

BISHOPS PULL “GOLDEN COMPASS” REVIEW

On November 29, the Office for Film and Broadcasting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops posted a positive review of “The Golden Compass” on the Catholic News Service website. Written by the office’s director, Harry Forbes, and an associate, John Mulderig, the review hailed the film as “an exciting adventure story” that “rates as intelligent and well-crafted entertainment.” It completely sidestepped the anti-Catholic nature of the books upon which the movie was based.

Forbes actually said that Philip Pullman’s use of the term Magisterium “is still a bit unfortunate,” thus suggesting that he did not want to concede what almost everyone else freely acknowledged.

At one point, Forbes even went so far as to congratulate the movie’s producers for promoting Catholic values. “To the extent, moreover, that Lyra [the protagonist] and her allies are taking a stand on behalf of free will in opposition to the coercive force of the Magisterium, they are of course acting entirely in harmony with Catholic teaching.”

After the Forbes review was published, Bill Donohue was asked by the media for his reply. Speaking of Pullman’s use of the term Magisterium, Donohue said, “He deliberately chose it because his target from the very beginning has been Catholicism, not anything else. It was Pullman who said that ‘I’m trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief.’ Not to accept what the man says about himself shows no respect for his integrity.”

When the Religion News Service pressed Donohue to explain why Forbes took this position, he offered, “I don’t know what his motive was. Maybe he’s just a simpleton who thought it was unfortunate.” But, Donohue contributed, “There was nothing

‘unfortunate’ about it; it was deliberate.”

Regarding the tribute Forbes made to the movie for emphasizing the Catholic value of “free will,” Donohue pulled no punches: “Nazis are portrayed as having free will in movies, too. Should the screenwriters of such films be commended for reflecting Catholic values? Free will is indeed a Catholic value, but it is the object of free will that carries moral weight.”

To complicate matters, Forbes—and by extension the USCCB—was used by New Line Cinema (the film’s primary producer). For example, an ad posted on the website of Beliefnet that was paid for by New Line Cinema was exploitative. It deliberately, and unethically, juxtaposed two unconnected remarks from the review, leading the reader to conclude that the bishops’ conference had ruled that the movie was “entirely in harmony with Catholic teaching.”

In fairness to Forbes, he never said any such thing. He qualified his remarks about the so-called “free will” components, saying *they* were “entirely in harmony with Catholic teaching.” He never said that the *story* itself was emblematic of Catholic teaching. But this is what happens when our side doesn’t take a strong stand against bigotry.

It didn’t take long before many bishops weighed in on this issue. Not one sided with Forbes. Every one of them who spoke out was unqualified in his denunciation of the movie. No wonder they quickly killed the Forbes review, removing it from the USCCB website.

Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput saw the movie and lost no time blasting it: “The aggressively anti-religious, anti-Christian undercurrent in ‘The Golden Compass’ is unmistakable and at times undisguised. The wicked Mrs. Coulter alludes approvingly to a fictional version of the Doctrine of Original Sin. When a warrior Ice Bear—one of the heroes of the

story—breaks into the local Magisterium headquarters to take back the armor stolen from him, the exterior walls of the evil building are covered with Eastern Christians icons. And for Catholics in our own world, of course, ‘Magisterium’ refers to the teaching authority of the Church—hardly a literary coincidence. The idea that any Christian film critics could overlook or downplay these negative elements, as some have seemed to do, is simply baffling.”

Baltimore Archbishop Edwin O’Brien said that “The Archdiocese of Baltimore is grateful that the conference withdrew the review because it caused much confusion in the Catholic community. From all reports, the review failed to adequately warn parents about the movie’s widely recognized dark themes and anti-Catholic imagery.”

On December 19, the Vatican condemned the film in a long editorial in *L’Osservatore Romano*. It called it “the most anti-Christmas film possible” and that “honest” viewers would find it “devoid of any particular emotion apart from a great chill.”

This was not the first time Forbes came under attack for one of his movie reviews. In 2005, he wrote a glowing review of “Brokeback Mountain,” a gay cowboy film that many found offensive. After mounting lay Catholic pressure, Forbes was forced to give the flick a more negative rating.

We are so happy that priests, as well as ministers, all over the country took our counsel on this issue. We knew that a movie aimed at kids at Christmastime that tried to sell the wonders of atheism and the horrors of Catholicism would fail, provided that people were given a heads up.

Perhaps the best news that the Catholic League won this battle came when it was reported by one Hollywood source that New Line Cinema is not likely to make a movie of the second and third volumes of Pullman’s trilogy. That was one of the

league's goals from the beginning.