



John Paul the Great Catholic University

THE MISSION OF STORYTELLING



A CALL TO CATHOLIC STORYTELLERS

Alexander Granata

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Sermon on the Mount, Carl Bloch, 1877.

ALEXANDER GRANATA

The Mission of Storytelling

A Call to Catholic Storytellers

What is a Story?

A story is a sequence of events authored by a person with a thematic purpose; expressed through a hero's struggle against an obstacle to reach a goal. Where am I getting this definition? I am using Aristotelian form and matter. Aristotle writes about form and matter in his *Physics*¹, which comes from the Greek word *physis* meaning "nature." In this text, Aristotle talks about the four causes:

- † Material: The matter that makes up the natural thing.
- † Formal: The shape of the natural thing.
- † Efficient: The source of change/rest in the natural thing.
- † Final: The end/purpose of the natural thing.

An author creates his story (efficient cause) with a thematic purpose (final cause). It has its own setting and genre (formal cause), which the hero's story takes place in (material cause). This is a base definition, and its terms need to be greatly expanded, so that is what the rest of my presentation will do.

The Covenantal Meaning of Storytelling

The covenantal meaning of storytelling is inseparably linked with the covenantal meaning of salvation history. According to Dr. Scott Hahn and John Bergsma, salvation history in Sacred Scripture gradually unveils itself in six divine covenants which establish a special unity between God and man². As Hahn and Bergsma note, a covenant is an "agreement establishing a kinship bond between two parties by a verbal or ritual oath." See *Figure 1* for a graph of the six divine covenants.

Figure 1: The Six Divine Covenants

Covenant	Mediator	Kinship	Bible Ref	General Stipulations	Specific Stipulations	Blessings	Curses	Sign
Adamic	Adam	Marriage	Gen 1:26-28, 2:17.	"Be fruitful and multiply"	"But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat"	Eternal life of peace	Spiritual death and separation from God	Sabbath
Noahic	Noah	Household	Gen 9:4, 8-17	"Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood"	"Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood"	Earth free from major floods	Your own blood will be shed as reckoning	Rainbow
Abrahamic	Abraham	Tribe	Gen 12:1-3, 15:1-21, 17:1-14, 22:16-18	"And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great"	"Every male among you shall be circumcised"	Father of many and the blessing of God	Cut off from his people	Circumcision
Mosaic	Moses	Nation	Ex 3:4-10, 6:7, 19:5-6	"And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"	"If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples" (Mosaic Law)	Nation of God's chosen people	Cut off from God's possession	Passover
Davidic	David	Kingdom	2 Sam 7:5-16	"I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom"	"Would you build me a house to dwell in?"	The throne of David's descendants will last forever	Fall of the kingdom	Temple
New Covenant	Jesus Christ	Universal Church	Matt 26:26-29, 28:19-20; Lk 22:14-20, Mk 14:22-25	"Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a chalice, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant'"	"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Bringing souls to Christ in the life of the Church)	Eternal life by the forgiveness of sins	Eternal separation from God, void of love	Eucharistic Liturgy

¹ Aristotle. *Physics*. 4th century BC. These concepts have been adopted past philosophy itself and into the Church's theology through St. Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Trent, among other places.

² Bergsma, John, and Hahn, Scott. (2015). Covenant. In Samuel E. Balentine (Ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology* (Vol. 1, pages 151–166). Oxford University Press.

Upon reflecting on the divine covenants, we can also conclude that they have these general characteristics: kinship, a gift of self, and unity, all actualized by a sign whose end is to bring people into the covenant. Here's another chart to show these characteristics in all the divine covenants:

Figure 2: *Unity, Kinship, and Truth in the Divine Covenants*

Covenant	Kinship	Self-Gift	Unity
Adamic	God & Adam	Obedience	Marriage
Noahic	God & Noah	Eating meat without blood	Household
Abrahamic	God & Abraham	Circumcision	Tribe
Mosaic	God & Moses	Adherence to the Law	Nation
Davidic	God & David	Building the Temple	Kingdom
New Covenant	God & Jesus	Christ on the Cross	Universal Church, Salvation

So now we have some general information on the covenantal meaning of salvation history, but how can we apply this to storytelling? When it comes to salvation history, the kinship is between God and man, united through Jesus Christ. But in the case of storytelling, the kinship is between writer and reader, united in truth, who is Jesus Christ. The reality of what happens with a story imitates the reality of what takes place in salvation history. Here are some examples:

Figure 3: *The Structure of the Divine Covenants Reflected in my Favorite Stories*

Story	Mediator	Kinship	General Stipulations	Specific Stipulations	Blessings	Curses	Sign/Veil
The Lord of the Rings	The receiver of the story (received from J.R.R. Tolkien)	Kinship united in truth	This is Middle Earth	This story is about hope and morality	You learn a lesson of hope and life after death	If you don't care, you won't learn or grow	Sign: Book Veil: Fantasy world
Star Wars	The receiver of the story (received from George Lucas)	Kinship united in truth	This is the Galactic Republic	This story is about letting go and sacrifice	You learn a lesson of sacrifice and acceptance	If you don't care, you won't learn or grow	Sign: Live action movie Veil: Spaceships, lightsabers
Spider-Verse	The receiver of the story (received from Phil Lord and Chris Miller)	Kinship united in truth	This is the Spider-Verse	This story is about identity and true justice	You learn a lesson of confidence and hardship	If you don't care, you won't learn or grow	Sign: Animated movie Veil: Kid with spider powers

Continuing on the point, with salvation history, God is its author. His will determines reality, a reality that works through these people so that his story is complete. And he sent his hero, his only-begotten son,³ into the story so that he could save all the people within it. An author does the same thing with their story. He decides reality, he creates characters and his plan for the story works through them. He writes his hero into the story. What sets the two apart is that one person is God and the other is man. The story God writes is reality itself, while the story man writes imitates God in creation.⁴ Man's story shows us truth, but it is truth because God is truth, and for that reason it is inescapable for man's story to point to anything other than Jesus Christ.

³ Jn 3:16.

⁴ Von Balthasar, Hans Urs (1988–1998). *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (Vols. 1–5) (G. Harrison, Trans.). Ignatius Press. I am not pulling a direct quote, but have learned of this point's similarity to Balthasar's thinking.

Storytelling as a Sacrament

Thinking back to the divine covenants, the signs for each are sacramental, meaning that the visible sign reveals an invisible reality. The signs of the divine covenants prefigure the Eucharist as the sign of the New Covenant, brought to us in the Eucharistic Liturgy. Truly, the Liturgy itself is a living story. It is the supreme story, for it is the only story that does not merely point to Christ, but becomes Christ and is Christ. There is physical choreography in the form of rituals, dialogue in the form of the prayers and responses, music in the form of sacred chant and hymns, and immersion in the form of the architecture of the Church, the placement of sacred objects, and the beauty of her sanctuary. The Liturgy is the embodiment of the story of salvation history, for the Liturgy is the expression of the New Covenant, the story of salvation. Though the Eucharistic Liturgy is the Sacrament of all sacraments, for it brings us Christ in the Eucharist, stories that are made by man, or subcreated,⁵ themselves also function sacramentally.

Storytelling, by nature, is sacramental, for its veil is a sign of an invisible reality — its deepest truths are hidden behind the world of Middle Earth, the vast Galactic Republic, the presence of a boy who shoots spiderwebs, or any other subcreated reality. And like all things, its fulfillment is in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Spoke in Parables

For the sake of learning what it means to be a Catholic storyteller, the theology of storytelling is vital to know. Yet the reality of what it means to be a Catholic storyteller cannot be understood without first knowing the mission of stories, and for that reason, we must transition into talking about the purpose of storytelling. Just like salvation history, the good news wasn't revealed instantly. In fact, upon reading the Gospels, we find that Jesus intentionally concealed his identity as being equal to God for a major portion of his mission. Here's an example from Mark: "And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God.' And he strictly ordered them not to make him known."⁶

Why does Jesus do this? It's rhetorical, or in other words, it is his strategy of delivering himself to the world. He reveals himself to us in a way that we can better understand, in a way that speaks to our humanity. This is important, for a major way Jesus used rhetorical strategy to reveal himself to us is through parables, which are stories. My point here is this: storytelling was a major

aspect of Jesus' mission on earth, so why not make it a major aspect of the mission of the Church? The mission of storytelling is inseparably tied to the mission of evangelization. When we tell stories, we work to fulfill Christ's command to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."⁷

The Mission

In this final section, I want to touch upon storytelling's application, for without application theology is nothing but a soul with no body. To understand the application, it is necessary to circle back to my definition of a story: a sequence of events authored by a person with a thematic purpose; expressed through a hero's struggle against an obstacle to reach a goal. Adding what we have learned, we can create an even clearer vision of the story through the lens of Christ. Let's take another look at the four causes as it relates to what stories are:

- † Material Cause: a hero's struggle against an obstacle to reach a goal.
- † Formal Cause: The setting and genre of the story.
- † Efficient Cause: Both God and man.
- † Final Cause: The mission of evangelization.

We can now start adding to each of these categories what we have learned. The material cause, "a hero's struggle against an obstacle to reach a goal," reflects humanity's need for a hero, one who is like us, but becomes something greater. That hero in salvation history is Jesus Christ. The formal cause is the setting and genre of the story, set in place by the efficient cause, the person who authors the story. And the efficient cause can be both God and man. As we went over, God is the author of creation and of salvation history. Man imitates God in creation as subcreators, made in his image and likeness. When man authors a story it points to God's divine authorship and glorifies it. And finally, the final cause, the purpose of the story, is inherently thematic. Theme organically finds its way into the story as a reflection of the author's soul. It does not need to be forced, but it simply exists, and we must cultivate that once we find it. Tolkien once said: "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision."⁸ The final cause's thematic purpose exists for evangelization —

⁵ To be created in the image and likeness of God. Not as God, but in imitation of him.

⁶ Mk 3:11-12.

⁷ Mt 28:19.

⁸ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Humphrey Carpenter & Christopher Tolkien, Eds.,

bringing souls into a covenantal kinship with God. The creation and reception of storytelling directly imitates all the divine covenants, by which God created a kinship between himself and man. And the fulfilment of the divine covenants is the New Covenant, where Jesus used parables to spread the good news — the gospel which has been entrusted to the Church to proclaim. Therefore, the story must be authored according to its true identity — a new parable.

Knowing this, the Catholic storyteller must ask: “How do I live out this mission?” I think the answer is a lot shorter than you’d think. There is nothing more important to a Catholic storyteller than their own pursuit of God. As the Church was born from Christ’s pierced side on the cross,⁹ so must our mission of storytelling flow. “For the body does not consist of one member but of many,¹⁰ having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us,¹¹ and his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,” and I will add, when Paul says “some evangelists,” Christ has also called some storytellers, all “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up

the body of Christ.”¹² Let us all strive to cultivate in ourselves a devotion to prayer, especially Sacred Liturgy, so that God’s work and call in us is strengthened through this divine experience, deepening the expression of truth in the stories we tell.

Finally, through the use of parables, we know that the Catholic storyteller cannot reject the mission of evangelization in their work. Whether we are telling stories to our children, or to our brothers and sisters in Christ, or to the whole public as professionals, we are all telling new parables as servants of Christ and his Church. It is also important to note that storytelling is a largely secular industry in our day. Therefore it is fitting to end with a short, yet vitally important point: with the knowledge of the power of storytelling and its relationship with truth, a Catholic storyteller cannot cut themselves off from the secular industry, but they must become a missionary in it, for Christ prays to the Father, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they may also be consecrated in truth.”¹² Let the world be converted through the story. Tell the new parables.

2023). William Morrow, Letter 142.

⁹ Jn 19:34. As Eve was born from the side of Adam, so was the Church born from the side of Christ.

¹⁰ Cor 10:14.

¹¹ Rom 12:6.

¹² Eph 4:11.

¹² Jn 17:18-19.



Sermon on the Mount, Ivan Makarov, 1889.

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The Mission of Storytelling

A Call to Catholic Storytellers

Full Text. Submitted to Prof. Panlasigui, Aug 2026, in partial fulfillment of HUMA491

What is a Story?

“A story is a hero's struggle against an obstacle to reach a goal¹.” These are the words of my college screenwriting professor, Chris Riley. He drills this into the heads of his new students each year in his introductory storytelling class. If you are a storyteller in any capacity on campus, you know this definition. The hero, goal, and obstacle can be named clearly in all great stories. Frodo set out to destroy the One Ring with the forces of Mordor standing in his way². This is a simplistic explanation — and of course our professor requires more nuance — but in a general sense this is a hero-goal-obstacle. This definition of a story works, but I believe it can be part of a more complete definition. By no means do I doubt the quality of my professor. He is terrific at his craft and I owe the largest portion of my growth as a writer to him. However, I still believe there needs to be not necessarily a critique, but an addition to my professor's definition.

Though I seek to give a more complete definition of a story, I do not think a story can have a universally objective definition. A definition cannot cover all tropes, genres, themes, and nuances in creative vision contained from story to story. I love to be objective, but art is one of the places where objectivity must be placed into its golden mean. Because of this, I will emphasize the nature of a story in my definition. The mysterious beauty of theme and the variety of technique will not be defined—in many cases I believe they cannot be particularly defined—yet will still remain encapsulated in my definition.

To make my case for the nature of a story, I desire to use Aristotelian form and matter. Aristotle writes about form and matter in his *Physics*³, which comes from the Greek word *physis* meaning “nature.” In Aristotle's articulation, form and matter both make up nature.

Aristotle defines nature as “a source or cause of being moved and of being at rest in that to which it belongs

primarily, in virtue of itself...” A common articulation is that nature is an internal principle of motion and rest. Something is what it is because it does what it does⁴. Everything in nature is a natural thing, and everything that exists has motion and rest within itself. Nature has four causes:

- † Material: The matter that makes up the natural thing.
- † Formal: The shape of the natural thing.
- † Efficient: The source of the change or rest in the natural thing.
- † Final: The end or the purpose of the natural thing.

Something in nature is created (efficient cause) with a purpose (final cause). It is what it is (formal cause) because of that, and it has come to be (matter). Storytelling itself is not a natural thing, but it can simulate a natural thing in its behavior as it relates to Aristotle's articulation of nature.

The writing of a story begins with a blank page. There must be an agent, an efficient cause, that causes the story to turn from being a blank page to a completed work. That efficient cause is the author. The story the author writes has setting and genre. It is its own world with its own characteristics. This is the formal cause, which gives shape to the story of the hero — his struggle against an obstacle to reach a goal. This hero-goal-obstacle gives the story its material cause. Lastly, the author writes with a purpose, which is the final cause, the end of which the story is made for. And for a true story, this purpose must incorporate theme. Without theme a true story would be void of its true meaning, which is the pursuit of truth. It is important to note that theme is not forceful. Rather, it finds its way into the story as the author answers the questions on their soul.

¹ Professor Riley pulled this quote from a November 2002 edition of *Written By*. The writer of the article is Marsha Scarbrough.

² Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*.

³ Aristotle. *Physics*. 4th century BC. These concepts have been adopted past philosophy itself and into the Church's theology through St. Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Trent, among other places.

⁴ Younan, Fr. Andrew. *Philosophy of Nature Course Reader*. (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015). I didn't pull this directly from the reader, but the lectures given by the author based upon the course reader.

And the story exists so that the pursuit of truth may be shared. Its theme flows organically out of the soul and into the story, making any sort of forced implementation detrimental to its pursuit of truth.

With storytelling being articulated through the four causes, a more complete definition can be made: “A story is a sequence of events authored by a person with a thematic purpose; expressed through a hero’s struggle against an obstacle to reach a goal.” This definition seeks to cover all the general grounds of the mystery, or the sacrament, of storytelling, for anything past that may be too detrimental to specifically describe. After all, a mystery is only knowable to a certain extent—the rest is elusive beauty that we can only know exists.

The Covenantal Meaning of Storytelling

The covenantal meaning of storytelling is inseparably linked with the covenantal meaning of salvation history. A very general understanding of covenantal salvation history is required so that a deeper understanding of covenantal storytelling can be learned. And the place to find this understanding is Sacred Scripture. According to Dr. Scott Hahn and John Bergsma, salvation history in Sacred Scripture gradually unveils itself in six

divine covenants⁵:

A pattern of divine covenants characterizes the whole economy of salvation history, starting with creation. God’s “fatherly plan” for his family advances at every stage of salvation history through a series of divine covenants with chosen mediators: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus Christ. This sequence of divine covenants may be interpreted in theological terms as God accommodates himself to the developmental stages of the human family: marriage, household, tribe, nation, international kingdom, and the universal church of the new covenant.

All of these divine covenants establish a special unity between God and man. As Hahn and Bergsma note, a covenant is an “agreement establishing a kinship bond between two parties by a verbal or ritual oath.” When it comes to the divine covenants, each one expands the scale of the familial bond between God and man and generally consists of a mediator, general stipulations, specific stipulations, blessings, curses, and a sign, which is the ritual. See Figure 1:

Figure 1: *The Six Divine Covenants*

Covenant	Mediator	Kinship	Bible Ref	General Stipulations	Specific Stipulations	Blessings	Curses	Sign
Adamic	Adam	Marriage	Gen 1:26-28, 2:17.	"Be fruitful and multiply"	"But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat"	Eternal life of peace	Spiritual death and separation from God	Sabbath
Noahic	Noah	Household	Gen 9:4, 8-17	"Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood"	"Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood"	Earth free from major floods	Your own blood will be shed as reckoning	Rainbow
Abrahamic	Abraham	Tribe	Gen 12:1-3, 15:1-21, 17:1-14, 22:16-18	"And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great"	"Every male among you shall be circumcised"	Father of many and the blessing of God	Cut off from his people	Circumcision
Mosaic	Moses	Nation	Ex 3:4-10, 6:7, 19:5-6	"And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"	"If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples" (Mosaic Law)	Nation of God's chosen people	Cut off from God's possession	Passover
Davidic	David	Kingdom	2 Sam 7:5-16	"I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom"	"Would you build me a house to dwell in?"	The throne of David's descendants will last forever	Fall of the kingdom	Temple
New Covenant	Jesus Christ	Universal Church	Matt 26:26-29, 28:19-20; Lk 22:14-20, Mk 14:22-25	"Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a chalice, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant'"	"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Bringing souls to Christ in the life of the Church)	Eternal life by the forgiveness of sins	Eternal separation from God, void of love	Eucharistic Liturgy

⁵ Bergsma, John, and Hahn, Dr. Scott. (2015). Covenant. In Samuel E. Balentine (Ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology* (Vol. 1, pages 151–166). Oxford University Press.

Take a look at the cross, where Jesus Christ takes the blood of the covenant⁶, consummating the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the sign of the New Covenant, and it shows us an important truth:

God wants us to be his family, his kin, in a way more intimate than we can possibly comprehend.

When we receive the Eucharist, we not only receive the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ⁷, but we also unite ourselves to his passion, death, resurrection. This unity leads us into the Kingdom of Heaven, which was won for us by Christ in the pouring out of his whole self without reserve. And this unity is attained by the Eucharist as a sign. It's safe to say that the New Covenant's covenantal structure provides us with a perfect example of the divine covenant's general characteristics: kinship, a gift of self, and unity, all actualized by a sign whose end is to bring people into the covenant. Here's another graph to show these characteristics in all the divine covenants:

Figure 2: Unity, Kinship, and Truth in the Divine Covenants

Covenant	Kinship	Self-Gift	Unity
Adamic	God & Adam	Obedience	Marriage
Noahic	God & Noah	Eating meat without blood	Household
Abrahamic	God & Abraham	Circumcision	Tribe
Mosaic	God & Moses	Adherence to the Law	Nation
Davidic	God & David	Building the Temple	Kingdom
New Covenant	God & Jesus	Christ on the Cross	Universal Church, Salvation

As you can see, kinship, the gift of self, and unity are present, alongside their sign or ritual that leads people into the covenant—into that kinship, that love (which is a gift of self), and that unity.

So now we have some general information on the covenantal meaning of salvation history, but how can we apply this to storytelling? When it comes to salvation history, the kinship is between God and man, united through Jesus Christ. But in the case of storytelling, the kinship is between writer and reader, united in truth, who is Jesus Christ: “the way, and the truth, and the life⁸.” The reality of what happens with a story imitates the reality of what takes place in salvation history. Here are some examples for how stories reflect the structure of all the divine covenants:

Figure 3: The Structure of the Divine Covenants Reflected in my Favorite Stories

Story	Mediator	Kinship	General Stipulations	Specific Stipulations	Blessings	Curses	Sign/Veil
The Lord of the Rings	The receiver of the story (received from J.R.R. Tolkien)	Kinship united in truth	This is Middle Earth	This story is about hope and morality	You learn a lesson of hope and life after death	If you don't care, you won't learn or grow	Sign: Book Veil: Fantasy world
Star Wars	The receiver of the story (received from George Lucas)	Kinship united in truth	This is the Galactic Republic	This story is about letting go and sacrifice	You learn a lesson of sacrifice and acceptance	If you don't care, you won't learn or grow	Sign: Live action movie Veil: Space-ships, lightsabers
Spider-Verse	The receiver of the story (received from Phil Lord and Chris Miller)	Kinship united in truth	This is the Spider-Verse	This story is about identity and true justice	You learn a lesson of confidence and hardship	If you don't care, you won't learn or grow	Sign: Animated movie Veil: Kid with spider powers

⁶ Mt 26:28, Mk 14:24, Lk 22:20, 1 Cor 11:25. *Revised Standard Second Catholic Edition* (used hereafter unless stated otherwise).

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 1374.

⁸ Jn 14:6.

Continuing on the point, with salvation history, God is its author. His will determines reality, a reality that works through these people so that his story is complete. And he sent his hero, his only-begotten son⁹, into the story so that he could save all the people within it. An author does the same thing with their story. He decides reality, he creates characters and his plan for the story works through them. He writes his hero into the story. What sets the two apart is that one person is God and the other is man. The story God writes is reality itself, while the story man writes imitates God in creation¹⁰. Man's story shows us truth, but it is truth because God is truth, and for that reason it is inescapable for man's story to point to anything other than Jesus Christ. And Jesus' actions in the formation of the New Covenant are also imitated in the creation of a story. Jesus Christ pours himself out on the cross, and man pours himself out in the creation of his story. Months and even years are spent cultivating the beauty of the story, your whole heart is exposed in its theme, and it is given for other people to receive. As we established earlier, the kinship of storytelling is between writer and reader, united in truth that points to Jesus Christ. So in the covenant of storytelling, as in the divine covenants, we too see kinship, a gift of self, and unity: the kinship of truth, the gift of your whole self-poured out into creation, and the unity of truth. And it all comes down to love, for the creation of a story, just like the cross, is inherently an act of human love — a total gift of self for the sake of another. In Christ, the gift is salvation. In our storytelling, the gift, surely aided by the Holy Spirit working in us, is the beauty of truth, which strengthens souls in the gift of Christ.

Storytelling as a Sacrament

In the last section, I touched upon the fact that God “writes his hero into the story,” and that the “story God writes is reality itself.” And as was explained, this story is salvation history, and its hero is Jesus Christ, who came into the world as God. The coming of Christ—the mystery of the Incarnation—is so clearly profound in the way it affects our lives and brings about salvation history. There is such beautiful theology to be found there, but with storytelling, there is also such a beautiful connection to our human nature—the fact that we need a hero. In stories, our heroes define virtue and truth. They do things that can't be explained and they save. As was also touched upon in the last section, the author writes the hero's reality. The need for a hero is so innate to our

humanity, for we are broken. We don't have it all figured out, but heroes are the ones to figure it out for us, and to help us. They are brought down to our level, they are shown to be like us, but to rise to something greater, and to be something greater that we can become. These heroes exist in all of our stories because of an innate need for a savior, and that makes the coming of Christ as the true hero so much more powerful, for he too became like us in the Incarnation, and he too rose to something greater, showing us the glory of the Father by his mission as the Son of God, so that we can become like him.

Perhaps the most beautiful reflection on this topic comes from J.R.R. Tolkien, the man behind *The Lord of the Rings*—a Catholic himself, who by his work clearly understood the power of storytelling and the mastery that goes into crafting your own story. In his essay called *On Fairy Stories*¹¹, Tolkien uses the term “Euchatastrophe” to describe the highest function of what he calls a “fairy-story.” Though in a very general sense, “fairy-story” is a term he created for the fantasy genre,¹² the truth of the Euchatastrophe very much extends to all genres of stories, for the Euchatastrophe is the consolation, the end of which those in the story may finally rest and have peace. It is the happy ending, the reaching of the goal. Tolkien writes:

I would venture to say that approaching the Christian Story from this direction, it has long been my feeling (a joyous feeling) that God redeemed the corrupt making-creatures, men, in a way fitting to this aspect, as to others, of their strange nature. The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: “mythical” in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable Eucatastrophe. But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the Eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the Eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy.

Tolkien begins by expressing his joy that God “redeemed the corrupt” in a way fitting to our “strange nature,” our nature that makes us need a hero. The Old Testament makes this clear. It is filled with the brokenness of man,

⁹ Jn 3:16.

¹⁰ Von Balthasar, Hans Urs (1988–1998). *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (Vols. 1–5) (G. Harrison, Trans.). Ignatius Press. I'm not pulling a direct quote, but have learned of this point's similarity to Balthasar's thinking.

¹¹ Tolkien, J.R.R. On Fairy Stories. In *Tales from the Perilous Realm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008). Page 387.

¹² The fantasy genre didn't yet exist. He basically created it as it is today with *The Lord of the Rings*.

it shows us that need. And it is out of that need that we as humans search for that heroic story, forging our own realms to tell it in. But the Old Testament also shows us a promise. The promise of Christ: the hero sent by God. The Gospels tell the story of this promise being fulfilled, a story filled with “many marvels” as Tolkien describes it. Yet the Gospels are not fantasy as the realms we create to tell the story of a hero are. They are reality, and without that reality, there would be no faith and therefore no connection to any hero in any story. There would only be despair. The beauty of the story of these heroes truly points straight to the beauty of salvation. When man creates his story, we create in the image and likeness of God, which is sub-creation. That sub-creation is “raised to the fulfillment of Creation” in the story of Christ, for the truth of any sub-creation is only truth, as said in the previous section, because God is truth. For that reason, the end of any sub-creation—so any story—is the eternal joy of salvation, which comes by the resurrection, the happy result of the Incarnation.

Let us ask ourselves this question then: “how do we unite ourselves to the salvation of the Incarnation and the subsequent Resurrection?” The answer is the Sacraments. If Jesus Christ is the bringer of the New Covenant, then his gift of himself in the Eucharist is the bringer of unity with the New Covenant, because that gift is himself. The Eucharist is the “source and summit¹³” of all of the Church’s Sacraments, all of them working towards unity with Christ and salvation. Thinking back to the divine covenants, the signs for each are sacramental, meaning that the visible sign reveals an invisible reality. The signs of the divine covenants prefigure the Eucharist as the sign of the New Covenant, brought to us in the Eucharistic Liturgy. Think about it—the Liturgy itself is a living story. It is the supreme story, for it is the only story that does not merely point to Christ, but becomes Christ and is Christ. It tells us the story of the brokenness of man and our redemption through Christ becoming flesh. There is physical choreography in the form of rituals, dialogue in the form of the prayers and responses, music in the form of sacred chant and hymns, and immersion in the form of the architecture of the Church, the placement of sacred objects, and the beauty of her sanctuary. The Liturgy is the embodiment of the story of salvation history, for the Liturgy is the expression of the New Covenant, the story of salvation. Though the Eucharistic Liturgy is the Sacrament of all sacraments, for it brings us Christ in the Eucharist, stories that are made by man, or subcreated¹⁴, themselves also function sacramentally. Storytelling, by nature, is sacramental, for its

veil is a sign of an invisible reality — its deepest truths are hidden behind the world of Middle Earth, the vast Galactic Republic, the presence of a boy who shoots spiderwebs, or any other subcreated reality. And like all things, its fulfillment is in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Spoke in Parables

For the sake of learning what it means to be a Catholic storyteller, the theology of storytelling is vital to know. Yet the reality of what it means to be a Catholic storyteller cannot be understood without first knowing the mission of stories, and for that reason, we must transition into talking about the purpose of storytelling.

Knowing that storytelling particularly reveals and lives out the story of salvation history, we may look to God, who is its author. Salvation history does not all come at once. There are thousands of years of covenants, trials of suffering, and endurance, all in which the promises of God are gradually revealed and prophesied towards. These promises are all fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is God Incarnate, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Jesus’s mission was to reveal the redemption of man in and through himself, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God the Father. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life¹⁵”. Furthermore, the Catholic Church itself exists to further this mission by our participation in it, for it was founded by Christ and we make up his body¹⁶. Jesus Christ himself is the supreme evangelist, for he himself is the source of the good news and it was his coming upon which it was discovered and preached by him. But just like salvation history, the good news wasn’t revealed instantly. In fact, upon reading the Gospels, we find that Jesus intentionally concealed his identity as being equal to God for a major portion of his mission. Here’s an example from Mark: “And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, ‘You are the Son of God.’ And he strictly ordered them not to make him known¹⁷.” Why does Jesus do this? It’s rhetorical, or in other words, it is his strategy of delivering himself to the world. He reveals himself to us in a way that we can better understand, in a way that is more suited towards the human person, and in a way that allows us to truly experience him in which the “fulness of God was pleased to dwell¹⁸.” The person of Christ would be far less fruitful to discover, to study, and to unite ourselves to if everything was known about him at once. This is important, for a major way Jesus used rhetorical strategy to reveal himself to us is through parables, which are stories.

¹³ CCC 1324.

¹⁴ To be created in the image and likeness of God. Not as God, but in imitation of him.

¹⁵ Jn 3:16.

¹⁶ CCC 789.

¹⁷ Mk 3:11-12.

¹⁸ Col 1:19.

In the same way Christ is the supreme evangelist, we may also call Christ the supreme storyteller. Let's read again from the gospel of Mark¹⁹, the Parable of the Sower:

Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he taught them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had not much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil; and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

And when he was alone, those who were about him with the Twelve asked him concerning the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven." And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them. And these in like manner are the ones sown upon rocky ground, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones sown among thorns; they are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." In this passage, Jesus reveals to us that his parables exist for a rhetorical purpose—one that gives the message of the gospel in a way that is easier to understand and better for souls, even if that means to not reveal the fullness of who he is right away.

Jesus starts by speaking to the crowd, teaching "them

many things in parables." Among these is the Parable of the Sower, where we see a sower as he is sowing drop some seeds onto the path, being devoured by birds. Then, some seeds fall on rocky ground, sprouting but burning immediately in the sun due to its weakness of not having a root. Other seeds were choked out by thorns. But there were also seeds sown on good soil, which brought forth an abundance of grain. Jesus gives this teaching in a story instead of just saying it. Why does he do this? The disciples asked him just that, and he tells them: "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables." For those who already know the teaching, a parable is not necessary, the power of a story's ability to convey truth sacramentally loses its meaning. Yet is there anyone who truly knows the "secret of the kingdom of God" other than Christ and the saints to whom it has been revealed? Jesus says in this same section, "Do you not understand this parable?" He then proceeds to explain it to them, telling them that the sower sows the word along the path, sowing it in the people, and the ones on rocky ground or among the thorns are affected by Satan to fall away. "But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." The good soil is the soil that responds to God's grace and cooperates with it. That's the meaning of this parable, but I would venture that for many of us it took this explanation from Jesus for us to even understand it. That's our human nature. Even with a capacity for great intellect, we often just have no idea what's going on, and we need to be taught. Jesus says, "for those outside everything is in parables." We are the outside, brought inside by Christ. It takes rhetorical strategy, rhetoric that Jesus even seems to use to his disciples when he says "to you has been given" when talking about the "secrets of the kingdom," even when they did not understand. Is he saying it in the sense that they possess it, or in the sense that he is giving it to them in parables? I think it might be the latter. Think about it this way. Could you handle it if Jesus told you all of his teachings at once? Surely your growth in his word is something accumulated over months and years. Rhetorical strategy is necessary in learning. And it is no coincidence Jesus uses storytelling for rhetoric, for it brings to us its own world, one that is framed in a way we can understand by its author, and one that shows us truth. In the use of parables, Jesus acts as both God and man, telling stories as brilliant as man can tell it, but making them point to himself in his divinity. Here is a graph of all of Jesus' parables²⁰:

¹⁹ Mk 4:1-20.

²⁰ Hahn, Dr. Scott., and Mitch, Curtis, Eds. *Ignatius Catholic Study*

Bible: Old and New Testaments (Revised Standard Version, 2nd Catholic ed. 2024).

Figure 4: Table from the Ignatius Catholic Study Bible.

Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
The Builders	7:24-27		6:47-49
The Sower	13:1-9	4:1-9	8:4-8
The Wheat and the Weeds	13:24-30		
The Mustard Seed	13:31-32	4:30-32	13:18-19
The Leaven	13:33		13:20-21
The Hidden Treasure	13:44		
The Pearl of Great Value	13:45-46		
The Dragnet	13:47-50		
The Lamp		4:21-23	8:16-18
The Growing Seed		4:26-29	
The Two Debtors			7:41-43
The Good Samaritan			10:25-37
The Friend at Midnight			11:5-13
The Rich Fool			12:16-21
The Barren Fig Tree			13:6-9
The Lost Sheep	18:10-14		15:4-7
The Lost Coin			15:8-10
The Prodigal Son			15:11-32
The Unforgiving Servant	18:23-35		
The Unrighteous Steward			16:1-9
The Unrighteous Judge			18:1-8
The Pharisee and Tax Collector			18:9-14
The Laborers in the Vineyard	20:1-16		
The Two Sons	21:28-32		
The Wicked Tenants	21:33-46	12:1-12	20:9-19
The Marriage Feast	22:1-14		
The Great Banquet			14:15-24
The Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids	25:1-13		
The Talents	25:14-30		
The Pounds			9:11-27

I encourage you to spend time meditating on these, reflecting on the mastery of his rhetoric, but also the use of the parables as a means for evangelization. Truly the power of storytelling as it conveys truth is maximized in Jesus' parables. He uses his parables in order to reveal himself to us in a way fitting to ourselves. In time we grow to know him and his truth, and we become like him. And as storytellers ourselves, there reaches a certain point where it becomes our turn to share in the mission given by Christ, which is to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"²¹. In doing so, Jesus asks us to teach the nations to "observe all that I have commanded you," reminding us, "I am with you always, to the close of the age"²². Storytelling was a major aspect of Jesus's mission on Earth, so why not make it a major aspect of the mission of the Church? Jesus is both the supreme storyteller and the supreme evangelist, and it is through him that we know as Catholics that the mission of storytelling is inseparably tied to the mission of evangelization.

The Mission

In this final section, I want to touch upon storytelling's application, for without application theology is nothing but a soul with no body. The mission of storytelling would be dead. Beauty and truth would have no place to call home.

To understand the application, it is necessary to circle back to my definition of a story: a sequence of events authored by a person with a thematic purpose; expressed through a hero's struggle against an obstacle to reach a goal. Adding what we have learned in this essay since this definition was given, we can create an even clearer vision of the story through the lens of Christ.

Let's take another look at the four causes as it relates to what stories are:

- † Material Cause: a hero's struggle against an obstacle to reach a goal.
- † Formal Cause: The setting and genre of the story.
- † Efficient Cause: Both God and man.
- † Final Cause: The mission of evangelization.

Looking at this, we can now start adding to each of these

categories what we have learned. The material cause, "a hero's struggle against an obstacle to reach a goal," reflects humanity's need for a hero, one who is like us, but becomes something greater. And we never become something greater without an obstacle. In Jesus' ministry, he faced many obstacles to win for us his salvation, and he ultimately conquered them all by rising from the dead. Our human stories, using this structure, point to the need for a hero to do that for us. The formal cause is the setting and genre of the story. It is the world the story takes place in alongside its general tropes that provides the context for the story to happen. It is set in place by the efficient cause, the person who authors the story. And the efficient cause can be both God and man. As we went over, God is the author of creation and of salvation history. Man imitates God in creation as subcreators²³, made in his image and likeness. When man authors a story it points to God's divine authorship and glorifies it. And finally, the final cause, the purpose of the story, is inherently thematic. Theme organically finds its way into the story as a reflection of the author's soul. It does not need to be forced, but it simply exists, and we must cultivate that once we find it. Tolkien once said: "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision"²⁴. Therefore, in the formation of ourselves as Catholics, a true and beautiful message inherently works its way into our stories, because our souls are in the pursuit of truth. Strive to grow in Christ, and the theme will be there. Do not overthink it, but let Christ work in and through your souls, and you will find your story's true meaning. The final cause's thematic purpose exists for evangelization—bringing souls into a covenantal kinship with God. The creation and reception of storytelling directly imitates all the divine covenants, by which God created a kinship between himself and man. And the fulfilment of the divine covenants is the New Covenant, where Jesus used parables to spread the good news—the gospel which has been entrusted to the Church to proclaim. Therefore, the story must be authored according to its true identity—a new parable.

Knowing this, the Catholic storyteller must ask: "How do I live out this mission?" I think the answer is a lot shorter than you'd think. There is nothing more important to a Catholic storyteller than their own pursuit of God. For us, our mission is storytelling, but at the center of any vocation, no matter what it is, is Jesus Christ. As the Church was born from his pierced side on the cross²⁵, so must our mission of storytelling flow. "For the body

²¹ Mt 28:19.

²² Mt 28:19-20.

²³ To be creators in the image and likeness of God. Not as God, but in imitation of him.

²⁴ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: Revised and*

Expanded Edition (Humphrey Carpenter & Christopher Tolkien, Eds., 2023). William Morrow. Letter 142.

²⁵ Jn 19:34. As Eve was born from the side of Adam, so was the Church born from the side of Christ.

does not consist of one member but of many²⁶, having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us²⁷, and his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,” and I will add, when Paul says “some evangelists,” Christ has also called some storytellers, all “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ²⁸.” Our vocation flows from our life with God, so let us all strive to cultivate in ourselves a devout prayer life, so that God’s work and call in us is strengthened and fully realized.

We can then also say that because the Liturgy, with the Eucharist as its focal point, lives out our participation in the story of salvation history through beautiful prayers, rituals, and architecture, a Catholic storyteller in pursuit of rooting themselves as a meaningful Catholic in pursuit of God, ought to have a particularly special devotion to Sacred Liturgy. This is so that frequent reception of Christ in the Eucharist and participation in divine Liturgy’s expression can imprint itself on the soul of the storyteller, only for the sake of their holiness and growth, so that in the same way they are strengthened to be holy in the world as their first priority, they are strengthened

to carry the divine experience of Liturgy into the expression of truth in the stories they tell in their mission as storytellers.

Finally, through the use of parables, we know that the Catholic storyteller cannot reject the mission of evangelization in their work. We are called to bring this mission into the field of storytelling as a whole. Whether we are telling stories to our children, or to our brothers and sisters in Christ, or to the whole public as professionals, we are all telling new parables as servants of Christ and his Church. It is also important to note that storytelling is a largely secular industry in our day. Therefore it is fitting to end with a short, yet vitally important point: with the knowledge of the power of storytelling and its relationship with truth, a Catholic storyteller cannot cut themselves off from the secular industry, but they must become a missionary in it, for

Christ prays to the Father, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they may also be consecrated in truth²⁹.” Let the world be converted through the story. Tell the new parables.

²⁶ Cor 10:14.

²⁷ Rom 12:6

²⁸ Eph 4:11.

²⁹ Jn 17:18-19.

