



Tolkien's preference for an early medieval Catholic sensibility in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*

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*Great might was given to him by Ilúvatar, and he was coëval with Manwë. In the powers and knowledge of all other Valar he had part, but he turned them to evil purposes, and squandered his strength in violence and tyranny. For he coveted Arda and all that was in it, desiring the kingship of Manwë and dominion over the realms of his peers.*¹ –“Valaquenta: Of the Enemies”

On the Argument

The quotation above from *The Silmarillion* provides the template and pattern for the descent into evil that many of Tolkien's characters follow. Tolkien's conceptions of the (un)reality of evil were shaped, in part, by his knowledge of Catholic² theology and theodicies. Remarking on his Catholic

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin) 1977, 31.

² This term is derived from the Greek καθολικισμός (katholikismos), meaning "according to the whole," connoting universality and completeness. In some ways, this is the central term used in developing the argument that Tolkien's vision is Catholic, but a specific variant of Catholicism. In standard usage, the term most commonly is used in connection with the Catholic Church, and this is where confusion arises, since what many contemporary, especially European and North American, observers seem to mean by "Catholic" is the Catholic church as it is currently constituted, with specific positions on a variety of social, political, and ethical issues, a particular set of liturgies, a centralized institutional hierarchy with a monarchical pope at its head (at least in theory), and so on. I argue that this is *not* what Tolkien means by the term in the context of his legendarium. Catholicism manifests a variety of historically and locally specific variations, many (maybe most) of which do not fit into that description just stated. Eighth century Anglo-Saxon Catholicism is not the same thing as 19th century Italian Catholicism; 21st century Mexican Catholicism is not the same thing as 16th century Japanese Catholicism; Ultramontanism is not the same thing as Conciliarism, Augustinianism is not the same thing as Scholasticism, and so on. Certainly there are continuities, but *continuity* is not the same thing as *equivalency*. Simply claiming Tolkien and his work as "Catholic" is not enough; we must ask "what kind of Catholic?" and be willing to locate him more precisely within the larger stream of variant Catholicisms.



vision, in December 1953 Tolkien wrote in response to a letter from a Jesuit correspondent and friend that "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision."³ This statement, and other relatively clear Christian and Catholic elements of Tolkien's legendarium⁴, support claims made by Catholics that Tolkien and his writing is "one of their own." However, this is not an unproblematic claim, despite the fact that for at least the past 25 years many Catholic apologists have been eager to claim *The Lord of the Rings* as a fine example of a Catholic vision applied to literature.⁵ While these claims are in the main largely correct, caution should be exercised in their application, because what Tolkien seems to have meant by the term "Catholic" is more specific than and somewhat distinct from what many contemporary observers and apologists mean by the term. In other words, I argue that Tolkien's use of the term is nuanced and contextual. We, as readers of his work and the secondary literature that analyzes it, should likewise notice that nuance and context to understand in a more accurate way what Tolkien means by claiming that his work is Catholic. Specifically, I will argue that Tolkien favors an early medieval form of Catholicism with which he identifies. This Catholicism, for the purposes of this paper, is marked especially by three characteristics: 1) It emphasizes a sacramental vision of the world which never disappears from Catholic thought but is somewhat less emphasized in modernity,⁶ 2) the power of the papacy is somewhat more limited than it would later become, being more Conciliar⁷ in nature than

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin) 1981, Letter 142.

⁴ I use the term "legendarium" in its broadest sense, that is, to include all of Tolkien's material set in or relating to his sub-creative setting of Middle-Earth.

⁵ A glance at only one of many such offerings should suffice to demonstrate this point; EWTN (Eternal Word Television Network), a Catholic media outlet, offers several Tolkien-themed apologetical products, such as this DVD:

http://www.ewtnreligiouscatalogue.com/TOLKIEN+S+LORD+OF+THE+RINGS+CATHOLIC+WORLDVIEW+DVD/cid=262/page_no=3/edp_no=22609/shop.axd/ProductDetails (as of October 2014)

⁶ A sacramental worldview is one in which it is understood that divine and spiritual realities can be perceived in and through material realities. In the Catholic case, especially in the medieval Catholic case, this means that the presence of God is revealed partially through the material world, including and especially the natural world and the sacraments of the Church. Other divine mysteries may also be discerned via these media. In an artistic/aesthetic mode, this means that the world, even the material aspects of it, is pulsing with divine energy and grace which is well-suited to being expressed via the various arts. Part of my argument in this paper rests on the observation that early medieval Catholicism foregrounded a sacramental worldview in a way that modern and contemporary Catholicism, at least in Europe and North America, relegates to a secondary attention (to be overly general about it). This is one reason why Tolkien prefers it; his theory of sub-creation is derived from a sacramental worldview which is stressed more in medieval Catholicism.

⁷ Broadly, this is a position arguing that institutional authority in the Church should ultimately reside in Ecumenical Councils, that is, conferences of ecclesiastical dignitaries and theological experts convened to discuss and settle matters of Church doctrine and practice in which those entitled to vote are representative of the whole world and which secures the approval of the whole Church. More simply, Conciliarism is the position that institutional authority in the Church resides in a collegial discussion among several more-or-less equal authorities and leaders; the pope is not a monarch, but a first among relative equals.

Ultramontanist,⁸ 3) the ecclesial community (the Church) is understood more as an open community than as a closed "fortress."⁹ To develop this argument requires looking at several examples from Tolkien's stories, specifically his characters Gandalf, Denethor II, and Saruman, as well as examples from *The Silmarillion*, a project which begins after a few items of Tolkien's Catholicism are addressed. So:

On Tolkien's Catholicism

*"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 re-arising. 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."*¹⁰

--J.R.R. Tolkien in a letter to Michael Tolkien

Most biographical information about Tolkien indicates that he was a faithful Catholic with deep personal affection for the Church and its teachings and practices, at least up until the conclusion of Vatican II (1962-1965). After Vatican II, he remained a faithful Catholic, but a distressed one who thought that many of the changes, especially liturgical, of the council were misguided at best.¹¹ Frequently his disappointment in that council is used as evidence that Tolkien's sympathies lay with a more conservative and traditional Catholicism. This is partially true, perhaps, in the sense that he

⁸ This term goes through a variety of changes in denotation over the centuries, but for the purposes of this paper it refers to the position that institutional authority in the Church resides primarily with a papacy that is nearly monarchical, or is monarchical, in nature. In the struggle between Conciliarist and Ultramontanist visions of the papacy, the general historical tendency has been to move increasingly in favor of the Ultramontanist claims, culminating with the promulgation of the doctrines of Papal Infallibility and Papal Primacy in Vatican I (1868-1870) shortly before Tolkien was born.

⁹ This is a term applied to the vision of those who hold that the Church should return to a pre-Vatican II emphasis on preserving standards of purity and holiness against the encroachment of the modern world. The image is that of the Church-as-fortress, wherein the faithful may find shelter and protection against "dangerous" modernist currents in an institution that has "sealed the gates" against a cultural siege. It can be argued that this image is backwards; that is, it is hell that is supposed to be a fortress, the gates of which cannot withstand the Church. "And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.'" --Matthew 16:17-18. Additionally, this is the passage that is most frequently used to establish the preeminence of the Petrine office, the papacy.

¹⁰ Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, letter #250.

¹¹ See Letter #306 in Carpenter and Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 393.

wanted to preserve the older forms of liturgy for having been patterns that, over time, had become organic and integral parts of the Church’s practice and were he thought more effective in transmitting the sacramental worldview than were the revised liturgies. This does not mean that he was a “conservative” Catholic, however, in the sense that conservatives tend to be sympathetic to Ultramontanism and/or embrace a “fortress Catholic” mentality.

Furthermore, Tolkien consistently argued for the validity of the concept of the “development of doctrine” against a conservative Catholic and Protestant desire to freeze Christian teaching in one historical phase or another. He resisted the “Protestantization” of the Church, meaning that he thought the diminution of the roles of the saints, the lessening of attention to Mary, the reduction of emphasis on a sacramental worldview (which acknowledged various levels of spiritual realities and corresponding beings), and the increasing focus on political issues all showed a lessening of attention to what he saw as core Catholic concerns. Furthermore, those topics in their medieval fullness were reflective of a *development* and *advance* in Christian understanding, Tolkien thought.¹² To diminish them would represent an actively retrograde motion, not a “conservative” preservation. So, regarding these issues, he was liturgically conservative, but theologically expansive. Combined with Tolkien’s opposition, as I see it, to an Ultramontanist papacy and a “fortress Catholic” mentality, we simply cannot peg him as being conservative or liberal in the contemporary senses of those terms.

On Tolkien’s Subtle Critique of Ultramontanism: Why Gandalf is Tolkien’s “Pope” and Saruman and Denethor II are not

Saruman

But at length the Shadow returned and its power increased; and in that time was first made the Council of the Wise that is called the White Council, and therein were Elrond and Galadriel and Círdan, and other lords of the Eldar, and with them were Mithrandir and Curunír. And Curunír (that was Saruman the White) was chosen to be their chief, for he had most studied the devices of Sauron of old. Galadriel indeed had wished that Mithrandir should be the head of the Council, and Saruman begrudged them that, for his pride and desire of mastery was grown great; but Mithrandir refused the office, since he would have no ties and no allegiance, save to those who sent him, and he would abide no place nor be subject to any summons. But Saruman now began to study the lore of the Rings of Power, their making and their history.¹³

I argue that Tolkien concealed (or revealed subtly) a theme in parts of *The Lord of The Rings* which shows indirectly but clearly his idea of what a good pope is and is not. To put it bluntly, Tolkien favors a Conciliarist rather than an Ultramontanist pope. To see this theme appearing, we would do well

¹² *Ibid*, 394.

¹³ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 300.

to examine the characters of Gandalf, who is a “good pope,” and compare him to two other stewards, Saruman and Denethor II, who in their own ways are “bad popes.” Our basis for comparison will be the thesis, forwarded again and again in Tolkien’s legendarium that the desire for mastery leads to an over-reaching of a character’s legitimate power and authority, producing a downward spiral into evil, shadow, and nothingness. Only by operating within one’s legitimate prerogatives and for the right reasons may this fate be avoided. It is the depictions of these characters and their respective trajectories that demonstrate to a degree Tolkien’s critique of the papal institution and its modern Ultramontanist claims.

For Tolkien, as for many Catholics, and going far enough back, Christians in general, the office of the pope is primarily that of stewardship. That is to say Christ is the head of the Church and the pope is a rightful steward acting in Christ’s name.¹⁴ As steward, it is within the pope’s prerogatives to teach, to guard doctrine and practice, to organize other bishops for various purposes, and through the charisma of the office generally hold the Church together. It is not the pope’s place to replace Christ as king, but to act most fully as a servant of Christ and a servant of others, indeed, as *servus servorum Dei* (“the servant of the servants of God”).

It is in this function as faithful steward that Gandalf excels and Saruman and Denethor II fail. Saruman, as a Maia and an *Istari* (wizard, but not magician) sent specifically to aid the free peoples of Middle Earth against the machinations of Sauron, is expected to do just that and no more. He can teach, he can guard against the movements of the enemy, he can organize the Wise (as in the White Council), and through the charisma of his office generally hold things together. He is *not* supposed to lead the fight or use aggressive force. None of the *Istari* are, for that matter. They appear as old men, but vigorous, so that they may advise but not seem overwhelming to their charges or of a martial nature. Saruman¹⁵ however gradually over time begins to seek increasing mastery over both things and other beings. He looks to solidify his power, moving into the Númenórean-built tower of Isengard.¹⁶ There he lives an existence increasingly isolated from the communities of free peoples he is supposed to be aiding. His researches into the stratagems of Sauron deepen and he becomes attracted to them. His use of a *palantír*, itself a product of that greatest of the Noldor who fell to depths of his own through pride and a desire for mastery, Fëanor, hastens his spiritual destabilization. By the time of the War of the Rings, he has become a traitor and a dupe, convinced he has the right to rule Middle-Earth and control

¹⁴ Although even that is a later development. For much of the first 1000-1200 years of Church history, the pope’s primary title was that of Vicar of *Peter*; he holds, after all, the Petrine office. As the papal claims to worldly and monarchical authority grew as the Middle Ages passed on into modernity, a shift in titles to Vicar of *Christ* was gradually effected.

¹⁵ I use both names here to recall that in his origins Saruman was a Maia of Valinor, and as such, was good and operated with the best of intentions initially.

¹⁶ The Númenóreans, though great in their origins, fall to destruction by seeking to transcend their natural status and limitations out of a mixture of pride, envy, and fear. In a sense, when Saruman moves into Isengard, he literally comes to inhabit not only that space but those motivations.

the fates of others as he sees fit, unaware that neither Sauron nor Gandalf have been deceived by Saruman of Many Colours.

The starkest contrast between the Saruman who claims authority as ruler, rather than as steward, and Gandalf may be seen in two conversations between them which Tolkien highlights. The first takes place when Gandalf has unmasked Sauron’s return and desire to recover the One Ring, and Gandalf travels to Saruman the White to seek his aid and advice. Saruman, isolated in Isengard, listens briefly to Gandalf before launching into a series of short speeches designed to, at first, lure Gandalf into joining him and, failing that, intimidate Gandalf into providing him with information about the location of the Ring. Saruman, using the rhetoric of inevitability, argues that a new Power is arising and that it cannot be resisted; better to join with it and try to manipulate it to advantage rather than resist it. After that, Saruman more directly says that “we” (meaning Gandalf and him) can together use the Ring to rule, and in so doing reveals his own naked desire for mastery. Gandalf rebukes both of these efforts, refusing to seek for mastery beyond that which has been given to him and steadfastly hewing to the mission he as an Istari must carry out.

The second conversation takes place after Isengard has been flooded by the Ents, and Saruman is trapped within. Gandalf, accompanied by several allies, returns to parley with Saruman with the goal of helping Saruman to repent and lend his aid once more against Sauron. Saruman by this point is completely caught up in his desire for power, despite his debased status, and refuses. This is reminiscent of Milton’s Satan exclaiming that

*Here at least we shall be free
the Almighty hath not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:
Here we may reign secure, and in my choice
to reign is worth ambition though in Hell:
Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven.*

Likewise, Saruman wants rulership and mastery, even if there is none of value to be had, rather than to serve others, which was his original purpose.

I do not think that Tolkien is equating an Ultramontanist papacy with Saruman. However, I argue that Tolkien sees in an Ultramontanist papacy a dangerous reach for mastery that does not properly belong in a legal sense to it, which in fact in its early medieval form it barely possessed if at all, operating on a much more Conciliar model. The papacy, in this evaluation, is not fully corrupt, but the Ultramontanist tendency is in the process of corrupting it, and Saruman can be read as an object lesson in where that may lead.

Denethor

The other major steward presented in *The Lord of the Rings* is Denethor, who rules Gondor from his steward's chair located at the foot of the throne of the King of Gondor. The lineage of Gondorian kings has long been absent from the throne and the line of their stewards have gradually come to consider themselves to be the *de facto* rulers of the kingdom. The current rightful king, Aragorn¹⁷, has been unwilling for various reasons to claim his status as king in Gondor, but when the War of the Ring breaks out, he prepares to reclaim his position. To prepare the way for this, Gandalf confronts Denethor II in Minas Tirith, capital of Gondor, in an effort both to gain Denethor's aid and to remind him of his status as steward, so that he will not work against Aragorn's return.

Gandalf fails in so persuading Denethor, largely because Denethor is in the grips of despair, primarily at the thought of losing his assumed authority. If Sauron defeats Gondor, which Denethor thinks inevitable, Denethor will lose his status as ruler. If Aragorn returns, a necessary condition for defeating Sauron, Denethor will lose his status as ruler (or more precisely return to rightful status as steward, a status which he has exceeded and no longer accepts). Either way, Denethor perceives that he loses, even though Aragorn's return should be Denethor's goal; his whole purpose as steward is to hold the kingdom together until the return of the king. Having exceeded his rightful status, Denethor can only see Aragorn's success as Denethor's failure, and therefore responds caustically to Gandalf's persuasions. In this he shows the overreaching nature of his desire for power, a desire more in keeping with an Ultramontanist-type vision than a Conciliar-type vision, such as that which the White Council is founded upon.

It is in this encounter between Gandalf and Denethor that the contest between rightful stewardship and overreach of rightful stewardship may be seen, especially in two brief paragraphs of dialogue between Gandalf and Denethor. In these paragraphs we first see Denethor's claims of a status beyond his rightful one, and Gandalf's alternative vision of his own status:

"If you understand it, then be content," returned Denethor. "Pride would be folly that disdained help and counsel at need; but you deal out such gifts according to your own designs. Yet the Lord of Gondor is not to be made a tool of other men's purposes, however worthy. And to him there is no purpose higher in the world as it now stands as the good of Gondor; and the rule of Gondor, my lord, is mine and no other man's, unless the king should come again."

"Unless the king should come again?" said Gandalf. "Well, my lord Steward, it is your task to keep some kingdom still against that event, which few now look to see. In that task you shall have all the aid that you are pleased to ask for. But I will say this: 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. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task,

¹⁷ Aragorn himself in typological terms is one of Tolkien's Christ-figures, refracted images of the Christ to come in the Fourth Age. Aragorn is the prefiguration of Christ-as-king, merciful liberator of the suffering dead and just ruler in Middle-Earth.

though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I also am a steward. Did you not know?"¹⁸

Denethor's vision of himself is as lord, not steward. He perfunctorily gives due to the idea that this status only lasts until the king should return, but Gandalf perceptively calls Denethor out on this point, since many (including Denethor) no longer believe that any such king will actually return. Gandalf, by contrast, envisions his stewardship on much broader and less possessive terms. He sees his role as one of protecting and giving aid to anything in the world which requires it. He bears this responsibility without making any claims of rulership, for his is to support, not to rule. He also extends this care to the natural world itself, not only a socially-constructed reality such as that of the kingdom of Gondor. Where Denethor is parsimonious and grasping, Gandalf is generous and helpful.

Denethor, then, as *de facto* ruler of a city and realm that is at the heart of things, in insisting the prerogatives of his assumed position, doubting the return of the true king, falling prey to despair and closing the gates of the fortress-city of Minas Tirith, is the type, I would argue, of Tolkien's vision of everything dangerous about an Ultramontanist vision of the papacy, which claims prerogatives that are only of recent historical development. These claims in turn lead to a kind of fortress mentality in the Church, which in turn reduces the Church's ability to actually engage with the world. Gandalf presents the Conciliarist type/alternative; that of a steward who is open to the world, who consults and supports as well as teaches, and as someone who sees his role as extending to all things without claiming ownership over them. Tolkien's preference between these two models is quite clear.

Fortresses

There is a clear connection in Tolkien's legendarium between the prideful claiming of status beyond one's legitimate position and the construction of fortresses. Fortresses are the products of minds that, whatever their other intellectual, spiritual, or moral qualities, wish to claim possession of or control over something that does not truly belong to them, even if for the "best" of motives, such as the desire to preserve or protect (seemingly) important things. Barad-Dur, Mordor with its walls and gates, and Angband are obvious examples, as are dwarven fortresses, such as Erebor and Moria, the human-built Minas Tirith and the elven Gondolin. What about realms that are protected by means other than walls, such as Lothlórien, Doriath, or even the Shire? Even in these cases, the motivation behind their creation is usually one based on a desire for control and a kind of exceeding of one's rightful prerogatives combined with a desire to protect something considered to be precious. Minas Tirith, after all, is the last outpost of the last descendants of the Númenóreans, who are remembered primarily for their technological prowess and their desire to negate their mortality in increasingly unnatural and unrightful ways. Gondolin was an effort to replicate the Valinorian city of Tirion by a branch of the Noldor, those elves who are the most rebellious and the most practiced in creating things that inspire

¹⁸ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin) 1991, 788-789.

possessive lust, such as the *Silmarils*, the *Palantíri*, and indirectly, the Rings of Power. Lothlórien is sustained by Galadriel and her Ring of Power, but Galadriel's motives, while generally admirable, are admixed with desire for control and a hint of rebelliousness; in fact, when she forgoes seizing the One Ring and in this way overcomes her desire for power, she recognizes that without the energy of that desire to motivate her, Lothlórien too will fade. The dwarves seek to protect their independence and their treasures; the hobbits their peace and comfort. Morgoth seeks a base from which to extend his power and hoard the *Silmarils*; Sauron in a lesser way follows in his footsteps.

All of these fortresses, then, are products of some kind of will to control and to possess; they are all, to varying degrees, expressions of egoistic desire, even if in the service of trying to preserve something deemed valuable and good. Furthermore, they all collapse at some point or in some way. The Tower of Barad Dur, the gates of Mordor, and Angband all collapse at the defeat of their masters. It is true that Minas Tirith does not literally collapse, but its walls prove almost useless in the end; it is only by *leaving* the fortress, by abandoning its walls, that Aragorn and allies can effectively confront Sauron. The walls of Gondolin are destroyed due to betrayal from within. Doriath is overrun by former allies. Lothlórien fades away, inevitable change comes to the Shire, and the dwarves are almost perpetually homeless. The irony is that fortresses, in the long run, do not work in Tolkien's legendarium. Eventually, what they are designed to protect or to control is lost. Being manifestations of an egoistic desire to possess and to control, they, like all things based on possessiveness in Tolkien's legendarium, fail. Hell has the gates of a fortress.

In the modern world, at least up until Vatican II and arguably even after it, one of the characteristics of Ultramontanist papacies has been a promotion of a kind of "fortress Church" mentality. Tolkien's extended meditation on fortresses and how they fail in the end is, I think, a critique of this Ultramontanist product. He never says so explicitly, but in repeatedly revisiting the theme of collapsing or failing fortresses, I argue that Tolkien is rejecting at the same time the fortress Church mentality. For Tolkien, if the sacramental vision is true, then barring the gates of the Church is an act of unfaith; God's love and presence is to be found throughout the whole world, not just within the confines of the Church community. The elves fail to do their jobs of tending all of Middle-earth when they retreat into their fortresses, and the fortresses themselves fail. In a Conciliar vision, the Church is not a fortress, but a wide-open and apparently vulnerable community. However, that is its strength; by not binding itself to a closed-off and possessive claim relative to the rest of the world, it is then able to tend the rest of the world. It is when Aragorn and Gandalf leave the fortress that they are able save what is valuable. The only way to tend to "all worthy things that are in peril" is to go out to them, not wall oneself off from them.

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