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Harry Potter and the Last Enemy

07.14.2011 | Culture and Society, Hot Topics Emily Strand, director of liturgy at the University of Dayton, is an avid Harry Potter fan, baking foods from the series and throwing an annual Harry Potter-themed Halloween costume party.

But the series offers more than just entertainment, it promotes Christian themes that can be a great springboard for discussing weighty issues, according to Strand.

As *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part II* hits theaters at midnight on July 15, Strand reflects on the Christian Bible verse: "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death."

In addition to her role as liturgical director, Strand teaches courses on Catholic faith and worship for the religious studies department. She writes for the Canadian journal of pastoral liturgy, *Celebrate!*, and serves on various committees for the Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati.

The Last Enemy

(A reflection on the release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part II*)

By Emily Strand

As the Harry Potter film series comes to a close, this fan hopes *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part II* embraces the series' Christian parallels. It will mean the difference between a respectable finish and a truly worthy end to a classic story of love's victory over death.

For millions of *Potter* franchise fans, scripture isn't sexy. Part of the films' mass appeal relates to their slightly dangerous vibe: a fashionably "gothy" edginess that films featuring scripture references don't tend to possess (compare the *Potter* film phenomenon to the *Chronicles of Narnia* movies). But there they are in the *Potter* books: scripture passages, as bold as brass.

Two verses adorn gravestones in the church yard at Godric's Hollow. The first is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." The second, inscribed on Harry's parents' tombstone, is from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." *Potter* author J.K. Rowling has said these quotations "sum up — they almost epitomize the entire series." (1) But how?

Deathly Hallows Part I, released in November, is a story about choosing between the lure of the world and the love of family and friends. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Mt. 6:19-20a, 21) It is a troubling passage — why did Albus Dumbledore choose it for his mother and sister's tombstone?

In *Deathly Hallows*, the sad significance of the Dumbledore family's history begins to unfold. Obsessive love — for power and prestige, for possessing the Deathly Hallows, for a sinister and brilliant young man named Gellert Grindelwald — pulls the young Albus away from his already broken home. His mentally disabled sister Arianna, who so desperately needed her brother's care after the death of their mother, perishes tragically in the crossfire of Albus' misguided choice of friends.

This devastating loss of family, dreams and self-assurance makes Albus Dumbledore the man Harry Potter knew: the powerfully wise but inexplicably humble Hogwarts Headmaster, willing to sacrifice his very life to protect the students he had sworn to teach and nurture, even the one who would be his murderer.

By the end of his life, Albus Dumbledore has stored the kinds of treasures that do not die with him but remain to help Potter and friends continue the fight against the Dark Lord: wisdom, courage, light, love.

Voldemort, of course, has chosen a different path, intentionally secreting his very essence into objects of silver and gold, of power and of influence, to shun the indignity of death. In the first part of *Deathly Hallows*, the Trio plays a dangerous game of hide-and-seek for these objects, known as Horcruxes, which unnaturally anchor Voldemort to life.

But Rowling's second scripture reference marks a shift in the story's focus from the treasures of this world to the mysteries of the next: "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." Harry at first chafes against the inscription on his parents' grave:

"Isn't that a Death Eater idea? Why is that there?" Hermione gently helps interpret: "It means... you know... living beyond death. Living after death." (2)

When all the Horcruxes have been found and destroyed, only Tom Riddle (Voldemort's mortal essence) remains. In the end, Riddle and Potter square off in a cosmic confrontation between power and humility, fear and love, murder and self-sacrifice, death and life. "For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ... The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (1 Cor. 15: 22, 26; NRSV)

In the end, Harry will discover exactly what this passage means. Harry defeats death, personified in Voldemort, not by destroying innocent others, but by laying down his own life. Death has pursued Harry since infancy, but no more; Harry takes off his invisibility cloak and willingly gives himself over.

By confronting death in the dark forest of our human condition, with wand pocketed to prevent self-defense, Harry destroys the burden death has placed upon him from childhood. Harry's self-offering is done freely in love.

If it was not clear to readers that Harry is a Christ figure by this point in *Deathly Hallows*, it is now: Christ is both victim and priest at the altar, and Harry is both victim and victor in the forest. Instead of an indignity, death for Harry is the moment of his glory. It is the last enemy.

Readers of both *Harry Potter* and the New Testament know this is not the end of the story for the Boy Who Lived. In the final scenes, the cosmic confrontation returns to earth. But we know Harry has already won; Voldemort's spells against the gathered crowd don't seem to hold, recalling another passage from Corinthians: "O Death, where is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55) Finally, like Christ, Harry destroys death by disarming it.

(1) Shawn Adler, "'Harry Potter' Author J.K. Rowling Opens Up About Books' Christian Imagery," 17 October 2007, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1572107/20071017/story.jhtml> (url: <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1572107/20071017/story.jhtml>) (accessed 8 November 2010)

(2) J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Scholastic, 2007), 328.

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