THE LORD OF THE RINGS AND CATHOLICISM:
A REFLECTIVE JOURNEY

or

ONE THESIS TO RULE THEM ALL

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract:

*The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien has become an iconic model of fantasy literature as well as a beloved tale that touches readers’ hearts. Yet, few readers understand the Catholic foundation upon which this epic work was written. The *Lord of the Rings* has played an important role in the formation of my faith as a Catholic. By exploring the presence of five Catholic values embedded in Tolkien’s literature, I hope that others will come to appreciate the beauty of this connection and possibly become interested in the Catholic way of life.

*Please Note:* A large number of quotations and references come from the text of *The Lord of the Rings*, which is traditionally divided into three parts. To aid in the reader’s understanding, these references will be cited according to the specific part from which they come as follows:

- FOTR = *The Fellowship of the Ring*
- TT = *The Two Towers*
- ROTK = *The Return of the King*
Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank Dr. Laurie Lindberg for agreeing to be my thesis advisor. Together we spent countless hours editing the first draft of my composition. Often there were sections that lacked the feeling or verbiage I was looking for, and in that regard the keen literary insight and compositional mastery of Dr. Lindberg proved most useful. Dr. Lindberg is one of my most beloved professors at Ball State and one of my favorite people in general. I am delighted to have had her guidance during this project.

Secondly, I would like to thank Tolkien for writing one of the most influential tales I have ever encountered. His splendid novel swept me up at a young age and carried me into a world I have grown to adore. I am forever indebted to you, Mr. Tolkien. May your soul rest pleasantly in the eternal providence of Our Lord.

Lastly but certainly not least, I would like to thank Jesus Christ for inspiring me to undertake this task. Your love guides me forward and teaches me something new every day. I owe everything to you, and I pray that my heart may remain open to your teachings to the end of my days.
"The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision."

- J.R.R. Tolkien

Ever since I first read *The Hobbit* in fourth grade, I have been drawn to the literary works of J.R.R. Tolkien. At first I became swept up by the imaginative storyline and Tolkien's rich writing style. As I grew older and moved on to the more adult *The Lord of the Rings*, I came to appreciate the lush description of the natural world of Middle-Earth and the subtle symbolism embedded in the storyline that I had missed during my first reading as a child. I would spend hours poring over the books, surrounded by the sounds of nature by the creek in my backyard. I absorbed every detail of the places in Middle-Earth to the point that I would feel almost as if I were in the story myself. This meeting of nature and literature had such a profound effect on me that nowadays I prefer to read *The Lord of the Rings* almost exclusively outside.

As a man of depth and imagination, I am drawn most to stories that are full of transcendental meaning, so it is easy to see why I adore the works of Tolkien, whose ideas transcend the ordinary and superficial. Apart from the *Bible*, I have yet to find a set of books which offer more powerful insights to be gained than *The Lord of the Rings*. Each time I reread the books, I catch something new or more meaningful that I had not noticed before.

I also instantly fell in love with the characters. I found the members of the Fellowship - especially Aragorn, Legolas, Frodo, and Gandalf - to be ones that I could
relate to most easily. Their values are those that I deemed quite noble, and I would often visualize actions of the characters during my own instances of personal struggle. By my high school years it was clear that I had developed what I considered to be a healthy obsession with all things Middle-Earth. When Peter Jackson’s film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* were released, my love for this story blossomed to heights previously unimaginable. Little did I know that there was something far deeper at work underlying my passion.

Catholicism has always been a major pillar of my family’s existence. We rarely missed weekly Mass when I was growing up, and I took weekly Religious Education courses from first grade through eight grade. As I matured I came to appreciate the beauty and mysticism that exist within each Mass. While some believers find the rituals and traditions to be archaic or unnecessary, I have always enjoyed the structure as well as the innate sense of community that comes with them. There’s something quite profound about joining hands, praying the Our Father, and knowing that millions of people around the world are engaging in the same prayer. There’s something even more profound about taking Communion. I still find it quite moving to know that upon receiving the Eucharist I literally have the grace of Jesus Christ flowing through my body, and, what’s more, to know that millions of others are partaking in that same beautiful sacrament as part of the Christian family. This is the kind of transcendentalism I seek out in my daily life as a Catholic believer.

In truth, I have considered other denominations of Christianity from time to time. However, in my personal experience none of the other denominations possess quite the
depth that I find in Catholicism. Catholicism for me extends far beyond the modern sense of the word “religion.” It is not just a set of beliefs; it is my way of life.

Not until approximately six months ago did I encounter the statement by Tolkien and finally understood that “\textit{The Lord of the Rings} is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work”\textsuperscript{1} (Tolkien n.p.). It came as quite a shock that Tolkien himself proclaimed his work to have an essentially Catholic foundation, and that as a Catholic I myself had never picked up on the connection! Suddenly my fascination with Tolkien’s work all made sense. I firmly believe that as much as Frodo was meant to find the Ring, I was meant to be reading these wonderful books as a way of deepening my Catholic faith. Of course, the universal values to be found in \textit{The Lord of the Rings} can be appreciated by people of other faiths and humanity at large.

When I came up with the idea for this thesis, I knew I was undertaking a formidable task. I wanted to do justice to Tolkien and at the same time glorify God through my work. Reducing the depth of Catholicism to five values in so short an essay was difficult, but with the Holy Spirit as my guide I was able to pick five values I thought most appropriate to the story and of most value to readers. Before I began reading and drafting, I prayed a Rosary and asked God to speak through me as I wrote.

Some of the values, such as hope and giving, were ones that I knew right from the start would be chapters in my thesis. Others became manifest as I started the note taking and writing process. I carefully read each chapter of Tolkien’s books and made notes corresponding to each of the five values, often working in the comforts of God’s natural creation. The “Res” – a Mishawaka nature preserve – and the “back nine” of the local golf course provided excellent backdrops for my literary labor. Sometimes I went into a
chapter with a specific Bible quote in mind and I would search for the best connection in *The Lord of the Rings*. Other times I would have a quote from *The Lord of the Rings* in mind and I would dig through the Bible to find the Christian expression of the message I sought to bring to light. Through this process of exploration I gained a deeper understanding of my own faith as well as the faith which inspired Tolkien during his own journey into Middle-Earth.

Author Ralph Wood points out, as Tolkien states in his letters, that “the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism” (4). Unlike some of his contemporaries, Tolkien strongly disliked allegory, and he did not seek in *The Lord of the Rings* to teach lessons overtly to his readers (Wood 3). Instead, Tolkien appealed to a deeper sense of spirituality because the Catholic values are embodied in the myths of Middle-Earth themselves. Tolkien’s works serve to spark the reader’s imagination, and for those that are willing to explore his world in greater detail, to provide a mighty Catholic worldview that serves as the basis for his literary act of sub-creation. In the spirit of what I hope Tolkien wished to achieve through his great labor, I have decided to identify and reflect upon five quintessential Catholic values that are revealed in the characters, events, and actions that take place in *The Lord of the Rings*. Join me as I journey into Middle-Earth to uncover the precious spiritual treasures that lie within.

*Ihjve Aglar an Iluvatar, Coimas, ar Aina Fëa!*

All Glory to the Father, Life-bread, and Holy Spirit!
CHAPTER I

Hope

Hope can be defined as believing that one’s situation will improve, despite present difficulties. For Christians, hope at its core is manifested in trusting through faith that all will end well for those who follow God’s plan. Though the hobbits and other beings in Middle-Earth have not yet experienced the revelation of faith through Jesus Christ, they nonetheless cling to this deep sense of hope. When obstacles arise, the virtuous people hope and believe that they will be blessed with the inner fortitude to carry out their duties.

Hope’s opposite can prove deadly, even fatal, to those who allow it to poison their hearts and minds. When people act out of despair, they often make choices that negatively impact their lives. The worst kind of fear is despair: a belief that all hope is utterly and irreconcilably lost. Despair is what leads Denethor, Steward of Gondor, to his untimely demise. Denethor uses a palantír (seeing stone) to gain secret knowledge that could prove very useful in his defense of Gondor. Yet, since the two other known palantíri are being controlled by the evil wizard Saruman and the sinister spirit of Sauron, Denethor begins to view all events through the eyes of the Shadow, the summation of all evil in Middle-Earth. In his madness, Denethor attempts to burn his own son alive and eventually commits suicide because, as Gandalf discovered, “the vision of the great might of Mordor that was shown to him fed the despair of his heart until it overthrew his mind” (ROTK 838). According to Gandalf at the Council of Elrond, “Despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt” (FOTR 262). Denethor wrongfully imagined the death of his son and the end of his kingdom.
In a similar fashion, humans can experience needless suffering and fear if they allow dark thoughts to grind away at their psyches. Whereas the Shadow strives to push doubt and fear into the hearts of the good people in Middle-Earth, so Satan seeks to ensnare us in the depths of despair in our own world. At many times in my life, I have unfortunately given in to the destructive pessimism spread by the Prince of Darkness. However, I have learned that there is only one true remedy for this torment, and that is the hope brought about by Jesus Christ and the courage that he embodies.

Prospects often look rather grim for the free people of Middle-Earth as hope of peace fails. Elrond and the rest of the Council understand the danger when they meet in Rivendell before the company of a dwarf, men, an elf, hobbits and a wizard sets out. The task with which they are presented – destroying the One Ring - seems impossible. To fail would mean the ruin of all free things in Middle-Earth because it would give Sauron dominion. Its success is doubtful and will surely cost many lives in the end. Events have taken a dark turn even before the Council meets when Frodo has been stabbed on Weathertop by the Witch-King. Part of a Morgul knife is embedded in his shoulder. Yet somehow he survives despite the fact that, as Gandalf feared, “I have known Big People who would quickly have been overcome by that splinter, which you bore for seventeen days” (FOTR 216). Other members of the Fellowship experience hardship along the way, but the journey is undoubtedly hardest for Frodo. Near the borders of Mordor he finally acknowledges the gravity of his situation:

And here he was a little Halfling from the Shire, a simple hobbit of the quiet countryside, expected to find a way where the great ones could not go, or dared not go. It was an evil fate. But he had taken it on himself in his own sitting-room
in the far-off spring of another year...this was an evil choice. Which way would he choose? And if both led to terror and death, what good lay in the choice? (TT 630)

Even in the depths of near certain doom, when it would be so easy to turn back, the hobbits keep moving forward. Hope is the driving force that gives them the courage to face the great evil of their time.

In the world of Middle-Earth, what do its inhabitants have to say about hope? For them, it is often a physical sign or peculiar occurrence that reassures them, pushing them forward even into uncertainty. While camping out in the desolate mountains of Mordor, Frodo and Sam become weary and weighed down in their hearts by the evil fate they seem to face. Yet in the midst of darkness,

Peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach. (ROTK 901)

It is hope that provides the courage to attempt the impossible. Giving up in the face of adversity is not an option, according to Gimli the Dwarf: “Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens” (FOTR 274).

Sometimes darkness can be necessary to fulfill the purpose of good will. Stars shine out clearer in dark, and that is precisely the message Galadriel blesses Frodo with when she gives him her gift in Lothlórien: “In this phial,” she said, “is caught the light of
Eärendil's star...it will shine brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out" (FOTR 367). This very light blazes forth in the horrifying tunnels of the giant spider, Shelob, symbolizing the hope and waxing courage that Sam finds in the darkest of hours (TT 712).

The success of the Quest depends on hope, on trusting that the forces of good will ultimately master the forces of evil, despite calamities that befall the Fellowship during the journey. The same can be said of Catholics and our quest. We know that part of our journey on this earth will lie in darkness and uncertainty, for, "Who hopes for what one sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance" (International Student Bible, Rom. 9.24-25). Trusting can be extremely difficult, even requiring us to start "hoping against hope" (International Student Bible, Rom. 4.18). Yet Catholicism teaches us to trust in God's will, no matter what darkness or doubts plague us. The Apostle Paul encourages us through his letter to the Romans to

...even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the holy spirit that has been given to us. (International Student Bible, Rom. 5.3-5)

Mastering the skill of perseverance takes time and patience. In my own life I have experienced times of doubt, grief, and hardship that I thought would never end. However, in looking back I have found purpose in every single one of those struggles, and often it seems that the times that were darkest occurred right before some amazing breakthrough in my life!
To hope that such terrible situations as they experience will resolve themselves happily requires the Fellowship and other good people in Middle-Earth to face their fears head on. Despite the overbearing and ever present Shadow, Aragorn’s message to the company in the dark of Moria is “Do not be afraid!” (FOTR 303). A similar shadow of evil lingers over us as humans on Earth. However, I am sure most Catholics, Protestants, atheists, and agnostics would be as surprised as I was to learn that “The most common phrase that appears in the New Testament is ‘Do not be afraid.’ The most common phrase that appears in the Old Testament is ‘Be not afraid.’ Between the Old and New Testaments, this phrase appears more than one thousand times” (Kelly 311)! Clearly God is calling humanity to put aside its fears. He is calling humanity to put all its trust in Him. He is also calling us to have faith enough to know, as Gandalf does, that “courage is found in unlikely places” (FOTR 83). Tolkien’s characters endure many trials, both physical and mental. But each character keeps moving through the difficulties because he or she lives with the hope that all good efforts work towards the good will of a higher power. It is this same blessed hope that Catholicism offers to its followers.
CHAPTER II

Purpose

The concept of purpose can be understood within the context of Catholicism in two ways: as the purpose for our existence and as the purpose for events that occur during our existence. If you were to ask a Catholic what his or her purpose in life is, the individual should refer you to the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus states,

You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments. (International Student Bible, Matt. 22.37-40)

As Christ commands us, we are to love our God, our selves, and our neighbor. These greatest of commandments convey a certain degree of responsibility for taking on any challenges to these objectives that we might face. At times, mainly because of the worldly temptations of sin, these commandments can seem difficult to uphold, and, while our salvation depends ultimately on our adherence to these simple requirements, it should be noted that electing to follow them is always a free choice — for humans and Hobbits alike.

Despite Frodo’s having been called to carry the Ring as part of the Quest, he is always given the opportunity to turn back or refuse the burden. Before even being asked, Frodo graciously offers at the Council of Elrond to “take the Ring, though I do not know the way” (FOTR 264). Elrond, an Elvish leader, promptly acknowledges Frodo’s request, stating, “But it is a heavy burden...I do not lay it on you. But if you take it
freely, I will say that your choice is right” (264). Though the Wise (Elrond, Gandalf, Galadriel, and Celeborn) believe that Frodo is called to carry the Ring and that his doing so could fulfill the purpose of good will in Middle-Earth, Frodo is meant to take on that challenge only as an act of free will.

In much the same way, God calls Catholics – and in truth, all of humanity – to fulfill His Purpose. At times Catholics fall short of this purpose. We forget to treat others as we want to be treated. Days go by when we forget to love our God fully by calling to Him in prayer. Indeed, struggle is a part of every person’s faith life on some level. Yet for those who believe, what prompts them to strive to uphold God’s purpose? What prompts Catholics to choose to love their neighbors, even when it is hardest to do so? What motivation did Frodo find for continuing his journey, even when the road became darkest? The answer to all these questions has to do with the purpose for events in our lives and the resulting hope that they can elicit.

Catholics believe that events that occur outside of our control can serve as evidence that a higher power is at work. Many times during my life I have felt incredibly blessed by fortunate circumstances and the “hope unlooked-for” that I will discuss in Chapter V. I have also at times felt called to certain tasks or talents. For example, I feel called as a violinist to glorify God through music. I certainly felt called to read *The Lord of the Rings* and write this thesis as a means of glorifying God. When something works out unexpectedly or we find ourselves being gently prodded to undertake a certain task or follow a particular path in life, Catholics know that the Lord is present and working through them.
So it is with Frodo and the Ring. While Frodo exists in a pre-Christian world where belief in the Savior is not yet possible, evidence exists to show that Ilúvatar (the "Father of All" in Tolkien's world) is working to ensure that good is achieved. A perfect example of this is demonstrated when Gandalf tells Frodo that

"Behind that [Bilbo's finding of the ring] there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you were also meant to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought." (FOTR 54)

Though Frodo is a very unlikely person to attempt the destruction of the One Ring, it has been ordained by the higher benevolent power that he should be just the person to complete the task. Yet it may not seem so to Frodo, or indeed to anyone who is given a seemingly impossible task. But without a certain degree of uncertainty, there would be no need for hope. Truly, trusting that the higher power is working to guide one for a specific purpose provides the courage to move forward. Galadriel, a leader among the Wisest of Elves, demonstrates this belief during her farewell to the Fellowship when she states, "Maybe the paths that you each shall tread are already laid before your feet, though you do not see them" (FOTR 359). This message is similar to the advice proclaimed in the Gospel: "Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself" (International Student Bible, Matt. 6.34).

Despite any assurance of safety, there are evil powers that operate in our world and Middle-Earth that strive against the over-arching force of good. For the inhabitants of Middle-Earth during the War of the Ring, Sauron is the spiritual and physical embodiment of pure evil. In a similar way, Satan is the driving force behind all evil and
unfortunate acts that humanity experiences. These evil forces can seem overwhelming at times, sometimes so much that those who experience them temporarily lose the precious gift of hope. Frodo probably asked “why me?” several times throughout his journey, and all of us can certainly relate to feeling this way at one point or another. Yet the Catholic faith teaches us that even evil things can be turned to a good purpose by God.

*The Lord of the Rings* expresses this idea, which is evidenced in numerous examples throughout the work. For instance, Frodo’s finding of unlikely friendship with Faramir (a knight of Gondor and brother of the late Boromir) turns the calamity of Boromir’s betrayal from “evil to great good” (TT 679). Whereas Boromir’s shortcomings had threatened the integrity of the Quest and the Fellowship, Faramir’s wisdom and generosity atone for the evil and renew Frodo’s faith in Men. Another example is seen when Gandalf returns from death as Gandalf the White. He serves as a major corrective to the evil that was brought about by Saruman, stating, “Indeed I *am* Saruman, one might almost say, Saruman as he should have been” (TT 484). The struggle with the Balrog in Moria which seems to have caused Gandalf’s death was a heavy blow to the Fellowship, but Gandalf’s struggle makes him stronger in the end, so that his return is all the more glorious.

The most striking example of the concept of purpose can be traced through the role of Gollum in the novel. After bearing the burden of the Ring for hundreds of years, Gollum becomes a slave to it. Though his motive for helping the Hobbits is ultimately selfish, there exists some good that can come out of his actions. Gandalf foreshadows Gollum’s importance during the Wizard’s early meeting with Frodo when he says that “my heart tells me that he [Gollum] has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the
end" (TT 58). Gandalf’s words hold true in the Cracks of Mount Doom when, ironically, Gollum is the creature to destroy the Ring by falling into the fire with it. Frodo recognizes that, despite all his efforts, “but for him [Gollum] I could not have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain...so let us forgive him!” (ROTK 926).

Frodo faced extreme physical and psychological pain during his journey, yet he continued to move forward. Accepting suffering as a necessary part of the ultimate plan in one’s life can be difficult, especially when such suffering seems needless or undeserved. However, in the midst of darkness, Catholics are called to remember the truth behind Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (*International Student Bible*).

Amidst all the experiences, both good and seemingly bad, which I’ve had in trying to discern God’s Will in my life, remembering one of my mother’s favorite verses from 1 Corinthians 13 has been extremely helpful: “God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it” (*International Student Bible*). In essence, this message says that God will never give us more than we can handle. The hardest part of this message for me involves trusting that the paths I choose are the “right ones” or optimal. The Catholic answer to this uncertainty is to focus on the present situation and realize, as Paul states in his letters to the Romans and Corinthians, that “as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function.” Furthermore, “the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are all the more necessary” (*International Student Bible*, 1 Cor. 12.22; Rm. 12.4). In the pre-Christian ages of Middle-Earth, Gandalf applies this value often when he states, “it is not our part to master all the tides of the world” and that
“all we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us” (ROTK 861; FOTR 50).

As a Catholic, I understand that my true purpose is to love God, my neighbor, and myself. With this comes the responsibility to do my best to uphold God’s laws, but that even when I fall short or unfortunate circumstances arise, God will use them ultimately to achieve His Will, if I allow Him to work through me. The Ring was not destroyed in one day; similarly the individual callings of humanity and the eradication of evil cannot be completed in one day. When we feel discouraged, it is helpful to heed the advice of Blessed Mother Teresa (and I think Gandalf would certainly agree): “Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin” (“Words by Mother Teresa”).
CHAPTER III

Giving

Throughout my life I have felt that it is truly better to give than to receive. Being raised Catholic, I’ve been taught to appreciate and imitate Christ’s generosity and humility as displayed in the Gospels. I learned – although I am far from perfect at it – to put God and the needs of others first in my life as much as possible. Giving is an essential component of Catholicism that is easy to see reflected in the good people of Middle-Earth.

The most basic level of giving involves a simple generosity. This usually means recognizing a need in others and seeking to fulfill it, or perhaps completing simple acts of kindness. The good beings in Middle-Earth are characterized by that kind of giving. The generosity of hobbits is apparent early in The Lord of the Rings, especially considering that hobbits “give presents to other people on their own birthdays” (FOTR 26). Indeed, Frodo’s choice to accept the burden of the Ring on behalf of all free-speaking peoples represents a substantial act of giving, but that will be covered in a later section of this chapter.

Another example is the supreme benevolence and hospitality of Tom Bombadil. Though the fate of the Ring will ultimately have no effect on him, Bombadil graciously offers to take in the four hobbits after saving them from Old Man Willow. Furthermore, he travels to the edge of his realm to save the hobbits from the Barrow-wights after they leave his abode (FOTR 122). How many people, Catholics included, would be willing to take in wandering strangers and provide them with food, shelter and clothing, all for no
personal gain? Certainly, this is the minimum level of giving that Catholicism calls humanity to strive for, yet too often we get caught up in our own wants and desires.

The deepest level of giving involves self-sacrifice. This means giving to others (with or without need) and not expecting anything in return. All Catholics should be aware of this kind of giving, as it is precisely Christ’s sacrifice of Himself that allows us to be forgiven for our sins. We remember this ultimate sacrifice every time we celebrate the Liturgy of the Eucharist at Mass. It is one thing to give assistance to others; however, it requires a deep-seated selflessness to offer up our own motives and desires in that process of giving. Some of the most wise and powerful characters in *The Lord of the Rings* practice just that kind of sacrifice.

Early on in the first book, Bilbo surrenders the precious Ring to Gandalf and Frodo in Bag-End. Because of the evil power Sauron wove into the One Ring, its possessors experience an unquenchable desire to hold on to it at all costs. For Bilbo to freely give up the Ring represents a great sacrifice of his personal desires (FOTR 32). Another example of this altruism involves those who watch over the Shire. The Dúnedain, last remnants of the ancient line of Númenóreans, are enlisted by Gandalf to guard the Shire, especially after word reaches Barad-dûr that the Ring may be hidden in Bag-End. Though “travelers scowl” and “countrymen give us scornful names,” the Dúnedain would not change their task (FOTR 242). This is because these Rangers are willing to jeopardize their own lives and reputations so that others may have peace.

Possibly the most apparent instance of selfless sacrifice occurs when Gandalf lays down his life for the Fellowship in the Mines of Moria. The Wizard is adamant that the company leave him to fight the Balrog – the Flame of Udûn - on his own. The impact of
this move is evident in the devastation that it brings to the Fellowship when Gandalf disappears into the darkness. The Company is left to continue the journey without its leader (FOTR 322). To be sure, the Grey Pilgrim’s sacrifice is well rewarded in his return as Gandalf the White (TT 491).

An often-overlooked example of altruistic giving concerns the Elves and the Three Rings that were entrusted to them in the Elder Days. While the One Ring holds no sway over the Three Rings when it is out of Sauron’s hands, the fate of the Three is still bound to Sauron’s pending doom. For the Wise believe that if “you [Frodo] succeed, then our power is diminished, and Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away” (FOTR 356). Yet the elves would not have it any other way and would indeed “cast all away rather than submit to Sauron,” even if it means the downfall of the most sacred of Elven realms in Middle-Earth (356).

Finally, Frodo’s unwavering acceptance of the task appointed to him represents the quintessential sacrifice throughout the entire course of Tolkien’s work. His willingness to give his very life so that Middle-Earth may be free is astounding, especially considering the effects the Ring begins to have on him through his journey:

With every step towards the gates of Mordor Fodo felt the Ring on its chain about his neck grow more burdensome. He was now beginning to feel it as an actual weight dragging him earthwards. But far more he was troubled by the Eye...that horrible growing sense of a hostile will that strove with great power to pierce all shadows of cloud, and earth, and flesh, and to see you: to pin you under its deadly gaze, naked, immovable. (TT 616)
Though in outward appearance he is a simple hobbit of the Shire, and therefore an unlikely individual to be appointed to such an errand, he is actually the ideal person to bear the Ring. Frodo possesses a strong, selfless courage that enables him to accept his task even in the darkest moments.

So, what do all these examples of giving, especially Frodo’s, have to do with Catholicism? The essence of giving as taught by the Catholic lifestyle is a Godly obedience. This obedience as Galadriel puts it in Middle-Earth terms, stems from a desire that “what should be shall be” (FOTR 356); that in submitting to the will of the Higher Power, even in darkness, great good can be achieved. Frodo acknowledges this truth when he departs for the Uttermost West, stating, “It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them” (ROTK 1006). So too the warriors of the neighboring countries of Gondor and Rohan are willing to sacrifice their lives to distract Sauron so that Frodo may have a final chance of completing his Quest. As Gandalf sees it: “We must walk open-eyed into that trap, with courage, but small hope for ourselves. For my, lords, it may well prove that we ourselves shall perish utterly in black battle far from living lands; so that even if Barad-dûr be thrown down, we shall not live to see a new age. But this, I deem, is our duty” (ROTK 862). The prospects look very grim, but Gandalf and his supporters would rather see the Enemy triumph as they lie dying at his Black Gate than to stand idly by as Frodo and Sam endure the might of Mordor to no avail.

Catholicism calls humanity to be willing to give up anything and everything so the Will of the Father may be achieved. We may not always enjoy the self-sacrifice and we may often fail to see the purpose behind it. Yet it is important to remember that God
gave His Only Son to ensure that we may have everlasting peace in the afterlife. The human part of Jesus might have wished the task to be appointed to someone else, but as he proclaimed during his agony in the garden: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done" *(International Student Bible, Lk. 22.42).*
CHAPTER IV

Love

It is written that of all the virtues, "the greatest of these is love" (*International Student Bible*, 1 Cor. 13.13). The central teaching of Catholicism is that love is the quintessential foundation of God's powers and action, and thus the human purpose for existing. We believe that no matter what happens, love will survive and conquer all because it "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things" (*International Student Bible*, 1 Cor. 13.7). While love is not always given primary attention in *The Lord of the Rings*, its presence is nonetheless essential to the mission of the Fellowship and all free-speaking peoples of Middle-Earth.

The first indirect mention of a form of love occurs during one of Gandalf's early conversations with Frodo regarding the creature Gollum:

Frodo: 'What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had the chance!'

Gandalf: 'Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need....Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity.' (FOTR 58)

While Gollum is not to be trusted, Gandalf makes clear that he is still to be respected as a creature of worth, even if that worth is not apparent until it is demonstrated in the Cracks of Doom. Truly it is love that enables Frodo to acknowledge the part Gollum played and even forgive him as he [Frodo] lies with Sam on the slopes of Orodruin (ROTK 926).

But how can love be given to so seemingly wretched a creature as Gollum, who has become a wretched, lying slave to the Ring? The answer lies rooted in the Catholic
teaching that true love is unconditional. The strongest evidence of this kind of love is shown in the brotherly love poured forth by Sam for his Master and friend, Frodo. Love enables Sam to be instantly ready to pursue the Quest with Frodo even “if he climbs to the Moon” (FOTR 85). It is love that Sam proclaims to readers as Frodo sleeps on the outskirts of Mordor: “I love him. He’s like that and sometimes it shines through somehow [referring to the inner light that shines out in Frodo’s character at times]. But I love him, whether or no” (TT 638). Finally, when Sam bears the burden of the Ring himself for a short time, “it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm” (ROTK 881). No matter what Frodo says or does, Sam’s love for him is unfaltering, and thus he embodies perfectly the Catholic concept of true love.

Because Catholics believe that true love is unconditional, and that all good things come ultimately from God’s Divine Love, love’s opposite is all the more dangerous and destructive. Love builds things up and binds things together. Hatred tears things down and serves no purpose other than to spread evil throughout the world. Certainly, Saruman’s downfall is due primarily to the fact that “often does hatred hurt itself!” (TT 571). Whereas love has its source in respect and a genuine desire to give to others, hatred is based on selfishness and avarice. This hatred is precisely what Sauron lives by and seeks to spread during his proposed reign of Middle-Earth, but in the end it serves to bring about his own ruin.

Love can do wonders to heal the hurts of the world, but to achieve true, perfect love, humans and Middle-Earth dwellers must learn to extend their love even to enemies. Jesus teaches us to “love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the
good” (International Student Bible, Matt. 5.44). I feel I can speak for most of humanity when I assert that this facet of love is the hardest to master. It is so easy to become angry with our enemies and lash out in hatred towards them. The same difficulty is experienced by the inhabitants of Middle-Earth, and no one character is perfect at overcoming it. But those that are open to experiencing love in its truest form may even have an experience similar to Gimli’s during his first encounter with Galadriel when he “looked suddenly into the heart of an enemy and saw there love and understanding” (FOTR 347).

Though he began his journey with a hatred for Gollum, Frodo demonstrates upon his return to the Shire that he has mastered the art of loving his enemy. True love helps Frodo to show mercy to even so duplicitous a wizard as Saruman. Saruman has taken over the Shire after the fall of Sauron, but Frodo pleads with the other hobbits upon Saruman’s capture: “Do not kill him even now. He is fallen, and his cure is beyond us; but I would still spare him, in the hope that he may find it” (ROTK 996). Saruman betrays the purpose he was designed for early in the tale by joining forces with Sauron, and he further abases virtue by attacking the Shire even after the fall of Sauron (FOTR 253; ROTK 994). But in his heart Frodo takes pity on Saruman and chooses to forgive rather than forsake.

It should be mentioned that love is symbolically present in Middle-Earth in the form of the Elvish waybread called lembas. This bread “had a virtue without which they [Frodo and Sam] would long ago have lain down to die...It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond mortal kind” (ROTK 914). This life-bread or coimas as it is called in the high-Elven language of Quenya is obviously filled with a supernatural virtue, most likely some function of the great love of Ilúvatar.
(the "Father of All"). For Catholics, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist gives us the physical embodiment of love. This is why the Eucharist is so important to us: it is a means of directly receiving God's Love in the deepest of ways. Those Catholics who open their hearts truly to the Blessed Sacrament can tell you that it fills them with a deep sense of joy! It is certainly enough to sustain a weary heart in a similar fashion to the *lembas* but in all the more real and powerful a way since its enactment requires reciprocity and faith on the part of its partaker.

To sum up this chapter, love is inherently present in all things that are good. At times it may be difficult to practice and even harder to perfect in the loving of our enemies. Yet the true love illustrated by the Catholic way of life expresses the ultimate truth that we seek and crave as human beings. For it is foretold that in the end, love will conquer all.
CHAPTER V

Joy

Tolkien was a man who believed that fairy stories should have happy endings. He developed the term “eucatastrophe” to represent the happy ending that is the highest function and culmination of all true stories. As a Catholic, Tolkien firmly believed that “The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy” (Tolkien 88). In the spirit of Tolkien, I chose to make joy the topic of my final chapter for this thesis.

Like the Resurrection, *The Lord of the Rings* is also a story that begins and ends in joy. In the first chapter, Tolkien paints an in-depth picture of the land of the hobbits: the Shire. His words provide mental illustrations so lush and vivid that readers – myself most definitely included – feel a profound sense of joy as they become swept up in the lives of the Shire-folk. For the doubtful, I challenge them to read a description of Gandalf’s amazing fireworks and *not* feel a childlike sense of wonder well up inside them (FOTR 27).

Joy can be experienced at a simple or more complex level, and in a variety of ways. One of the chief joys of the hobbits in Middle-Earth is the simple pleasure to be obtained from breathing fresh air and enjoying the beauty of the natural world. Even as Frodo scrambles with Sam through the dismal rock labyrinth of the Emyn Muil, he cannot help but be filled with joy at the sight of something as simple as the evening sky: “Night will be on us soon. How beautiful the stars are, and the Moon!” (TT 597).

Through my years as a nature lover I have grown to appreciate the transcendent joy to be experienced from walking through a woods. In our modern world where we have
become dependent on technology for entertainment as well as work, our passion for the natural world has fallen away, even in the Catholic lifestyle. With the rise or urbanization, people spend far less time in the forests and meadows of old. Yet Christianity calls us to respect and enjoy God’s Creation. The hobbits display the true spiritual joy that comes from flowers, fields, rivers, and hills – joys that have become increasingly “old-fashioned” or “forgotten” in modern society. Even Sam and Frodo are humbled by their journey, and during their quest they experience an overwhelming desire for the verdant hills of the Shire and the accompanying “plain ordinary rest, and sleep, and waking up to a morning’s work in the garden” (TT 697).

I would suggest that one of the characteristics of the deepest level of joy is timelessness. If we think about the times in our lives when we were most happy, most of us would remember feeling as if the earth were standing still, as if time itself held no bearing over that precious, happy moment. In Middle-Earth this deepest level of joy is found in the strongholds of the Elves. Rivendell is known for being a healing realm. It is a relaxing, refreshing refuge from a fallen world:

Such was the virtue of the land of Rivendell that soon all fear and anxiety was lifted from their [the hobbits’] minds. The future, good or ill, was not forgotten, but ceased to have any power over the present. Health and hope grew strong in them, and they were content with each good day as it came, taking pleasure in every meal, and in every word and song. (FOTR 267)

Because of the Elvish power of Elrond that protects Rivendell, “Time doesn’t seem to pass here: it just is. A remarkable place altogether,” as Bilbo describes it (FOTR 225).
In the Elvish woods of Lothlórien, this ageless joy is felt at an even deeper and transcendent level. As Sam reflects, Lothlórien is like “being inside a song...it’s wonderfully quiet here. Nothing seems to be going on, and nobody seems to want it to. If there’s any magic about, it’s right down deep, where I can’t lay my hands on it” (FOTR 342; 351). Catholics should know this feeling very well, because it is reflective of the transcendent peace they can experience at Mass, if their hearts are open to the Spirit.

The Mass serves as a timeless, ultimate joy to Catholics; hence it is called a celebration. While skeptics and parishioners who attend Mass by only “going through the motions” may view it merely as a complicated ritual, the Mass is actually a purposeful ceremony grounded in sacred Biblical tradition. It is a time for Catholics to join in communion with all other believers, living and dead, to worship the God who created us. Like Rivendell and Lothlórien, it provides a place for healing and reflection, and best of all it is a place to receive God’s grace through the presence of His Son in the Eucharist.

Joy is more than a feeling; it is a mindset that can be cultivated by constantly searching for the goodness that may lie in even the darkest of moments. When joy is discovered amidst sorrow, it can ignite hope unlooked-for. This could not be more true of the hobbits’ experience during their peril in one of the most evil places in Middle-Earth, Cirith Ungol. The Spider’s Cleft serves as a guardtower for Mordor’s eastern entrance. In an attempt to lighten the mood before they enter the Cleft, Sam fantasizes about a happy ending for the tale they seem to have fallen into. Upon hearing it, Frodo
laughs aloud and proclaims that “to hear you [Sam] somehow makes me as merry as if the story was already written” (TT 697).

Yet even this momentary optimism cannot fully prepare Frodo and Sam for the trials they are about to endure in the Tower of Cirith Ungol. After Frodo is captured by orcs, Sam risks his life to save his master. He searches in vain for a door to the highest compartment of the tower, but

At last, weary and feeling finally defeated, he sat on a step below the level of the passage-floor and bowed his head into his hands. It was quiet, horribly quiet. The torch, that was already burning low when he arrived, sputtered and went out; and he felt the darkness cover him like a tide. And then softly, to his own surprise, there at the vain end of his long journey and his grief, moved by what thought in his heart he could not tell, Sam began to sing...suddenly new strength rose in him, and his voice rang out, while words of his own came unbidden to fit the simple tune. (ROTK 887)

This sudden outpouring of joy, even in the darkest of tribulations, does wonders for the hobbits. It gives Sam secret hope –although he cannot pin down quite where it comes from – and it moves Frodo to attempt song in response, despite his weak body and weary mind.

Catholics experience this same joy that arises in the midst of darkness every time they celebrate Mass, or engage in another form of religious devotion such as adoration. As we have seen from the examples above, the hobbits can take joy in the simple pleasures in life, especially when those pleasures are experienced in an environment that is not bound by time. Humans can tap into that very same joy in a much deeper way
when they pray. In the modern world, we find it so easy to get caught up in the latest trends and devices. The speed of development in the modern world can be dangerous because it makes it convenient to forget the more essential parts of life. *The Lord of the Rings* should serve as a reminder to readers to appreciate the joys of creation and seek deeper meaning in their lives by setting aside time for spiritual enlightenment through prayer. As a Catholic, I make it a practice to pray a Rosary outdoors as often as I can. When I am surrounded by the simple beauty of God’s creation and lost in the timeless peace of prayer, a great joy enters my heart that few other endeavors can even approach.
PARTING WORDS

*The Lord of the Rings* is an epic fantasy novel that is rooted in the beauty of Catholicism. The values of the Catholic lifestyle guided Tolkien during his writing and became woven into his beloved story. Hope pushed Frodo forward to achieve his purpose of destroying the Ring. His generous nature persuaded him to take on the nearly impossible task. The love he received from his friends, especially Samwise Gamgee, lifted him up and carried him forward. The triumph over evil results in joy that resonates through all creation in Middle-Earth.

I hope that whatever your personal beliefs may be, you have come to appreciate the transcendent values of Catholicism upon which Tolkien created his world. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, then the next time you venture into Middle-Earth, it is my hope that you now understand that the joy you experience therein is derived from the joy proclaimed by Peter in the New Testament: “Although you have not seen him you love him; even though you do not see him now yet believe in him, you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy as you attain the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (*International Student Bible*, 1 Pt. 1.8-9).

CATHOLICISM

If you are interested in learning more about the Catholic way of life and developing your own spirituality to its fullest, I would encourage you to read Matthew Kelly’s *Rediscover Catholicism*. The book provides an excellent introduction to Catholicism as well as a wellspring of renewal for already practicing Catholics. Thank you for reading this thesis. May the Peace of Christ be with you always!
Works Cited


