

Slaying The Hoarding Dragon

By LORRAINE V. MURRAY **Commentary**

Every year it's the same drill. In January, I painstakingly go through all my clothes, jewelry, books and household items, and make a big pile by the door, which I then donate to charity.

Invariably, the following week, I will be pawing through my closet, looking for an item of clothing and then realize, "Oh, wait, I gave it away."

Still, despite this inevitable glitch, I am a big fan of de-cluttering as a spiritual practice. There is something deadening about clinging too tightly to stuff, especially when someone else may be able to use it. But even in situations where the items in question are junk that no one could possibly want, there's a spiritual benefit in throwing it out.

A scene in the book, "The Hobbit," by J.R.R. Tolkien speaks to the dangers of hoarding. There, we meet a dragon named Smaug sitting on a big pile of stuff he can't possibly use: jewels and gold cups and all sorts of glittering and expensive items. He clings to his stash because greed is part of his fiendish nature.

And that in a nutshell is the danger of hoarding, which feeds our greedy side—and bolsters our yearning to be surrounded by comfort all the time.

There is nothing inherently wrong, of course, with wanting a warm coat for winter and some nice cotton outfits for summer—but in my case, I have too much of everything. Yes, I put that in the present tense because even

though I have gone through the house with the proverbial fine-tooth comb, I still have many items I should let go of, but am still sitting on, so to speak.

In a wonderful book, "Bilbo's Journey," Catholic author Joseph Pearce explores the hidden meaning of "The Hobbit," most specifically its Christian undertones. His description of the dragon, Smaug, perched upon its cache of treasures is telling indeed.

The dragon, says Pearce, is guilty of an "obsessive possessiveness" and is a chilling reminder of the materialism that stalks our lives. When Smaug flies into a rage at the loss of a "single insignificant and practically useless trinket," notes Pearce, this scene is a metaphor for the habit of clinging tightly to stuff we really don't need.

Dragons in Tolkien's tales represent the demonic element, just as they do in classic Christian stories. This is why artistic renderings of St. Michael vanquishing Satan often show the devil as horrific, huge, horned—and thoroughly dragon-like.

Tolkien was first and foremost a faithful Catholic, as Pearce points out, and he never made the mistake of thinking the devil was a mere symbol.

And the image of a dragon in Tolkien's book guarding material goods represents the deadly sin of avarice. It is one thing to have enough to survive—and even a little more for enjoyment—but it is can be sinful to hold onto our excess rather than letting it go.

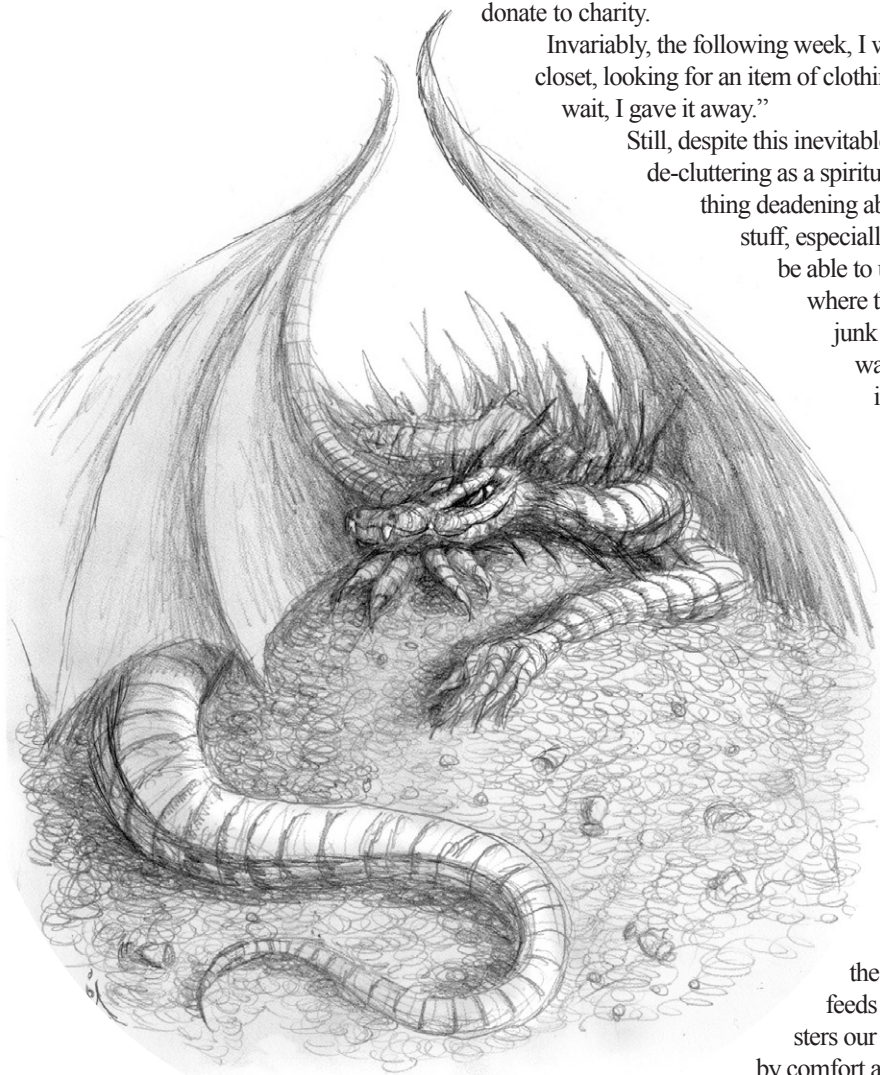
Is it easy to let go? Is it painless to say goodbye to stuff that reminds us of the past? Of course not, but it takes spiritual strength to battle any sin.

We can pray for God's grace to help us. We can turn to a priest in the sacrament of Confession and admit we are in the clutches of avarice. We can ask for God's mercy and forgiveness.

With God's help, we can gain the spiritual strength necessary to slay this deadly dragon. We can box up our excess and get it out of the house before we're tempted to keep it. We can donate our stuff to a charity like the St. Vincent de Paul Society, which sells items in thrift stores and uses the proceeds to help the poor.

In doing this, we are turning our backs on the devil, and are instead following Christ, who told us in no uncertain terms, "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

Artwork is by Jef Murray, whose sketches and paintings of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis' works can be seen at www.jefmurray.com. Readers may contact the Murrays at lorrainemurray@yahoo.com.



Archdiocese In Compliance With Charter

ATLANA—A recent on-site audit has found the Archdiocese of Atlanta to be in compliance, for the 2011-12 period, with all audited articles in the "Charter For the Protection of Children and Young People." A letter from the firm that performed the audit, StoneBridge Business Partners of Rochester, N.Y., was sent Dec. 15, 2012.

The letter states that compliance was based on "inquiry, observation and the review of specifically requested documentation."

For a copy of the letter and previous audit results, go to the website, www.archatl.com/offices/ocyp/audit/.

ARCHBISHOP'S SCHEDULE

ATLANA—Following is the public schedule for Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory for the coming weeks.
Saturday, Feb. 2, 10:30 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will ordain the permanent diaconate class of 2012 at the Cathedral of Christ the King, Atlanta.

5 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass for the Archbishop's Banquet for Catholic Education, Marriott Perimeter Center, Atlanta. A dinner will follow.

Monday, Feb. 4, 9:30 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will speak to the fifth- through eighth-grade students at Christ the King School, Atlanta.

6:30 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will speak at the Holy Spirit Men's Club meeting at Holy Spirit Church, Atlanta.

Tuesday, Feb. 5, 12-2 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will hold presbyteral conferences at the Chancery, Smyrna.

4 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will participate in the vespers service for the celebration of religious life at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit, Conyers. A dinner will follow.

Wednesday, Feb. 6, 10 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will attend the priest personnel board meeting at the Chancery, Smyrna.

1 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will attend the Secretariat meeting at the Chancery.

Saturday, Feb. 9, 6 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will attend the Cathedral Ball to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Cathedral of

Christ the King, Atlanta, at Piedmont Driving Club.

Sunday, Feb. 10, 11 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass and the sacrament of confirmation at Our Lady of the Mountains Church, Jasper.

Wednesday, Feb. 13, 9:15 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass for Ash Wednesday at the Cathedral of Christ the King, Atlanta.

12 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass for Ash Wednesday at the Chancery, Smyrna.

1 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will attend the Secretariat meeting at the Chancery.

2 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will attend the Catholic Construction Services, Inc. at the Chancery.

Thursday, Feb. 14, 10 a.m.-12 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will hold presbyteral conferences at the Chancery, Smyrna.

12 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will meet with the vicars general at the Chancery.

Saturday, Feb. 16, 10 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will attend the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council meeting at the Chancery.

Sunday, Feb. 17, 10:45 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass at St. Philip Benizi Church, Jonesboro.

2 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate the Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion at the Atlanta Civic Center.

Chopping, slicing, dicing—and praying



BY LORRAINE
V. MURRAY

PRAYER CAN BE so mysterious. After reading Flannery O'Connor's recently published prayer journal, I was mystified by the fact that she plaintively wrote, "Would someone please teach me how to pray?"

Keep in mind she wrote dozens of letters to friends instructing them in the details of the Catholic faith, and did so eloquently. She also generously helped the sisters at Our Lady of Perpetual Help home in Atlanta write a book about a little girl named Mary Ann, one of their patients. O'Connor had lupus and was too ill to do the ordinary works of mercy such as visiting the sick, but she did her part through her writing.

I consider her a saintly woman—although she would protest that description—and yet even she struggled with prayer. But then again, don't we all? The apostles, who were with Jesus day in and day out, asked him, "Lord, teach us how to pray." And it was then that Jesus taught them that

very simple prayer in which we ask for our daily bread and surrender to God's will.

St. Paul admonishes us to "pray constantly"—but how can we interweave prayer into our busy day, especially during Advent when there is so much to be done? How can we pray while baking cookies, wrapping presents, cooking meals and stringing lights in the yard?

We can turn our hearts to God whenever possible. All we need to do is say, "This is all for you, Lord," whether we are making soup, driving to work, addressing cards or chasing a toddler around the house.

We can also take to heart the advice of Brother Lawrence, who wrote about prayer in "The Practice of the Presence of God." He absolutely hated working in the monastery kitchen, but one day, much to his dismay, he was given a permanent assignment there.

While chopping, slicing and dicing, Brother Lawrence



managed to turn drudgery into prayer by saying, "Here I am, Lord. Make me according to Thy Heart."

In the chaotic and steamy monastery kitchen with one person asking for one thing and another for something else, he felt as close to God as if he were on his knees in the adoration chapel before the Eucharist.

It's all about mindfulness. If we see a fancy bird at the feeder we can say, "Thank you, Lord." If we are impatient with crowds at the mall, we can pray for the people around us.

We can also say when faced with difficulties—whether it's a sulky teenager or a grouchy boss—the poignant words, "Lord, have mercy on me!"

Prayer means lifting our hearts to God, which we can do by reciting the Lord's Prayer and the rosary. We are fortunate to have traditional Catholic prayers for every occasion, so we needn't constantly reinvent the wheel.

Still, when people like O'Connor admit their strugg-

gles with prayer, I understand exactly what they mean. We often believe there is some deep mystery to it that we have yet to unravel.

And we may suspect everyone else knows how to do it better than we do.

However, it helps to remember that God gave us a sense of humor, and since we're created in his image, we can assume he has one too.

So I have to believe he enjoys the simplest words from us such as the sincere prayer of surrender that a priest shared with me, after learning it from an elderly lady in his parish: "Everything and anything, God!"

Really, doesn't that say it all?

Lorraine is delighted to announce the publication of her latest book, "Death Dons a Mask," the third cozy mystery in the Francesca Bibbo series. Artwork for this column is by Jef Murray. Readers may contact the Murrays at lorrainevmurray@yahoo.com.

QUESTION CORNER

Archbishop Sheen's process to sainthood?



BY FATHER
KENNETH
DOYLE
CNS

Q. About 10 years ago, I read an article in our Catholic newspaper about the possibility of Archbishop Fulton Sheen's becoming a saint. Since then, though, I have heard nothing further. Could you tell me where that process stands now? (I think it would be great if it happened. I remember, as a child, watching his show on television. I wish there could be reruns. (Severn, Md.)

A. In June 2012, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen was declared "venerable" by the Vatican. This means that he is considered to have been of "heroic virtue" and is

worthy of imitation. The next step on the road to sainthood is beatification, which requires one miracle through that person's intercession.

The Vatican is currently reviewing an Illinois case from 2010 where an infant boy, apparently stillborn, was revived after not breathing for more than an hour when his mother prayed to Fulton Sheen.

The media-savvy Sheen won the hearts of many Americans with his television show, "Life Is Worth Living." It ran from 1952 to 1957 and, at its peak, had 10 million weekly viewers. With only a blackboard and a statue as props, Sheen spoke

with drama and humor of the values that should guide faith-filled living.

In 1952, he received an Emmy as "Most Outstanding Television Personality." He also served for many years as the national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, spreading the message of the Gospel through missionary efforts across the globe.

Father Robert Barron, creator of the current award-winning television documentary "Catholicism," has called Sheen "the patron saint of media and evangelization."

Q. How should I respond to a young couple (raised Catholic) who do not plan to baptize their infant children? (They intend to wait until the children are old enough to decide on a religion for themselves.) (Baltimore, Md.)

A. I would ask the couple whether they follow the same standard in other areas of child rearing. Since they're not sure whether their son will grow up to like math, do they decline to teach him arithmetic when he is little?

The role of parents is to determine what opportunities they have benefited from, what

virtues and values have helped them, what moral framework can offer guidance through life—and then to pass on the best of what they have learned to their children.

What Catholic parents say by having their infants baptized is this: We believe (both from our faith and from our experience) that the sacraments and Catholic teaching offer a clear channel to God, and we want our kids to have that blessing.

Questions may be sent to Father Kenneth Doyle at askfatherdoyle@gmail.com and 40 Hopewell St., Albany, N.Y. 12208.

ARCHBISHOP'S SCHEDULE

ATLANTA

Following is the public schedule for Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory for the coming weeks.

- Saturday, Dec. 7, 10 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass for the Missionaries of Charity at the Gift of Grace House, Atlanta.
- Monday, Dec. 9, to Tuesday, Dec. 10. Archbishop Gregory will attend The Catholic University of America board meeting in Washington, D.C.

- Wednesday, Dec. 11, 9:30 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will meet with the Vicars for Clergy at the Chancery, Smyrna.
- 10:30 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will attend the Council of Priests' meeting at the Chancery.
- 1 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will attend the Secretariat meeting at the Chancery
- 2 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will attend the Catholic Construction Services, Inc. meeting at the

Chancery.

- 7 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass for Our Lady of Guadalupe at Our Lady of the Americas Mission, Lilburn.
- Thursday, Dec. 12, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will hold presbyteral conferences at the Chancery, Smyrna.
- 1 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will meet with the Episcopal Vicars and the Vicar General at the Chancery.
- 6 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will

celebrate Mass for the Serra Club at Holy Spirit Church, Atlanta. A dinner will follow.

- Saturday, Dec. 14, 6:30 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will attend the Christmas reception for the St. Thomas More Society at the Chancery, Smyrna.
- Sunday, Dec. 15, 2-4 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will attend the deacons' Christmas party at the Chancery.
- Tuesday, Dec. 17, 10 a.m.-12 p.m.

Archbishop Gregory will hold presbyteral conferences at the Chancery.

- 7 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will participate in the Catholic - Orthodox Ecumenical Gathering at the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Annunciation, Atlanta.
- Wednesday, Dec. 18. Archbishop Gregory will attend the celebration for the 50th anniversary of ordination for Cardinal Francis George, OMI, in Chicago.

Dreaming of a Miami Christmas



BY LORRAINE
V. MURRAY

THE THINGS I WANT for Christmas aren't really things at all. Oh, sure, I'll be happy to open the mysteriously wrapped gifts my husband places beneath the tree. I'll look forward to the big package my sister always sends with a cluster of surprises tucked inside.

But, really, if I could have one wish, it would have nothing to do with anything you can hold in your hands. You couldn't place this gift beneath the tree.

I would love to have one more Christmas like the old days when my parents were still alive. We were living in a small ranch-style house in southwest Miami with a yard loaded with trees from which dangled every imaginable fruit including coconuts, Key limes, grapefruit, mangos and bananas.

Christmas Eve my mother prepared the traditional Italian seafood dinner. We started with shrimp cocktails then moved on to a plate of steaming linguine with white clam sauce—and the pasta was

cooked *al dente* because we never, ever ate it soggy.

The next course was an oddly named dish, baked smelts, which were tiny fish that took a ton of time to prepare because my mom had to debone each one then dip it in melted butter and bread crumbs and lemon.

My mother brought her own version of joy to the festivities in a Christmas apron trimmed in red and green ribbons with tiny bells attached. The big table was set with the finest china with my father at the head presiding over an array of aunts, uncles, cousins and family friends.

The aunts wore dresses with festive pins attached, perhaps a reindeer with glittering eyes or a tree decorated with tiny jewels. My sister and I were decked out in our special Christmas outfits—cotton dresses with puffy sleeves and glossy patent leather shoes.

Dessert featured hazelnut biscotti plus tiny succulent cookies that we called wine cakes since they were made with flour, oil and white wine.

Each cookie had to be meticulously rolled out and shaped by hand, then fried and drizzled with honey.

My mother was not one to rest on her laurels, so on Christmas day she pulled out all the stops again. This time the menu featured homemade manicotti, sausage and meatballs. After the meal, a platter of roasted chestnuts was placed on the table and the adults would peel them and drink coffee spiked with anisette and talk for hours while the kids pretended to be horses running around outside on the lawn.

At this point it would be tempting to say I don't remember any of the actual gifts we received at Christmas because only the memories of people remain.

But that wouldn't really be true because one year I received the love of my life, a stuffed Pluto dog with golden fur and a black nose. He saw me through early childhood into high school and followed me to college. He has been with me through three decades

of marriage and now sits in my study, bedraggled and bald, but a reminder of love that endures.

My memories are from so many years ago and most of the people around the Christmas table are long gone. But each year I am made aware of what heaven would be like for me.

It would be to walk into that simple little house with the terrazzo floors and the white brocade couch, and to see my mother bustling around in the kitchen in her cheery apron. My father would be on the screened-in porch smoking a cigar and reading the paper.

When they saw me walk in, they would come running up to me and embrace me and wish me the holiest and happiest Christmas ever. And I would be truly home again in every sense of the word.

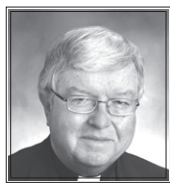
Lorraine Murray's new mystery is "Death Dons a Mask" featuring Francesca Bibbo, Tubs the cat and the wild and wacky crew at St. Rita's church in Decatur. Her email is lorrainemurray@yahoo.com.

Artwork is by Jeff Murray (www.jefmurray.com).



QUESTION CORNER

What's the point of the pope's ring?



BY FATHER
KENNETH
DOYLE
CNS

Q Why do Catholics kiss the pope's ring? Did our Lord walk around with such a ring? I don't know whether our new Pope Francis has had a ring designed for himself. It seems that he is trying to live the simple apostolic life. (Jamestown, Ky.)

A For centuries, popes have worn a ring called the fisherman's ring. It shows an image of Peter, the first pope, marking Peter's original occupation and Christ's invitation to the first apostles to become "fishers of men."

Until 1842, the ring was used to stamp official papal

decrees in wax as a sign of their authenticity, a fact reflected in the present-day symbolic destruction of a pope's ring at his death or resignation.

Characteristic of Pope Francis' preference for modesty, the new pope's ring is actually not one newly designed at his election. The wax model for it was created decades ago for Pope Paul VI.

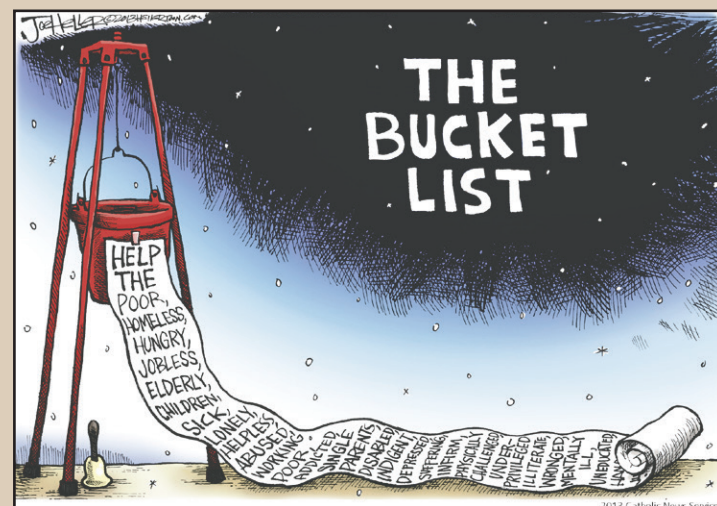
Though a ring itself was never produced at that time, Paul VI's priest-secretary kept the wax model, and sometime later it was cast in gold-plated silver. When he was shown the "leftover" ring, Pope Francis chose it as his own.

Bishops, too, wear a ring that is presented to them in their ordination ceremony as a symbol of their "fidelity to and nuptial bond with the church."

When people kiss a bishop's ring (a practice seen less frequently these days and often replaced by a simple handshake), they are expressing their respect for the bishop's role and responsibility in guiding the church.

Questions may be sent to Father Kenneth Doyle at askfatherdoyle@gmail.com and 40 Hopewell St., Albany, N.Y. 12208.

On the funny side of the street



CNS/JOE HELLER

ARCHBISHOP'S SCHEDULE

ATLANTA

Following is the public schedule for Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory for the coming weeks.

- Monday, Dec. 23, 6 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will host the seminarian Christmas party at the rectory of the Cathedral of Christ the King, Atlanta.
- Tuesday, Dec. 24, 10:45 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Christmas Eve

Mass at the Cathedral of Christ the King, Atlanta.

- Wednesday, Dec. 25, 10:30 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass for Christmas Day at the Cathedral of Christ the King.
- Tuesday, Dec. 31, 10:30 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass at Ignatius House, Atlanta, for the seminarian winter discernment. A luncheon

will follow.

- Wednesday, Jan. 1, 10 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass for the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, at the Cathedral of Christ the King, Atlanta.
- 1:30 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass in honor of Haitian Independence Day at Sts. Peter and Paul Church, Decatur.

- Thursday, Jan. 2, 1 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will meet with the Episcopal Vicars and the Vicar General at the Chancery, Smyrna.
- Sunday, Jan. 5, 11:30 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass for the 50th anniversary of Holy Spirit Church, Atlanta.
- 2 p.m. Archbishop Gregory will attend the sisters' Epipha-

ny reception at the Chancery, Smyrna.

- Monday, Jan. 6, to Friday, Jan. 10. Archbishop Gregory will attend the bishops' regional retreat in Florida.
- Sunday, Jan. 12, 11:30 a.m. Archbishop Gregory will celebrate Mass at Centro Católico del Espíritu Santo, Sandy Springs.