

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.

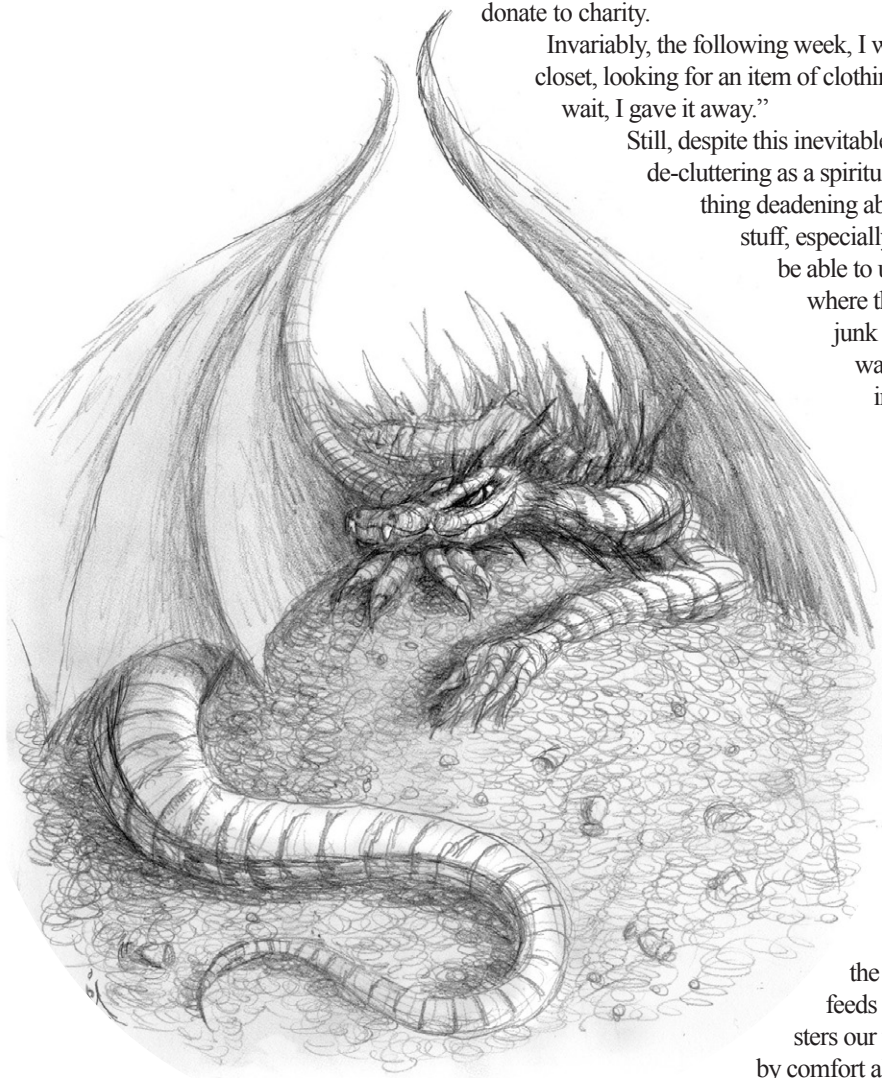
Is it easy to let go? Is it painless to say goodbye to stuff that reminds us of the past? Of course not, but it takes spiritual strength to battle any sin.

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

ATLANTA—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

ATLANTA—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.