

Renouncing Satan

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [September 12, 2001](#) issue

One Saturday morning when there was a brief lull in our domestic hubbub, I asked our 13-year-old son John what he considered to be the most important things in life. He instantly presented me with an itemized list:

- To make sure that you and everyone else have a good time
- To fulfill your duty and be honorable
- To be peaceful and law-abiding and church-abiding
- To be patriotic
- Not to be a tattletale

These struck me as remarkably soldierly ideals for a boy who has never been a scout, and whose schooling has been devoid of flag-waving or martial codes of honor. So I inquired further: What might interfere with carrying out such high resolves? Immediately he produced another list:

- greed
- power
- lust

I am quite certain that neither my husband nor I have ever lectured John on the seven deadly sins. More curious than ever, I asked: If greed, power and lust interfere, then what helps? For this, John had a single answer: chivalry.

And so the old idea of human nature as a battleground between good and evil, along with the chivalric ideal of behaving honorably regardless of how one feels, resurface with all the glamour of the unfamiliar. The language John was using reflects not the moralistic climate of the schoolroom, but the moral climate of his favorite films, *The Great Escape* and *Gladiator*, and his favorite author, J. R. R. Tolkien. It is archaic

language, and that is why we can trust it to endure, even while fashions in pedagogy and religious formation come and go.

John is aware that this archaic and martial language has been systematically expunged from his immediate culture. It has not escaped his notice that many of the great hymns of the church have been spruced up and sanitized to suppress both their penitential depths and their triumphant heights. Try singing “Amazing Grace” without the “wretch like me” in it. Try keeping a 13-year-old boy interested in visions of a peaceable kingdom on earth without rallying his imagination to the battle between good and evil that is its necessary prelude.

This problem was on my mind in May, when my family attended a first communion service. With the little girls in bridal veils and the little boys in miniature suits, the service had the look of a Munchkin wedding feast. Like weddings, first communion recapitulates baptism, and like baptism it is steeped in the ancient Christian rites of initiation. Traditionally, the baptismal rite begins with the renunciation of Satan. Do you renounce Satan? And all his works? (in various versions the list may include: And all his angels? And all his pomps? And all his worship? And all his empty promises?). In the account given by the fourth-century bishop Cyril of Jerusalem, the candidates approach the baptistery in darkness, turn toward the west where the Prince of Darkness resides, and cry out, “I renounce you, Satan!” before facing east to profess the creed. As Cyril says, “When you renounce Satan, trampling underfoot every covenant with him, then you annul that ancient ‘league with Hell,’ and God’s paradise opens before you, that Eden, planted in the east, from which for his transgression our first father was banished.”

But at the first communion service we attended, the renunciation of Satan was left out of the renewal of baptismal vows. No doubt this was done with the best of intentions: we do not wish to scare our children nor instill in them a precocious sensitivity to the devil. We do not wish to tempt them to hold witch trials on the playground. And yet by this omission we miss an opportunity to appeal to their moral imagination, their sense that the battle is in earnest.

It may also be that we are failing to give them a way to make sense of the world as they grow up. They will discover soon enough—as soon as they can read the newspaper—how much of the world is in the grip of genuine evil. Just the other day, a suicide bomber took 15 lives at a pizza restaurant in central Jerusalem. Our relatively tranquil local newspaper reports on a local boy, 19 years old, who in

frustration battered his seven-week-old daughter to death. Some would compare this case to that of the mother, suffering from postpartum depression, who drowned her five children in the bathtub.

These are tragic situations to which only full-strength divine mercy is equal. Explanations from politics, medicine, psychology or sociology cannot satisfactorily explain the whole mystery, nor can philosophical arguments about free will help us very much. We have to acknowledge that there is an objective power of evil in the world, a power that “seeks to work us woe,” a power to which lives and souls can be irretrievably lost, save only for the greater power of God.

John has not forgotten that at his own first communion he had to sing “Jesus’ love is bubblin’ over.” He would have gladly traded a few of those bubbles for the chance to renounce Satan. Must all the good battles be fought in fictional worlds?