



Daniel Bennett

## A Sacramental View of the World: Tolkien and My Conversion

I have finally discovered the answer to what struck me at the time, many months hence, as an evasive, yet undeniable fact: J. R. R. Tolkien, without saying one word about the Catholic Church *per se*, had played no small part in my conversion. C. S. Lewis lucidly describes this method of teaching Christian doctrines through fairy tales in a letter to the Anglican nun Sister Penelope: “Any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people’s minds under cover of romance without their knowing it.”

While many have drawn attention to the Catholic character of the “Mere Christianity” that Lewis desired to smuggle into people’s minds, the theology that Tolkien snuck under (or over) my defenses between December 2012 and January 2013 was explicitly, thoroughly, Catholic. The timing was providential: by Christmas of 2012, I was prepared for a fundamental shift in my thinking due to a newly-acquired pro-Catholic outlook.

Nonetheless, my dying but stubborn Protestantism still had several defenses against anything *officially* Catholic. Had Tolkien written, let us say, “It is to be understood that Boromir did Penance”, it would have been rendered impotent. I had for a good while known that Tolkien was Catholic, though in point of fact I was not privy to that information when I grew

deeply fond of his work as a boy. Upon discovering his Roman credentials, I merely separated the man from the work in my mind and thus avoided any possible suspicion towards his books. A papist might have created Middle Earth, but surely there were no papists inside it to threaten me.

Over that 2012 Christmas break, and in the course of my January flight to Dublin for a semester abroad, I read *The Silmarillion*. I also watched back-to-back the film versions of the trilogy over the holidays. Only the first of those had a very profound impact on me; the others stray, in my opinion, too far from Tolkien.

Reading the history of Middle Earth enacted a subtle yet profound shift in my philosophy. In short, Tolkien enabled me to view the universe sacramentally. This is somewhat hard to explain. I had previously been, philosophically, a dualist, though only an unconscious one. I conceived of the “person” merely as the soul, with the body as quasi-external to it. One was united to his body, certainly, and he would be resurrected in the body; but *he* was his soul. Matter was not the stuff of angels, nor was it really the stuff God worked with. God might happen to cause something via matter, but really, it was not *actually* through matter, but rather, the matter just sort of occasioned this phenomenon’s occurrence. It was there *with* the spiritual reality, but all would be just as well *without* the matter there. It was almost as if the matter was for looks.

But reading Tolkien, I beheld a world that, while fantastical, had underlying it a very different, far more beautiful and robust view of nature. In Middle



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Earth, material objects, such as the great Elven fortress of Nargathrond, are not simply things that any villain with magical powers can bypass without a second thought. Rather, they can *contain* and *channel* power themselves. In the film of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the ancient Mines of Moria stretch beyond the eye, their vast but empty halls hearkening to the great days of old. They hold for the sons of Durin a value and glory *intrinsically* related to their material existence, and this simply cannot be dismissed. Magic power adhering in matter characterizes many swords in *The Silmarillion*, and such power is clearly manifest in Vingilot, the enchanted white ship of the mighty hero Eärendil. Thus the foundation was laid for my conceiving of truly holy places and things, of material objects instrumentally communicating spiritual realities—of a sacramental view of the world.

I was at the time—and for some months still vainly strove to fashion myself as—a Presbyterian. In Dublin, I undertook (and ultimately failed) to play the part of the “Ecumenical Presbyterian”, which in my case meant someone with few to no principled objections to Catholicism but a fear of struggles with my Protestant family and friends were I to convert. Now the Presbyterians have sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper (their term for Holy Communion). But baptism is not held to do anything; it is merely a sign of our baptism into the Holy Spirit. The matter (the water) here in no way acts as *causa instrumentalis* (instrumental cause) of our being baptized into Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit; no, that happens in some purely spiritual, inner way, as if the human person, the self, was only the soul, and not also including the body. No matter was needed, despite the material character of men’s bodies; man was really just his soul, fundamentally just spiritual.

The Presbyterian Lord’s Supper is similar. There is but a spiritual communion with the Incarnate Lord, bypassing His human nature. Furthermore, the bread and wine are still just those elements, and do not instrumentally cause men’s spiritual

communion with Christ; they are just there, symbolically, playing the part of a jester, daring us to think that they truly *channel* grace. Both spiritual realities—baptism into Christ and spiritual communion with Christ—could happen with or without any matter. Underlying these notions is almost certainly that sort of dualism to which I previously held.

But the view that Tolkien presented to me—a very Catholic view—is, I shall say again, more robust. The human person is *not* just his soul; he is a composite of matter and spirit. I have learned much more on this subject since my return from Dublin, knowing now that this Aristotelian philosophy of nature is called hylemorphism. But it was in Ireland that Tolkien laid the foundation for my seeing matter and spirit no longer as radically separate, with spirit being the “real” realm (something like a crude Platonism, perhaps), but as working together in Creation. In Middle Earth, fortresses and swords could hold and channel magical power; in the real world, material sacraments could communicate spiritual blessings to men, and some places could be objectively holier than others, like the Temple in the Old Testament, or Notre Dame in Paris, which I visited that April.

I recall when this development came to the surface, rising up from the depths and into my conscious mind. Influenced by *The Silmarillion*, I had been writing a long history of my own fantasy world. I reached a scene where the main hero at that point went into combat against a massive foe. It suddenly struck me that he could not very well bring a sword to that battle if he did not in fact truly need it. Likewise, if his armor could channel no magical power, and its material character could never be conjoined with immaterial forces, then why wear the cumbersome stuff? He was no safer against this supernatural enemy. Thus I broke with my past and “sacramentalized” his arms and armor; otherwise he surely would have been crushed in those mighty hands, with no rational explanation for his survival.

Another influence from Tolkien was

perhaps rooted in my personality, my love from childhood of medievalist fantasy and the Middle Ages broadly. This was a deeper appreciation for the sublime, an orientation towards a universal, epic scale—and the Catholic Church encompasses the universal totality of the community of men all over the Earth, from the humblest peasant to the pope who defends the Church’s freedom against mighty kings. And it was towards these highest battles and greatest expressions of glory to which I was drawn, akin to the sort of grand-scale adventures and battles in Middle-Earth. As the High King of the Noldor Elves led the world-wide war against Morgoth, so had the Successor of St. Peter led the Church in her war against the forces of darkness and their dark lord, the Morgoth of this world. And just as the mighty Elven prince was in no way the final nor highest power that stood against the foe, so it was that the power of the Church to stand against Satan comes from on high, from God—Ilúvatar—Himself.

Thus Tolkien’s fantasy crossed over the threshold of the fictional into the real world, a sort of reverse trip through the Wardrobe. Because of the Incarnation and the divine essence of the Church, I understood that God’s glorious, beautiful power was strong at work in the world through those whom He appointed in the Church, and through the sacraments they administered. Tolkien opened my murky eyes to recognize a wonderful truth: the real world, though through a glass we see but darkly, is yet more of a land of Wizards and Balrogs, than it is of desks and traffic lights. No, the world is of God, and the fruit of the music of the Ainur is beautiful. Thanks be to God, that with the aid of His servant John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, I was led home to Valinor.

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