limited; subsidiarity; and above all, minimal organisation and conflict. It is the sort of society envisioned by Distributists Belloc and Chesterton in Britain, by Salazar in Portugal, by the framers of the Irish Constitution, by Dollfuss in Austria, and by Smetona in Lithuania. How ever far short or close these dwellers in the real world came to their goal, the fact remains that it is something very close to the Shire they had in mind.

In the ages of faith, while both Church and State were dedicated to roughly the same ends, they often differed as to how to go about achieving them. Then too, human nature and greed often sowed discord. Sometimes the life-and-death struggle with Islam was hindered by these quarrels. In Lord of the Rings, we see these struggles reflected in the tension between Gandalf and Denethor II. Gandalf, indeed, partakes of much of the nature of the Papacy. He belongs to no one nation, and in a very real sense he is leader of all the free and faithful. This is so because his power is magical rather than temporal, just as the Pope’s is sacramental. Denethor’s interest is wholly national. To his statement “…there is no purpose higher in the world as it now stands than the good of Gondor,” Gandalf replies, “the rule of no realm is mine, neither Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care…For I also am a steward.” Thus might Boniface VIII have spoken to Philip the fair, or Gregory VII to Henry IV, or Innocent III to King John. Gandalf also reminds one of the Fisher-King in the Grail legends, who himself is a symbol of Peter-in-the-Boat.

On the other hand, the Catholic imagination was also haunted by the image of the great Kings, like Arthur, St. Ferdinand III, and St. Louis IX. These were held to have been the ideal prototypes for rulers: pious, brave, wonderful in a manner unapproachable for those of later times. In three characters in particular, Elendil, Gil-Galad, and Durin, do we find the yearning for the great King in terms with which Western Catholics of yesteryear and Third World Catholics of today would be familiar:

Gil-Galad was an Elven-King.

Of him the harpers sadly sing!

The last whose realm was fair and free

Between the Mountains and the Sea.

and again:

The world was young, the mountains green,

No stain yet on the moon was seen.

No words were laid on stream or stone,

When Durin woke and walked alone.

The world was fair, the mountains tall,

In Elder days before the fall

Of mighty kings in Narthgarond

and Gondolin who now beyond

Western Seas have passed away:

The world was fair in Durin’s day.

So might have a Medieval minstrel mourned the Nine Worthies; so might a modern one mourn the Negus, or the Mwami, or the Kabaka. The forms change, but for a Catholic, the subject rarely does.

The upheavals earlier referred to destroyed Catholic unity, splintered society, and destroyed much that was beautiful. The enclosures and various other economic measures ended Western Society’s communal nature. The great present-day expressions of these forces of modernity are Capitalism and Communism, with all they represent. JRRT’s feelings about such things are clear. In The Hobbit, we are told of Goblins that “they invented some of the machines that have since troubled our world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once, for wheels and engines and explosions have always delighted them…” Of course, the descriptions given in “The Scouring of the Shire” are particularly apropos.

In the struggle between Tradition and Modernity, three famous monarchs lost their lives: Charles I, Louis XVI, and Nicholas II. While the first and last were not officially Catholics, they were at least culturally so. Traditional forces in England, France, and Russia were solemnly canonised by the Anglican and Russian Orthodox Churches; Louis XVI is still regarded as a martyr by thousands of French Royalists. Each owed their deaths to two items: a desire to uphold the Traditional constitution of Church and State in their respective realms, and a personal weakness or flaw which reduced their effectiveness in so doing. They also shared heroic deaths which, to great degree, redeemed their mistakes in the eyes of many of their subjects. All of this applies to Isildur as well.

The social ideas earlier referred to were contradicted by the events of history. With their end as fact, they became hope. This hope became concentrated in the cause of the deposed sovereign, who would, upon his return to power, set all things to rights again:

‘Till then, upon Ararat’s hill

My hope shall cast her anchor still,

Until I see some peaceful dove,

Bring home the branch she dearly love;

Then will I wait, till the waters abate,

Which now disturb my troubled brain:

Else never rejoice, till I hear the voice,

That the King enjoys his own again.

As time passed, the claims went to heirs, but the ever hopeful adherents continued their struggle. Thus, the Jacobites fought for the Stuarts in 1689-1690, 1715, 1719, and 1745-46; the Carlists in Spain rebelled in 1833-39, during the 1840s and 50s, and in 1872-76—they also played a key role in the Spanish Civil War on the Nationalist side. The Chouans and the Vendeens continued guerrilla warfare against the French Republic all through the Revolution; even today, French Royalism flourishes. The Miguelists of Portugal continued their agitation against first the liberal monarchy and then the republic down to the present. Since the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Habsburg adherents have pursued dreams of restoration. So greatly did Hitler fear this possibility that he named the planned invasion of Austria Case Otto, after the exiled heir. Whatever may become of their political hopes, the canonisation of Charles, the last Emperor, may be presaged by the incorruptibility of his remains at Madeira.

However this may be, such people looked to a restoration to restore the Church to prominence, curb industry, revive the smallholder and the old order of society. As Robert Burns observed:

The Church is in ruins, the State is in jars,

delusions, oppressions, and murderous wars.

We dare nae well say it, but we ken wha’s to blame,

There’ll never be peace ’till Jamie comes hame.

As it became apparent that Jamie would not come home, nor would Don Carlos, nor Dom Miguel, nor the Comte de Chambord, many looked for less regal saviours. From such desires emerged (and emerge) such men as Franco, Pilsudski, and many of the better Latin American Caudillos. In a sense, this Catholic political messianism is even present in the careers of such diverse figures as Kennedy and Castro.

Aragorn succeeds where Bonnie Prince Charlie and the others failed. Instead of the field of Culloden’s defeat and mourning, we have the field of Cormallen’s victory and rejoicing. In Middle Earth, the “good old cause” triumphs. The Dunedain, so like the Jacobites, Carlists, and Legitimists for most of their history, gain at last the victory. From being the Young Pretender, Aragorn becomes Charlemagne, restorer of the Empire. Indeed, his restored kingdom has much in common with the Carolingian Renaissance. It would not be unfair to say that it is this which Catholics have at the bottom of their minds when they consider things political. In Middle Earth, all things do become well, for the King indeed enjoys his own again.

There are other symbols time does not allow us to explore: the dark Lord’s forces might represent not only Modernity, but the Islam which was Christendom’s greatest previous enemy; the Tower of Guard, Minas Tirith, might be seen as a symbol of the Church Militant, of the Res Publica Christiana. But we have examined a few of the most evocative motifs in terms of the Catholic Psyche.

In his Hieroglyphics: Notes on the Ecstatic in Literature, Mr. Arthur Machen declares, “Literature is the expression, through the artistic medium of words, of the dogmas of the Catholic Church, and that which is in anyway out of harmony with these dogmas is not literature,” for “Catholic dogma is merely the witness, under a special symbolism of the enduring facts of human nature and the universe.” Whether or no JRRT would have agreed with this definition, he did say, in the letter to Fr. Murray, S.J., already cited, “Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision…For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.”

It has been said that the dominant note of the traditional Catholic liturgy was intense longing. This is also true of her art, her literature, her whole life. It is a longing for things that cannot be in this world: unearthly truth, unearthly purity, unearthly justice, unearthly beauty. By all these earmarks, Lord of the Rings is indeed a Catholic work, as its author believed; but it is more. It is this age’s great Catholic epic, fit to stand beside the Grail legends, Le Morte d’Arthur, and The Canterbury Tales. It is at once a great comfort to the individual Catholic, and a tribute to the enduring power and greatness of the Catholic tradition, that JRRT created this work. In an age which has seen an almost total rejection of the Faith on the part of the Civilization she created, the loss of the Faith on the part of many lay Catholics, and apparent uncertainty among her hierarchy, Lord of the Rings assures us, both by its existence and its message, that the darkness cannot triumph forever.