Thank you for your welcome. It’s a joy and honor to be with you tonight. I wish to express my gratitude to Fr. Koterski, Fordham University, and the Spiritual Family the Work for inviting me to speak with Dr. Kezel.

Coming from Erie, Pennsylvania to New York City feels a bit like leaving “the shire.” Have I arrived at Rivendell or Mordor? It’s neither… but maybe in this big city, we find ourselves in a bit of a “fellowship” this evening, i.e., a privileged opportunity, amidst all our individuality and uniqueness, to find something that unites us.

Introduction
In this lecture, I would like to do the following:

- Acknowledge the significant differences between Newman’s novel Callista and Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings;
- Draw out several similarities which are not accidental, superficial or ephemeral, but seem to be at the very heart of both, especially with regard to the heroic virtue of the characters;
- Interpret the value of both novels based on Newman’s refined filter articulated in his mature work, Grammar of Assent.

Callista and The Lord of the Rings: So different
To begin, it would seem helpful to give a brief overview of our two authors and the fictional works mentioned. I will give more time to Newman’s Callista since it is the less known work of the two.

John Henry Newman, an Englishman, lived from 1801 to 1890. After a very successful, yet controversial career at Oxford, he converted to Catholicism in 1845, was ordained a Catholic priest, and established an oratory of priests in Birmingham, England, where he spent the rest of his life, save several years attempting to found a Catholic university in Ireland at the request of the bishops there. Although the author of a huge corpus of work, including sermons, theological and philosophical argumentation, prayers, meditations and poetry, he wrote only two novels, Callista, and Loss and Gain, neither of which receive much attention at all, even from many Newman devotees and scholars! He began to write Callista in 1848, but set it aside until July 1855, during the “long
In short, Callista is a piece of historical fiction about third century Christianity, in particular, the tremendous contrast between pagan culture and Christianity. The book traces the conversion of a young woman from the former to the latter. Yet, rather than being dismissed as pious hagiography, the novel has been praised as "remarkable... for its psychological realism," and as an "opening up [of] some of the larger preoccupations of [Newman’s] career." In a postscript for the 1888 edition, Newman said that he did not intend the tale “to be in any sense controversial, but to be specially addressed to Catholic readers, and for their edification.” The novel is set in a town in northern Africa, then part of the Roman empire. The action takes place during the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Decius, around 250 AD, when multi-theistic paganism was actively practiced. The title character, Callista, is a pagan woman whose occupation is carving pagan amulets, charms often worn around the neck of worshipers of the various deities as protection against harm. Consequently, she’s surrounded by religious sentiment and ceremonies, and even earns her livelihood by zeroing in on those aspects of religious worship which particularly stir people’s imagination. She’s good at it, but she believes none of it. Yet, she is far from non-spiritual – she feels deep within her heart and mind the promptings of what Newman elsewhere calls “natural religion,” that there is an all-powerful God around whom human life is to be oriented. Yet, she cannot find the formal/organized religion that seems to fit the deep spiritual inclinations which well up from within her. Through a number of circumstances which time does not allow me to elaborate on, Callista encounters several Christians, including an itinerant bishop (modeled after the great St. Cyprian), at the same time, because of a plague which descends upon the city, the pagan authorities pursue Christians as the scapegoat. As an author, Newman has mastered the tension of any great narrative: as Callista becomes intrigued by Christianity, it becomes ever more dangerous to investigate it. In the midst of this tension, the civil authorities mistakenly identify her as a Christian and throw her into prison, but at this point, she can neither assent to pagan worship, which she thinks is meaningless, nor to Christianity, which she fears may be merely an attractive illusion. In the midst of these spiritual crossroads, Callista delivers this great testimony of a soul looking for authentic revelation from the God she thinks may exist:

“I feel that [one] God within my heart. I feel myself in His presence. He says to me, ‘Do this: don’t do that’... It is the echo of a person speaking to me. Nothing shall persuade me that it does not ultimately proceed from a person external to me... My nature feels towards it as towards a person. When I obey it, I feel a satisfaction; when I disobey, a soreness – just like that which I feel in pleasing or...

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offending some revered friend…. I believe in what is more than ‘something.’ I believe in what is more real to me than sun, moon, stars, and the fair earth, and the voice of friends. You will say, Who is He? Has He ever told you anything about Himself: Alas! no! – the more’s the pity! But I will not give up what I have, because I have not more. An echo implies a voice; a voice a speaker. That speaker I love and I fear…. O that I could find Him!... On the right hand and on the left I grope, but touch Him not. Why dost Thou fight against me? – why dost Thou scare and perplex me, O First and Only Fair? I have Thee not, and I need Thee.”

At this point, when she would neither describe herself as pagan nor Christian, she describes her disposition to Christianity: “Well, its maxims are too beautiful to be believed; and then, on the other hand, its dogmas are too dismal, too shocking, too odious to be believed. They revolt me.” Soon the bishop is able to visit her in prison. Patiently, step by step he invites her to take Christianity seriously:

“If you have needs, desires, aims, aspirations, all of which demand an Object, and imply, by their very existence, that such an Object does exist also; and if nothing here does satisfy them, and if there be a message which professes to come from that Object… to bring the remedy you crave; and if those who try the remedy say with one voice that the remedy answers; are you not bound, Callista, at least to look that way, to inquire into what you hear about it, and to ask for His help, if He be, to enable you to believe in Him.”

In response, Callista finally begs, “What is your remedy, what your Object, what your love, O Christian teacher?” The bishop encourages her to read a copy of the gospel of Luke which he has given her and says, “Here you will see whom we Christians love.” As she read the Gospel, she finds herself brought into the world which for the bishop was real. This new world occupies her mind so powerfully that “everything looked dull and dim by the side of it.” It is the “very teaching… demanded by both her reason and her heart.” Later, when the bishop returns, she begs to be baptized, with these words:

“He has given me the firm purpose to gain heaven, to escape hell and He will give me the power to [bear suffering]… I am wonderfully changed, I am not what I was… Father, I have chosen Him, not hastily, but on deliberation. I believe Him most absolutely… I am very ignorant – very sinful, but one thing I know, that there is but One to love in the whole world, and I wish to love Him. I surrender myself to Him, if He will take me.”

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3 Callista, 314-5.  
4 Callista, 216.  
5 Callista, 220-1.  
6 Callista, 221.  
7 Callista, 226.  
8 Callista, 327.  
9 Callista, 293.  
10 Callista, 346-7.  

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She is baptized and the remainder of the novel moves quickly. Upon professing Christianity, the authorities execute her by placing her on the rack, which she endures with remarkable bravery and calm. Newman describes her thus:

“But yesterday, hungry and thirsty, and restless for some object worthy of an immortal spirit; today enjoying the ineffable ecstasy of the Marriage Feast and the espousals of Emmanuel. But yesterday tossed about on a sea of opinion; and today entranced in the vision of the ineffable truth and immutable sanctity.”

What do we see in Callista? A bright woman of integrity, a person of great spiritual sensitivity and hunger, yet skeptical of paganism; a person who believed that there must be something ultimate, real and true to match her spiritual hunger; a brave woman who recognized the truth of Christ and embraced martyrdom in order to be His.

So very different, in so many ways, is The Lord of the Rings. Published 100 years after Callista, in 1954-55, by J.R.R. Tolkien, a popular and well-respected philologist at Oxford University. Our previous speaker this evening, Dr. John Kezel, described Tolkien’s personal and professional background more than adequately. [Tolkien was orphaned at a young age, and subsequently entrusted to a priest at Newman’s Oratory in Birmingham. Before his mother died, she had entered the Catholic Church, and she raised Tolkien and his brother, Hilary, in Catholic devotion.]

Many people are familiar with the characters and story-line of The Lord of the Rings. The trilogy follows a hobbit named Frodo, and his “fellowship” of colleagues (of various natures – wizard, human, dwarf, elf), who resolve to destroy the ring in Frodo’s possession, which is the key to centralizing the power of evil in middle-earth. While Tolkien admitted that he began writing the trilogy as a sequel to his earlier work, The Hobbit, and as long enjoyable story, he soon found himself writing a story which portrayed the power of evil, and how various individuals decide to oppose that evil, and work for the restoration of peace and harmony.

In a letter to a friend, Tolkien stated, “The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.”

On the surface, the differences between Callista and The Lord of the Rings are striking:

- **Callista** is set in a concrete historical context of 3rd century Roman empire. The Lord of the Rings is set in a time and place constructed by Tolkien’s intricate imagination.
- **Callista** addressed religious, Christian and Catholic themes directly and explicitly. The Lord of the Rings rarely, if ever, addresses religious themes, and it certainly does not address Christian doctrine in any explicit manner.
- **Callista**, the protagonist, never leaves the city of Sicca, and much of the action is the development of her own thought, and is articulated by dialogue. Frodo, the

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11 Callista, 378.

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protagonist, travels widely across middle-earth, important enough for Tolkien to have included maps. The primary focus of action is external.

- Callista, the novel, read by few, mostly devout Christians or Newman scholars (hopefully those are the same people!) The Lord of the Rings, read by millions, often by people fascinated by fantasy fiction, and not as interested in any deeper Christian meanings.

**Callista and The Lord of the Rings: the similarities**

Yet for all these differences, we know that the two authors share several significant things: For both authors, the Catholic faith, the Birmingham Oratory, Oxford University and the English language were deep pillars of their intellectual, emotional and spiritual lives. Might we not find something that links Newman’s heroine and Tolkien’s hero, without stretching or fabricating? Would we not expect, even hope, to find a trace, an imprint common to both, and possibly one of substance?

I assert we can, and that we might best approach this by considering the heroic virtue portrayed in both novels. To do so, I propose that we call to mind the literary genre of the quest story. W.H. Auden himself identifies this genre as a meaningful application to The Lord of the Rings.¹³

In both Callista and The Lord of the Rings, there is a great quest or journey described, and it is this quest, which draws out the plot and characters. For Callista, she embarks on a great interior quest, the quest for truth, specifically spiritual and religious truth. Interiorly, she has a far way to go, she encounters obstacles and enemies; she is blessed to meet companions and guides. Ultimately, she reaches that which she sets out to reach – the truth, and even more, the One who is Truth. She is determined, she gets discouraged, she experiences her own limits, and yearns for something which is seemingly far from her reach. Yet she perseveres.

As many of you know, The Lord of the Rings includes several heros, determinedly pursuing the quest, the destruction of the ring. One author, Bradley Birzer, proposes four heroic figures and applies classic Christian types to them: Gandolf, because of his wisdom and magical intervention, is the hero-prophet. Aragorn, because of his human bravery in battle, is the hero-king. Frodo, because of his willingness to sacrifice himself, is the hero-priest. Finally, Sam is the heroic common man, the loyal and loving servant who protects his master, Frodo.¹⁴

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For our purposes, let us stay with Frodo. You may recall that great scene in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when in the midst of the Council of Elrond and their consensus to destroy the ring, Tolkien describes Frodo’s inner disposition:

“All the Council sat with downcast eyes, as if in deep thought. A great dread fell on [Frodo], as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo’s side in Rivendell filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice. ‘I will take the Ring,’ he said ‘though I do not know the way.’”

It is his resolve to do that which he does not want to do, and appears beyond his abilities, but knows must be done, which arouses the reader’s admiration and loyalty. The one who has the ring is willing to destroy it. The small one gives away the opportunity to be great and powerful. The homebody embarks on a perilous journey to far off lands so that dark powers may be vanquished. We know that at the end of the great journey, Frodo hesitates and is tempted to retract his resolution at the Council of Elrond. Yet, in this excruciating moment of weakness, Gollum, a recipient of Frodo’s mercy, attacks him, takes the ring, and falls into the fires of Mordor, the only place where the ring and its power can be destroyed. Even at the end, Tolkien allows his hero to be vulnerable and small.

How different these two worlds, how different the quest of Callista and the quest of Frodo! Yet, maybe not so different. In her relentless pursuit and heroic death, Callista sought the true faith and the true God, amidst all the idolatry and moral depravity. In his long journey, Frodo sought to re-establish harmony and peace in middle-earth, and conquer the power of evil. Both were willing to give their lives to something real, objectively real. Both freely chose to oppose what one famous preacher referred to as the “dictatorship of relativism.”

- Callista is the heroic figure entrusting herself to objective and eternal truth.
- Frodo is the heroic figure entrusting himself to what is objectively good, moral and right.

Both rejected the prevailing spirit around them – Callista of immoral paganism, Frodo the consolidation of evil.

**The value of these two novels**

So what? What is the value of these works, other than imaginative scenarios of bravery and virtue? Might we be getting carried away with the “drama” of bravery?

- Does fiction like this simply arouse a superficial and passing impression of something beautiful, perhaps, but not significant?
- Or can fiction lead the reader to a deep and lasting impression of something real, and prompt him/her to live differently?

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In a sermon preached in 1831, Newman seemed to tip his hand toward the former. He addresses at length the effects on a person who reads novels, and proposes that while they may have a great short-term impact, there is no lasting effect.

"Such works contain many good sentiments… characters are introduced, virtuous, noble, patient under suffering… the great truths of religion are upheld, we will suppose… But it is all fiction; it does not exist out of a book which contains the beginning and end of it. We have nothing to do; we read, are affected, softened or roused, and that is all; we cool again, -- nothing comes of it…. Literature…has no tendency to make the conduct, the practice of man virtuous."

Even religious novels, Newman asserts, “sometimes do good… but they do more harm than good. They do harm on the whole; they lead mean to cultivate religious affections separate from religious practice.” And here may be his driving concern: “Here I might speak of that entire religious system (miscalled religious) which makes Christian faith consist, not in the honest and plain practice of what is right, but in the luxury of excited religious feeling.”

Twenty-four years later, he published Callista! How might we account for his apparent change of mind?

In Grammar of Assent, one of Newman’s most mature works, he speaks of the religious imagination, and its significance in the process of coming to a real (versus notional) apprehension and assent to doctrine. It is here, I believe, that we can find that Newman’s mind had developed to honor the contributions that fiction can have on living faith.

Real assent, or belief is “concerned with things concrete, not abstract, which variously excite the mind from their moral and imaginatively properties, has for its objects, not only directly what is true, but inclusively what is beautiful, useful, admirable, heroic; objects which kindle devotion, rouse the passions, and attach the affections; and thus it leads the way to actions of every kind, to the establishment of principles, and the formation of character, and is thus again intimately connected with what is individual and personal.”

For Newman, then, the imagination can be used either to weaken our religious commitment, or strengthen it. If it is engaged in apprehending what is real and true, in a manner that reaches down to our intellectual foundations and even touches our emotions on the way, then imagination, stirred by fiction, can accomplish a great good. If imagination is used merely as recreation, to arouse fantasy and feeling, then it can quite easily degrade true religious commitment.

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18 John Henry Newman, Grammar of Assent, p. 64

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I propose, then, that both Newman’s *Callista* and Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* can be read at that deeper level, and give the reader a real apprehension of things important and profound, namely, that there is an objective truth, and objective good. Both are worth giving our lives to, as Callista and Frodo did. Reading their adventures can lead us not simply into enjoyable realms, but into important realms of eternal truth.

And so in both, as artists with the English language, both paint a portrait on a canvas. For Newman, it was an historical canvas of the 3rd century pagan Roman empire. For Tolkien it was an imaginative canvas of a world called middle-earth. Their two canvasses are quite different at first look… yet underneath is something common; As one stand back, one can detect an important theme common to both. Both Englishmen, both Catholics, give us an imaginative and moving portrait that some things are objectively real and lasting and worth giving our lives to.

As I near my conclusion, I would like to quote one of the great questions Callista asks in the novel, as she speaks with the holy bishop: “What [is] your Object, what your Love, O Christian teacher?” The answer for John Henry Newman and J.R.R. Tolkien was clear: Our Object is the true and living God; Our love is Christ; and our teacher is the Catholic Church.

Frodo and Callista will never meet. But Newman and Tolkien may meet, and possibly, by God’s grace, already have… in that place where Callista’s truth, and Frodo’s goodness are embodied, are real and eternal in the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

*These are notes prepared for the lecture.*

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Sources


