**Great Catholic Writers: Tolkien**

J.R.R. (John Ronald Reuel) Tolkien (pronounced “Tol-keen”) was born in 1892 in South Africa. His parents had lived in England, but his father had moved the family to South Africa hoping to find greater work opportunities. After his father died in 1896, the family returned to England. In 1900, Tolkien’s mother Mabel converted to Catholicism. Tolkien, consequently, was raised Catholic, and remained a devout Catholic all his life.

In 1904, when Tolkien was only 12, his mother succumbed to illness. After staying briefly with a relative, Tolkien took up residence at a boarding house. Even at a young age, Tolkien already showed a great talent for languages, and even began to invent his own (this would become useful in his later work!). His specialty was Old and Middle English, but he also excelled in Latin, Greek, and Finnish.

While living at the boarding house, Tolkien met and struck up a relationship with Edith Bratt. In 1916, they were married. The war had begun two years earlier and, only months after his wedding, Tolkien reported to the front. He contracted “Trench fever” and returned to England to recover. He would battle recurrences of the illness for almost two years.

Tolkien’s career had a great break in 1920. He received a post in English Literature at the University of Leeds. Shortly afterward, in 1925, Tolkien became the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, something of a dream position for someone in his field. He would remain at Oxford until his retirement.

It was here that Tolkien became involved with a group a scholars who referred to themselves as “the Inklings.” They were a group of writers who met together to discuss ideas and share their work. Among the members were novelist Charles Williams, philosopher Owen Barfield, and the great apologist and writer C.S. Lewis.

Over the years, Tolkien published a variety of works: translations, scholarly articles, poems, and stories. His major break would come when an unfinished version of his story “The Hobbit” (initially a bedtime story he had invented for his children), came into the hands of an editor at a major publishing company. The book was published in 1937 and met with a great response from the reading public. In light of the success, his publisher encouraged Tolkien to work on a sequel. For sixteen years, Tolkien worked on what would eventually become *The Lord of the Rings*, which was published in three volumes between 1954 and 1955.

*The Lord of the Rings* is Tolkien’s greatest and most famous work. It has experienced a revival in our own day, due in no small part to the epic movie trilogy produced by New Line Cinema. The work is deeply Catholic, shaped by the theme of sin and redemption, and infused with the Catholic understanding of the sacramental nature of the world. It is not, however, overtly Catholic, since Tolkien did not like simple allegories. On this point, he disagreed with C.S. Lewis, whose work is intentionally more explicit in its Christian symbols and images (see Jason Boffetti, "Tolkien's Catholic Imagination," *Catholic Culture,*online).

Tolkien died in 1973. A substantial amount of his writings (some of them incomplete) have been published posthumously over the past 40 years. And, following the success of the movie trilogy, there have been three more movies, based on *The Hobbit*, which have been released in the past five years.

Biographical material drawn from "Biography" and "J.R.R. Tolkien's Timeline" from *The Tolkien Society (*tolkiensociety.org), retrieved 20 Mar. 2015.