

*The Dunadin***A Monthly Reflection on Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings***

J.R.R. Tolkien was a giant among Catholic literary geniuses! His epic trilogy is undoubtedly an invaluable pre-evangelization tool. He doesn't rewrite the Bible; he doesn't issue dogmatic definitions and he doesn't write like an apologist. He doesn't even have his heroic characters going to church on Sunday! Neither does he include Catholic prayers in his trilogy. What he does do is write a highly imaginative and spell-binding story that is thoroughly imbued and permeated down to the very tiniest cell with the Catholic worldview or the Catholic view of reality. Yet, the reader is not conscious of this. He just kind of drinks it in. He "gets it" by osmosis - as it were.

Once upon a time, a seminarian was studying the writings of the Church Fathers. On one particular day, he came across the Letter of St. Ignatius to the Smyrneans. Ignatius was cautioning the Christians of Smyrna against the dangers of Docetism, a heretical belief that holds that the Son of God didn't really suffer and die on the Cross. Docetism claimed that it was a phantom that died on the Cross and rose from the dead. In reading this letter, the seminarian discovered that Ignatius' description of what the Docetists are on the road to becoming seemed remarkably similar to the description of one type of being in Tolkien's trilogy. Read the description for yourself and see if you, the faithful reader of Tolkien, cannot identify these shady characters for yourself!

All this [Christ] submitted to for our sakes, that salvation might be ours. And suffer he did, verily and indeed; just as he did verily and indeed raise himself again. His passion was no unreal illusion, as some skeptics aver who are all unreality themselves. The fate of those wretches will match their belief, for one day they will similarly become *phantoms without substance* themselves.¹

Perhaps the reader [of this newsletter] will remember from *The Fellowship of the Ring* movie when the Black Riders stab, slash, and destroy the mattresses of the beds in which the Hobbits were thought to be sleeping. One of the Hobbits - from the safety of another room - asks Strider, "What are they?" Aragorn replies, "They were once men, great kings of men. Blinded by their greed, each accepted a ring from Sauron; one-by-one falling into Darkness. They are Ringwraiths, *neither living nor dead*. At all times they feel the power of the Ring. They will never stop hunting you."² Then he adds, "They are terrible!"³ Then we are told, "The hobbits looked at [Aragorn], and saw with surprise that his face was drawn as if in pain, and his hands clenched the arms of his chair."⁴ Aragorn also tells the Hobbits, "In darkness and loneliness they are strongest . . . Their power is in terror."⁵ Later, it is said: "So black were they that they seemed like black holes in

¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrneans*, paragraph #2. In *Early Christian Writings*, Maxwell Staniforth, trans. (London; Penguin Books, 1987) 101.

² From the movie *The Fellowship of the Ring*; based on the novel by J.R.R. Tolkien. *Emphasis mine*.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Balantine Books, 1994) 188.

⁴ *Ibid.* Even this Numenorean, this great man of nobility, was terrified by these horrific beings.

⁵ *Ibid.* 197.

the deep shade behind . . . In their white faces burn keen and merciless eyes."⁶
Phantoms do such things and they *do* seem to live in some sort of shadow -
"neither living nor dead." For almost everyone considers a ghost or phantom to
be both *shadowy* and *lacking in substance*.

⁶ *Ibid.* 221-222.