

Many of you have heard of C.S. Lewis' Narnia series. But Lewis also wrote another series of books. The concluding volume of this trilogy is called That Hideous Strength, in which the Apocalypse happens in the Britain of Lewis' day. A small group of Christians led by a man named Ransom (a Christ-like figure) confront a vast, demonic conspiracy. In the midst of all this Merlin, the wizard from the King Arthur tales, is brought back to life as an ally of the Christian resistance.

In one scene from the book Ransom and Merlin are talking about how to fight the forces of evil. Merlin, thinking like the fifth century noble of the late Roman Empire that he is, asks Ransom, the contemporary Britain, "This Saxon King of yours who sits at Windsor, now. Is there no help in him?" "He has no power in this matter," (Ransom answers). "Is it then the great men – the counts and legates and bishops – who do the evil?" "It is – though they are not exactly the sort of great men you have in mind." "But . . . [i]t can not be that ALL your priests and bishops are corrupted." "The Faith itself is torn in

pieces since your day and speaks with a divided voice. Even if it were made whole, the Christians are but a tenth part of the people.” “Is there no Christian prince who would come in and cleanse Britain if he were called?” “There is no Christian prince left.” “Then we must go higher. We must call on the Emperor.” “There is no Emperor.” And here Lewis leaves Merlin in stunned silence at the lack of allies of the faith.

I’ve spent maybe too much time on this, but here’s my point. Even when I first read this passage years ago as an historian and newly returned Catholic it struck me as odd. Merlin is going through the hierarchy of his time, seeking the aid of the powers meant to protect the Church and society – kings, counts, bishops, priests, the Emperor. But he never mentions the most powerful figure a fifth century man would have thought of – the Pope in Rome. Lewis was an Anglican raised in Northern Ireland. He was a good Christian. I learned much from him. But his background blinds him to the truth of the Catholic

Church. There was still a force in Lewis' world that had existed in Merlin's time -- the Papacy.

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.” This passage is the central scriptural basis for the authority over the Church of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, who is the Successor of St. Peter. Catholics have always believed the Popes had this leadership role in the Church and world – and in the fight against the forces of evil Lewis envisioned in his books. Lewis might have a blindness towards the institution, but the Pope's authority is not a fantasy, but a historical fact. Non-Catholics may not accept the spiritual claims of the Popes, but they should be able to recognize the reality of their impact over thousands of years.

For example, Thomas Macaulay, a British historian, politician, and himself an Evangelical Protestant, wrote in 1840 of the Papacy and the

Catholic Church as follows: “No other institution is left standing which carries the mind back to times when the smoke of sacrifice rose from the Pantheon, and when [leopards] and tigers bounded in the (Coliseum). The proudest royal houses are but of yesterday when compared with the line of the Supreme Pontiffs. That line we trace back in an unbroken series from the Pope who crowned Napoleon in the nineteenth century to the Pope who crowned Pepin in the eight; and far beyond the time of Pepin the august dynasty extends . . . The Papacy remains, not in decay . . . but full of life and youthful vigor. The Catholic Church is still sending forth to the farthest ends of the world missionaries as a zealous as those who landed in Kent with Augustine, and still confronting kings with the same spirit with which she confronted Attila.

She saw the commencement of all the governments and of all the ecclesiastical establishments that now exist in the world; and we feel no assurance that she is not destined to see the end of them all. She

was great and respected before the Saxon set foot on Britain (Merlin's time), before the Frank had passed the Rhine . . . when idols were still worshipped in the temple of Mecca, and she may still exist in undiminished vigor when some traveler from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's."

Although we are technologically light years ahead of the Roman Empire in its last days, we are no less harassed by chaos and confusion. Things that seemed solid are melting. Truths once almost universally accepted are mocked. And who or what do we turn to? There is a crisis of trust in political leaders at the national, state, and local levels in much of the world. The situation in the Church is no better. Priests, Bishops, Cardinals, Popes have acted in ways that betrayed our confidence and faith. The work of sinful human beings is all around us.

But now is the time to remember that we will not be saved by human politics or human leadership, civil or ecclesiastical, but by Divine

power and providence. That is what reminded me of Lewis' words and story. Like all men, the Popes are sinful human beings. But neither the Catholic Church nor the Papacy is a merely human institution, as our Gospel today tells us. The office of Peter in the Catholic Church is instituted by Christ himself to protect God's own revelation for humanity. And Jesus promises us that the gates of the netherworld, that hideous strength, will never prevail against His Vicar on earth, the Pope, and His Church – no matter how dark things seem.

My point today is simply to remind you of our faith – that the Catholic Church has faced many crises in her two-thousand year history. She would have disappeared long ago if she were merely human. But she is not. She has Christ as her Head and the Holy Spirit as her soul and guide. Therefore, in these times, let us keep our faith and our nerve, and keep our eyes fixed upon her teaching as proclaimed by Peter's successors as our hope and safety in the storm of human history.