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Tolkien, the Practicing Catholic: The Early *Letters*

Reading through the *Letters* of Tolkien edited by Humphrey Carpenter, we might stumble upon *Letter 89*, a “most peculiar letter,” as Tolkien himself characterized it.¹ It is stunning to read the description of a religious experience Tolkien had during a time of adoration, that is, a prayer before the Blessed Sacrament in their parish church, then he continues with another such experience, which happened while he was riding his bicycle on a road in Oxford. These are clearly of a mystical nature and deserve further and thorough scrutiny, which will be done in a future paper. The present analysis will focus on the investigation of Tolkien’s letters, shedding light on Tolkien as a practicing, devout Catholic. As most scholarly works which analyze Tolkien’s Catholicism (and there is a constantly growing number of these) mainly focus on the implantation of his beliefs into his works, and very little is said about the actual practice of his faith in everyday life, the present paper attempts to scrutinize his *Letters* to gain a clearer view on this. Due to the limits of this paper, only the early years of his correspondence will be focused upon, and thus only a short glimpse will be offered into Tolkien’s living faith, although naturally a much ampler view would be gained by investigating a longer section of his correspondence.

The sources for this research are limited to Tolkien’s *Letters*,² further investigations might be extended to more comprehensive sources, like his contemporaries’ letters written to him or letters written to others but shedding further light on Tolkien’s religious habits. More archival material may be included, as well as the contemporaries’ other memoirs, etc., but these would constitute a further step of the research.

The *Letters* as a source are not comprehensive, either: Tolkien’s correspondence was so diversified that it has not been catalogued yet, numerous letters may still be undetected by scholarship, being in private possession. Therefore, all-inclusive research is impossible for the time being. In consequence, this paper will use Humphrey Carpenter’s published selection of the *Letters*,³ which gave priority to letters which contain information about Tolkien’s literary works and some other issues; as Carpenter puts it: “the selection has also been made with an eye to demonstrating the huge range of Tolkien’s mind and interests, and his idiosyncratic

¹ *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey CARPENTER, with the assistance of Christopher TOLKIEN, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000, 99–102.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

but always clear view of the world.⁴ The religious practices of Tolkien form part of this criterion to demonstrate the worldview of the author, and besides some theoreticizing theology (which is, surprisingly, rather rare in the *Letters*), considerably more numerous references are made to actual religious habits.

The omissions were mainly made by Carpenter to preserve the privacy of Tolkien's married life, so a great majority of the letters written to Edith Bratt are not included in the book,⁵ most unfortunately for this present research, as they very presumably might contain numerous references to Tolkien's Catholic beliefs and his demands to his fiancée and later wife to follow in his footsteps, as the conversion of Edith into the Catholic Church eventually happened due to Tolkien's insistence. But the concrete steps of this debate among the betrothed are relatively well treated and documented by previous studies and biographies.⁶ Nevertheless, let us quote just one instance from a letter to her, which aptly opens a long series of references to the lively religious life Tolkien led. It mentions his lifelong practice of attending mass, even on weekdays. Here he informs Edith about a Sunday mass or an important feast-day celebration he went to (this is what the word High Mass indicates), but it is noteworthy that he writes that he missed masses so much, even though he makes a clear reference to the fact that it was only a period of one week or two when he could not participate in them: "I went to St. Aloysius for High Mass – and I rather enjoyed it – it is such ages since I heard one for Fr. F.7 wouldn't let me go when I was at the Oratory last week."⁸ We also know from Carpenter's *Biography* that Tolkien went to early morning mass each day to St Aloysius, his parish church: "They bicycle three-quarters of a mile into the town, to St Aloysius' Catholic Church, an unlovely edifice next to the hospital in the Woodstock Road. Mass is at seven-thirty, so by the time they get home they are just a few minutes late for breakfast."⁹ Later we find other instances in his letters as well about his sacramental life, some of which will be treated later.

The bulk of the letters published in Carpenter's edition begins with some letters written by Tolkien to his sons, both enrolled in the Army during WWII. Tolkien visibly took his duties as a father very seriously, and it is moving to see the number of letters and the care with which he tries to equip his sons in these troubled circumstances. His Christian faith is manifested in multiple ways: it is present in the closing lines of the letters, where Tolkien constantly sent his blessings and reassured his sons about his prayers. In September 1939, Michael Tolkien, Tolkien's second son, volunteered for army service, and left to train as an anti-aircraft gunner. His father wrote to him: "But God bless you keep you anyway"¹⁰ and: "God bless

⁴ *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ See H. CARPENTER: *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.

⁷ Father Francis Morgan, who was Tolkien's guardian, in the Birmingham Oratory.

⁸ Letter I to Edith Bratt, not dated, October 1914, 7.

⁹ H. CARPENTER: *J. R. R. Tolkien: a Biography*, 114.

¹⁰ Letter I6 to Michael Tolkien, 3 October 1937, 22–23.

you, my dear son. I pray for you constantly. Remember me. Do you want anything specially? Very much love from your Father.”¹¹ The frequent repetition of this phrase in various forms suggests that we do not see here a literary topos of an epistolary closure, but Tolkien was convinced of the significance of paternal blessings and of prayer. He even asks for their prayers with touching sincerity: “Pray for me. I need it, sorely. I love you. Your own Father.”¹²

The difference between the sage paternal figure and the younger sons to be counselled alternates with the sense of a Christian fellowship where mutual spiritual help is needed and welcomed. This spiritual help takes on multiple forms. He mentions Masses offered for them, and mass counts as the most sublime and efficacious form of prayer. The Eucharist seems to have a central role in Tolkien’s devotional life, and it becomes clear from his letters that he did not only take the significance of Masses very seriously, attested by his custom of partaking in daily masses, as related above, but he also practiced the adoration of the Eucharist regularly. Several letters testify to this, and Tolkien becomes unusually and surprisingly loquacious when he touches upon this issue. Thus, we have a considerable number of passages in the letters where he took serious pains to share his admiration and love for the Eucharist and the extreme benefits of the face-to-face encounters with Christ hidden in the most blessed Sacrament. In these excerpts he is not theoretic or didactic, but tries to share his personal experiences in a touchingly sincere and vulnerable tone. One letter is often quoted by scholars, where Tolkien gives to Michael the supreme advice:

Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on Earth: the Blessed Sacrament ... There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth, and more than that: Death: by the divine paradox, that which ends life, and demands the surrender of all, and yet by the taste (or foretaste) of which alone can what you seek in your earthly relationships (love, faithfulness, joy) be maintained, or take on that complexion of reality, of eternal endurance, which every man’s heart desires.¹³

This an extremely rich text, which offers a thorough, though condensed essence of what Tolkien thought and experienced about the Eucharist. It would demand an in-depth theological analysis, but our focus being on the practical side of his faith, let us highlight these implications of the text instead. He strongly tries to avoid sounding theologizing; therefore, he begins with a touchingly sincere confession of his actual state of mind, overtly admitting the frustration, the tragic tone of his existence. Thus, the second line gains a real weight of argument, and the highly exigent claim

¹¹ Letter 42 to Michael Tolkien, 12 January 1941, 48.

¹² Letter 45 to Michael Tolkien, 9 June 1941, 56.

¹³ Letter 43 to Michael Tolkien, 6–8 March 1941, 53–54.

of this statement will become authentic (“I put before you the one great thing to love on Earth: the Blessed Sacrament”). The following list of definitions of what the Eucharist is, or what it offers was clearly taken from experience as well and seems to be issued much more from the lessons of a life lived than a mere theological theory. It is not by chance that we read about Death itself here, which is a quite surprising notion when relating to the Eucharist. The actual circumstances of writing the letter offer the explanation of this choice: they are both (father and son, the writer and the addressee) in war, facing possible death. What the Blessed Sacrament meant for him is suggested also by the terms “complexion of reality” (although here they refer to something else as well): it is, or rather, He is an eternally living reality, to be relied on, especially in times of trouble.

His letter to Michael Tolkien also displays his notion that there is an eternal quality of the relationship between fathers and sons, which transcends the earthly attachment:

Still, let us both take heart of hope and faith. The link between father and son is not only of the perishable flesh: it must have something of *aeternitas* about it. There is a place called “heaven” where the good here unfinished is completed; and where the stories unwritten, and the hopes unfulfilled, are continued. We may laugh together yet...¹⁴

The dangers of war naturally direct the attention of the father to the presence and help of the guardian angels, a Catholic concept which Tolkien took very seriously and admonishes his sons to fall back on their protection. He tries to give a description of how he envisages his angel:

Remember your guardian angel. Not a plump lady with swan wings! But – at least this is my notion and feeling –: as souls with free will we are, as it were, so placed as to face (or to be able to face) God. But God is (so to speak) also behind us, supporting, nourishing us (as being creatures) ... The bright point of power where that life-line, that spiritual umbilical cord touches: there is our Angel, facing two ways to God behind us in the direction we cannot see, and to us. But of course do not grow weary of facing God, in your free right and strength (both provided “from behind” as I say).¹⁵

It is interesting to see how Tolkien rejects the stereotyped representations of popular devotion about the guardian angels and describes instead his own concept and intuition (“my notion and feeling”) about them. After this highly interesting exposition, he advises his son not to forget to pray directly to God as well, that is,

¹⁴ Letter 45 to Michael Tolkien, June 1941, 55.

¹⁵ Letter 54 to Christopher Tolkien, 8 January 1944, 66.

not to fall into excesses as regards his devotion to his angel, which gives proof of Tolkien's soundness and realism in matters of piety.

But it seems that his efforts to understand the essence and workings the guardian angels were rewarded by a correction of these concepts. Very interestingly, later he had a kind of a mystical experience, and in Letter 87 he narrates the actual happening, a vision which he had on a day in a church in Oxford when he was praying before the Blessed Sacrament in adoration.¹⁶ During the experience he is given a more precise insight into the matter.

He takes Christopher into his confidences because evidently, Christopher took his father's advice seriously, and asked for the protection of his guardian angel. This is what follows:

Your reference to the care of your guardian angel makes me fear that "he" is being specially needed. I dare say it is so ... It also reminded me of a sudden vision (or perhaps apperception which at once turned itself into pictorial form in my mind) I had not long ago when spending half an hour in St. Gregory's before the Blessed Sacrament when the *Quarant'Ore* was being held there. I perceived or thought of the Light of God and in it suspended one small mote ... And the ray was the Guardian Angel of the mote: not a thing interposed between God and the creature, but God's very attention itself, personalized. And I do not mean "personified" by a mere figure of speech according to the tendencies of human language, but a real (finite) person.¹⁷

The *Letters* betray another religious practice Tolkien offers to his sons, which is even more interesting, as it offers a clearer view on how he lived the reality of himself being an artist, a "sceop," a bard in whom words, music and heavenly inspiration are fused in the same reality and practice: namely liturgy.

If you don't do it already, make a habit of "praises." I use them much (in Latin): the Gloria Patri, the Gloria in Excelsis, the Laudate Dominum, the Laudate Pueri Dominum (of which I am specially fond), one of the Sunday Psalms, and the Magnificat; also the Litany of Loretto (with the prayer *Sub tuum presidium*). If you have these by heart you never need for words of joy. It is also a good and admirable thing to know by heart the canon of the Mass, for you can say this in your heart if ever hard circumstance keeps you from hearing Mass. So endeth Faeder Lár his suna. With very much love.¹⁸

In his letter he makes a long list of the traditional prayers of the Church: these are prayers from rarely celebrated solemnities as well as prayers pertaining rather to

¹⁶ Letter 89 to Christopher Tolkien, 7–8 November 1944, 99.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Letter 54 to Christopher Tolkien, 8 January 1944, 66.

more popular piety. What is more, he confesses that he memorized the whole text of the liturgy of the mass, so that he can recite it even if some impediment would hinder him from hearing mass actively. This is a most unusual practice, even among the clergy, not to speak of a lay person, which demonstrates a very high level of commitment to religious practices and an equally unusual exigence in spiritual life.

He was well aware of and used the whole English liturgical tradition, as he alludes to the lines from the Anglo-Saxon Exeter Book, and in Old English!

Longað þonne þy læs þe him con léoþa worn,
 oþþe mid hondum con hearpan grétan;
 hafaþ him his glíwes giefe, þe him God sealde.¹⁹

From the Exeter Book. Less doth yearning trouble him who knoweth many songs, or with his hands can touch the harp: his possession is his gift of “glee” (= music and/or verse) which God gave him.²⁰

Noteworthy is here the word joy (“glee”), which condenses everything: very similarly to how his closest friend, C. S. Lewis used the same concept. For Lewis, this term somehow condensed the essence of the transcendental realities appearing in a perceivable form here in this earthly life, hence the title of his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*,²¹ where *Joy* is a synonym of God’s realm. In the same vein, here the word “glee” expresses the synchronicity of multiple concepts, that is, realities: that of music, words, and heavenly joy, which, as artistic creative forces, are real gifts of heaven.

Not only did Tolkien invoke transcendental help and grace, but he narrates occasions when he experienced the reverse direction as well: how heavenly aid appeared, as a surprise, even in a challenging form, in the everyday life of the faithful one, as in the following case:

I gave two lectures ... But an incident occurred which moved me and made the occasion memorable. My companion in misfortune was Cecil Roth (the learned Jew historian). I found him charming, full of gentleness (in every sense); and we sat up till after 12 talking. He lent me his watch as there were no going clocks in the place: – and nonetheless himself came and called me at 10:7, so that I could go to Communion! It seemed like a fleeting glimpse of an unfallen world. Actually I was awake, and just (as one does) discovering a number of reasons (other than tiredness and having no chance to shave or even wash), such as the

¹⁹ *Maxims I*, lines 169–171.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ C. S. LEWIS: *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, New York, HarperCollins, 2017.

desirability of getting home in good time to open up and un-black and all that, why I should not go.²²

In this letter we find proof of another form of devotion Tolkien practiced with seriousness, and which shows how he turned to more popular forms of devotion as well, namely, the Rosary.

But the intrusion of this gentle Jew, and his glance at my rosary by my bed, settled it. I was down at St. Aloysius at 7.15 just in time to go to Confession before Mass; and I came home just before the end of Mass ... I lectured at 11 a.m. and managed to have a colloquy with the Lewis and C. Williams (at the White Horse). And that is about all the top off the news as far as I am concerned!²³

The fact that he had the rosary by his bed suggests a daily prayer of it, as was advised for fervent believers. This short passage also testifies to another important element of sacramental life which Tolkien lived faithfully: confession. We can see from the letter that he went to confession even on weekdays, as he continued his day by giving a lecture and then having lunch with Lewis and C. Williams. The letter also betrays how Tolkien perceived the fine but real working of Providence in the instances of his everyday life: when he was reluctant to go to Mass, divine aid intervened and gently pushed him not to neglect his daily routine of taking part in the Sacrifice. He finely emphasizes that God uses an elder brother in faith (the gentle Jew) to remind him of his generous commitment, generous, as it was no demand of the Church which compelled the faithful to attend mass even on workdays; only the Sunday Mass was a requirement, so Tolkien's daily appearance in church testifies to his unusual ardour.

This is again followed by the confirmation of his paternal affection, which also has the purpose of turning the page, fuelled by his timidity, after this too sincere uncovering of his inner being, as in other instances, too: "This is (No. 1) of Pater ad Filium Natu (sed haud alioquin) minimum: Fæder suna his ágnum, þám gingstan nalles unléofestan)."²⁴

Another proof of his practice of going to church is his custom to share with his correspondent his criticism about the sermons delivered during the masses. He is quite outspoken about what he thinks, and he comments upon the issues treated. In Letter 69 he narrates a sermon he heard in Oxford by Father Douglas Carter, a priest of St. Gregory's Catholic Church: "Fr. C. gave a stirring little sermon, based on Rogation Days ... We all woke up. I am afraid it is all horribly true."²⁵ Therefore,

²² Letter 55 to Christopher Tolkien, 18 January 1944, 67.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ "The Father to his son, Born the youngest, (but not at all in other respects (the least), The Father to his own son, the youngest, but by no means the least loved." *Ibid.*

²⁵ Letter 69 to Christopher Tolkien, 14 May 1944, 80.

we might assume that he took an active part in the liturgy and considered the thoughts heard in church worthy of remembering and even thorough criticism.

Yet another proof of his interest in his faith is his familiarity not only with the theology and the customary religious practices, but also with the representatives of the Church to which he belonged. Tolkien had some correspondence with Catholic priests, not only with his guardian. Assuring his son, Christopher, about his understanding of the sufferings he had to undergo while being in camp during the war and about the urge to grouse about these, he provides the information that he used to have an ongoing correspondence with a priest from the Birmingham Oratory, his childhood church, while he took part in the first World War: “I used to write in just the same way or worse to poor old Fr. Vincent Reade, I remember.”²⁶ This is to say, he sought spiritual help and counselling from the priest with whom he was acquainted from his relatively early childhood even after years of physical separation, in times of utmost troubles, in the hardships of war. This testifies to a continuity of spiritual counselling which then went on throughout his whole life.

He wrote another letter to Father Robert Murray, a Jesuit priest and a close friend of the Tolkien family, which contains the often-quoted lines about Tolkien’s confession about the Christian conception of *The Lord of the Rings*:

I know exactly what you mean by the order of grace; and of course, by your references to Our Lady, upon which all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded. *The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first but consciously in the revision.²⁷

Lastly, even if this sounds paradoxical, as a proof of the absolute seriousness with which Tolkien lived his faith, let us quote a little example of the humour which permeated his spiritual life, as there is no seriousness without humour, and the saintlier, the jollier. He gives his son Christopher some news about his friend, C. S. Lewis, and laments about the naïvely exaggerated puritanic image Lewis’ audience forced on him:

Lewis is as energetic and jolly as ever but getting too much publicity for his or any of our tastes. “Peterborough,” usually fairly reasonable, did him the doubtful honour of a peculiarly misrepresentative and asinine paragraph in the Daily Telegraph of Tuesday last. It began “Ascetic Mr. Lewis”---!!!! I ask you! He put away three pints in a very short session we had this morning, as said he was, “going short for Lent.”²⁸

²⁶ Letter 66 to Christopher Tolkien, 6 May 1944, 78.

²⁷ Letter 142 to Robert Murray S. J., 2 December 1953, 171.

²⁸ Letter 56 to Christopher Tolkien, 1 March 1944, 68.

However, it seems that neither the Gargantuan nature of his closest friend, nor his acceptance of such unusual and maybe, by prudish standards blameful conduct could shake the belief of those who knew him well that Tolkien led a respectable and even admirably devout life as a Christian. Tolkien's fame as a pious Catholic is still lively and considerable in his parish, at St. Aloysius' church in Oxford and among his fellow Christians to such an extent that efforts are being made for the opening of a process of canonization. The local bishop encouraged the faithful to explore the life of the writer as a preparation for this. The cause gained supporters even abroad: an Italian priest, Fr. Daniele Pietro Ercoli wrote to the archbishop of Birmingham in this matter, who encouraged Ercoli to promote Tolkien's fame in this respect: "I am pleased to encourage you in seeking to inform people more widely about J.R.R. Tolkien's Catholic faith and the influence that this had on his writing and on his life." He also suggested that a prayer for private use should be written for the canonization, which was done. As a further step, on 1–2 September 2018 a "Canonization Conference" in Oxford was promoted.²⁹ Whether the cause will be successful or not, the *Letters* already give ample evidence about Tolkien's living faith, which found its expression in the ardent and faithful practices of his religion.

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²⁹ Philip KOSLOSKI, "Could J.R.R. Tolkien ever be canonized a saint?" *Aleteia* 09/06/22 <https://aleteia.org/2022/09/06/could-j-r-r-tolkien-ever-be-canonized-a-saint/> Accessed 14/05/2023.

Abstract

*The present paper investigates a hitherto unknown face of J. R. R. Tolkien: Tolkien, the practicing Catholic. The analysis of his works, mainly that of *The Lord of the Rings* by minutious scholarly work as well as his own lines about the “fundamentally religious” conception of it makes it clear that Tolkien had an overall religious worldview which determined to a considerable extent the creation of his works. A great amount of research has been made and is being made to uncover all the implications of Tolkien’s faith into his works. However, his actual religious practices of his everyday life have been left uncovered yet. This paper attempts to provide a brief glance into these by examining Tolkien’s early Letters, using the selection edited by Humphrey Carpenter.*

Keywords: Tolkien, Letters, religious practices, private devotion

Rezümé

Tolkien, a gyakorló katolikus

A jelen tanulmány Tolkien egyik eddig nem ismert arcát kutatja: Tolkienét, a gyakorló katolikusét. Műveinek elemzése révén, valamint saját sorai által is, világossá vált, hogy Tolkien világnézete alapvetően vallásos, amely lényegileg meghatározta műveinek megformálását. Komoly és sokrétű kutatás készült és készül arról, miként jelenik meg Tolkien hite műveiben. Ugyanakkor mindennapi életének hitgyakorlatairól még nagyon keveset tudunk. A jelen dolgozat megpróbál rövid bepillantást nyújtani e területre Tolkien leveleinek vizsgálata által, a Humphrey Carpenter által kiadott válogatott levélgyűjtemény alapján.

Kulcsszavak: Tolkien, Levelek, vallási gyakorlatok, hitélet