

Church Catches Hell In "Priest"

By Don Feder

If an institution is known by the enemies it makes, the Catholic Church should feel honored by Hollywood's entrenched hostility, which is manifest in the new movie "Priest."

"Priest," which opened in New York and Los Angeles last Friday, is so warped that it could only come from an entertainment industry at war with traditional religion.

There are five priests in the movie, set in Liverpool, all dysfunctional. The central character is a theologically conservative young priest who tells the older priest with whom he shares a parish to get rid of his mistress, then sneaks out to gay bars.

There's also an alcoholic priest, a bitter, disillusioned priest and a bishop who exudes the warmth of a cathedral's stone facade.

Not only are all of the priests aberrant, but, as William Donohue of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights points out, their problems are "directly attributed to the depraved nature of Catholicism"-particularly the church's insistence on priestly celibacy and opposition to homosexual conduct.

Hollywood's anti-Catholicism is pervasive. The Bells of St. Mary's are ringing a tocsin for clerical character assassination. "Monsignor" (1982) gave us Christopher Reeve as a priest in league with the Mafia who's sleeping with a nun. "The Godfather Part III" (1990) also fantasized a Vatican-Mafia connection.

"Household Saints" (1993) has a novice nun driven crazy by religious fervor-to the point where she has delusions of playing pinochle with the Trinity. For sheer malice, nothing surpasses 1985's "Agnes of God" in which a nun murders the child she gave birth to in a convent.

As an atheist psychiatrist, Jane Fonda (notorious for her real-life attacks on the Vatican) does battle with the order's mother superior, Anne Bancroft, for the soul of the young sister. The theme is unmistakable when Fonda shouts at Bancroft, "poverty, chastity, and ignorance is what you live by," or when she tells the infanticidal nun that it's "all right to hate God."

"Priest" is equally subtle. Director Antonia Bird told the *Los Angeles Times* that she "seethes with rage" over the pope's opposition to artificial birth control and that the movie's central message is opposition to "a hierarchy adhering to old-fashioned rules without looking at the way the world's changed."

Screenwriter Jimmy McGovern rails at the priests of his childhood as "reactionary bastards."

If the five tarnished clerics weren't enough, Bird and McGovern drag in incest in the form of a 14-year old girl who confesses to the gay priest that her father is molesting her. The priest is in agony, being unable to protect the child due to yet another antiquated church doctrine-the sanctity of the confessional.

In a video he narrates ("Hollywood vs. Religion," distributed by Focus on the Family), movie critic Michael Medved notes: "The Catholic Church is the most visible religious institution in the world so Hollywood views it as a particularly juicy target."

The entertainment community knows where the danger lies to its values: Live for the moment, trust your instincts, and always

let your hormones be your guide.

Some religions it will tolerate. Catholics and Amish share a biblical morality. Yet the Amish, who've isolated themselves from society, don't challenge the dominant culture. This affords Hollywood the luxury of viewing them as quaint and charming, a la "Witness."

The Roman Catholic hierarchy is inclined to activism and unapologetically articulates its views on a broad range of issues. Catholics march in front of abortion clinics. Various bishops have come out strongly against homosexual marriage and adoption.

Hence the need to portray church-going Catholics as superstitious, priests as fornicating hypocrites and the hierarchy as money-grubbing, power-lusting fanatics.

Toward the end of "Priest," the father with the mistress comes to the aid of the recently disgraced father with the male lover, asking his congregation if God really cares what men do with their sexual organs.

If this is indeed a matter of supreme indifference to the Supreme Being, then why should God care what a man does with that same organ to his teen-age daughter?

Bird and McGovern would reply that we all know that incest is wrong. But that knowledge is inseparable from the Judea-Christian ethic whose other applications by the church "Priest" decries.

Produced by the BBC, "Priest" is being distributed by Disney-owned Miramax. There are 59 million Catholics in this country. If a tiny fraction of them boycott Disney videos, disconnect the Disney Channel and cancel vacations to Disney World, the message to CEO Michael Eisner would come through as clearly as the message in "Priest."

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