

Something Stinks in the Magic Kingdom: “PRIEST”

By William A. Donohue

The movie “Priest” is a cruel caricature of Roman Catholic priests, one that is so blatantly unrepresentative of most priests as to qualify as an invidious stereotype of the Catholic clergy. Worse, the movie invites the audience to see the Catholic Church as the causative agent of priestly despair.

There are five priests in the movie and every one of them is a thoroughly tortured individual. Indeed the priests are either living a life that directly contravenes Church teachings or they are mean, even psychotic, individuals. Two of the priests are having affairs, one with the female housekeeper and the other with his newly acquired male friend. Another priest is a drunk, the country pastor is obviously a madman and the bishop is simply wicked. In short, there is not a single priest who is well-adjusted and faithful to the Church.

Perhaps most alarming, the depraved state of the priests is not cast as a manifestation of aberrant behavior, rather it is directly attributed to the warped nature of Catholicism. For example, the priests who have violated their vow of celibacy are portrayed in a most sympathetic fashion, the real villain being the celibacy requirement itself. In the case of the gay priest, he carries the additional burden of not being allowed to disclose what he has heard in the confessional, namely that a 14 year-old girl is an incest victim. True to form, the priest calls Christ a “bastard” for bequeathing the Catholic Church and its horrid rules.

Sympathy is also afforded the drunkard priest: we learn that it’s too late in life for this unhappy priest to leave the

order, albeit it is not too late for him to counsel the gay priest to "get out" while he's still young. Our sympathy deepens for the gay priest when his sexual orientation is made public (he is caught having sex in a car by a police officer). However, our sympathy quickly turns to hate when we see how harshly he is greeted by the country pastor and the bishop. Make no mistake about it, the viciousness of these two clergymen is a function of their role as enforcement agents of the Catholic Church. The bottom line, then, is that the institution of the Catholic Church is responsible for the twisted lives of the priests.

At the end of the movie, the straight priest who is sleeping with the housekeeper defends the gay priest in front of the congregation, lecturing the parishioners on the wrongness of the Church's teachings on sexuality. Using vulgar language, he asks the faithful at Mass whether God cares what men do with their sex organ, beckoning them to focus their attention instead on such real outrages as war, famine and disaster. This concluding statement is most revealing: the Catholic Church is seen as oppressive because it does not accept the philosophy of freedom as entertained by sexual libertines.

There will be those who will say that the only movie about Catholicism that the Catholic League would approve of is one that paints all priests in a favorable light. That view, however, is just plain wrong. We do not expect that every movie on the Catholic Church will, or should, resemble "The Bells of St. Mary's," nor do we flinch from honest criticism of the Catholic Church, no matter how tough. But when a movie, or any other medium of communication, presents the Catholic Church as an institution to be reviled, it should be expected that the Catholic League, and, we believe, most Catholics, will greet such characterizations with disdain. Our fundamental complaint is not with the way the flawed priests are portrayed, but with the way their flaws are all pinned on the Catholic Church.

Had "Priest" included even one priest who was well-adjusted, content with his vocation, honorably serving the Church, it would have been an anomaly. The reason there is no such priest in the movie is because the point of the film is to convince the public of the Catholic Church's malevolence; to show a normal priest might have confused the message. Indeed, the appearance of a normal priest would have made inexplicable the movie's theme of blaming the institution of the Church for the maladies of its priests.

We know that there will be some people who will tout the artistic merits of the movie to the exclusion of its central message. That is regrettable. By way of analogy, if a Disney-owned enterprise made a powerful movie entitled "Rabbi" that nonetheless did violence to the honorable heritage of Judaism, surely we would expect a vigorous response from the Jewish community. Similarly, high creative drama could be sustained in a movie that portrayed African Americans as a morally destitute people. Or a movie called "Gays" could be well-done and at the same time depict homosexuals as depraved human beings. And Hollywood could certainly show these Jews, African Americans and gays as victims of their own heritage or lifestyle.

Now ask yourself, in the unlikely event that these movies were made, would there not be an outcry from the various civil rights organizations established to combat defamation in these communities? If the answer is yes, then it should be readily understood why the Catholic League objects to "Priest."

Those who cannot see past the movie's artistic merits might benefit by knowing what the director and the writer of "Priest" have had to say about Catholicism; it might prove to be a much needed reality check. For example, director Antonia Bird told *US* magazine that the movie is "a celebration of Catholicism but questions its rules and regulations." I asked Gina Gardini of Miramax what element of Catholicism was

“celebrated” and she was speechless. Appropriately, I might add.

Bird was more revealing when she commented to *Premiere* magazine that her goal was to make a statement about celibacy. “I met a lot of priests from the inner city,” said the non-Catholic. “You could just see these guys repressing a whole positive energy that they could be putting into their work.” Having subjected the Catholic priests to her Freudian microscope, Bird was in a position to tell the *Los Angeles Times* that the movie is “against a hierarchy adhering to old-fashioned rules without looking at the way the world’s changed.” Such hubris makes intelligible Bird’s approach to the movie.

It is instructive to note that Bird was “seething with rage” when in 1993 she heard again of the Pope’s opposition to condoms. That her rage has informed her work is not to be disputed. Indeed, her hatred of the Catholic Church as depicted in “Priest” is a manifestation of her deep-seated rage against Catholicism.

The writer, Jimmy McGovern, is fond of dubbing the priests of his youth “reactionary bastards.” In doing so, McGovern affords us the insight we need to understand his sentiments. Moreover, as the *Los Angeles Times* reports, McGovern takes great delight in his “ability to dissect people’s motives, even apparently altruistic ones, and to debase them by finding elements of selfishness in them.” It is obvious that McGovern found in Catholic priests much to debase, but in doing so he exposed his own character as well.

If there is one aspect of Catholicism that is driving the hostility of both Bird and McGovern, it is the conviction that the Catholic Church plays by two sets of rules when dealing with straight and gay priests. For example, in the pages of the *New York Times*, McGovern says that “There’s very little comment made on the relationship between the older priest and

the housekeeper.” And that is because, as McGovern contends, “The community can co-exist alongside that priest. It’s heterosexual, it’s indoors, and he handles it well. But a gay affair, that’s different.” Director Bird is of the same opinion. She told the *Los Angeles Times* that “There’s also no doubt the [Catholic] church draws a veil over heterosexual relationships, but if gay priests attempt monogamous relationships with other men, they’re out.”

This appalling ignorance of Catholicism is symbolic of the bias that is evident in the movie. Let it be said one more time: the Catholic Church teaches that celibacy is the proper discipline for the priesthood. It follows that priests who have sexual relations, either with women or with men, are in violation of their vows. In addition, fornication, sodomy and adultery are proscribed for lay Catholics. Individuals are free to disagree with these teachings, but they have no right to distort them.

It is not just the Catholic League that has seen in this movie an animus against Catholicism. For example, there is no one who is more knowledgeable about the way Hollywood views religion than movie critic Michael Medved. He told me personally that the film “displays the most profound hostility to the Catholic Church that I have seen in the last 15 years of reviewing movies.” It is not without significance that the *Los Angeles Times* noted that “Priest” is “an angry piece of invective directed at the Catholic church’s hierarchy.”

Nor should it go unnoticed that *Premiere* said of director Antonia Bird that she “is basking in her blasphemy.”

That the movie has a political agenda was not lost on some reviewers. *Newsweek* commented on how “mechanical” the film is, noting that “the issues are dictating the drama.” Anthony Lane in *The New Yorker* stated that the Catholic Church is treated like a “dysfunctional family” and wondered “what the system did to deserve all this.” He added that “The sole purpose of

its existence [the Catholic Church], apparently, is to hang there like a punching bag and get pummelled." Similarly, it is worth citing *Newsday* columnist Liz Smith's observation that "Miramax is obviously looking to push Catholic sensibilities-bruised already-to the limit."

The remark by Liz Smith deserves comment. She notes, quite correctly, that the movie was originally scheduled for nationwide release on April 14, which just happened to be Good Friday. Now if there is anyone so naive as to wonder whether the timing is a coincidence, just ponder this. In her interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Antonia Bird said to reporter David Gritten, "Did I tell you when 'Priest' opens wide in the States? Good Friday. Sort of appropriate, wouldn't you say?"

This remark by director Bird settles the issue. The movie is designed to stick it to the Catholic Church and the timing of the release was designed to add salt to the wounds. It was the decision to release the movie on Good Friday-and with apparent glee-that was the final straw: any fair-minded person will admit that this crosses the line of decency. It is precisely this kind of "in-your-face" attitude that warrants a strong and unconditional reaction from non-Catholics as well as Catholics. Had it not been for the League's strong condemnation of the planned release date, "Priest" would have opened on Good Friday.

Finally, a word about Miramax and Disney. Miramax, as "Entertainment Tonight" said, "is no stranger to controversy." According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Miramax is most popular with "the art-house crowd" and the "cappuccino-sipping audience." It makes sense, then, that the persons behind these films, namely Miramax co-presidents Bob and Harvey Weinstein, have earned a reputation "as sometimes-abrasive entrepreneurs."

But when all is said and done, it is Disney that is

responsible for "Priest."

It is a matter of record that Disney has leaned on Miramax when it was felt that Miramax's battle with the Motion Picture Association of America was going too far. As the parent company, and as the quintessential producer of family-based entertainment, Disney holds a very special place in American life. It will not do, therefore, for Disney to wash its hands of being held accountable for "Priest."

The Catholic League is proud to lead a nationwide revolt against Disney. The Disney we once knew no longer exists, and its new face is not very pretty. We hope that all of our members join with us in sending Disney a message, one that might cause it to think twice the next time it is tempted to make a ideological statement about Catholicism. We liked Disney so much better when it confined itself to Mickey Mouse. Unfortunately, those days are gone. Fortunately, the days when Catholics took it on the chin are also gone.