

The Fallout Over "Priest"

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As the dust is settling over the movie "Priest," it now seems like an opportune time to address some of the complaints that were registered against the Catholic League's criticisms of the film. Most of the comments that the League received, I am pleased to report, were quite favorable, but, alas, "you can't please them all."

It wasn't the way we handled the issue that drew the most heated criticism, it was the fact that we complained at all. "Don't you know that there are priests like the ones portrayed in the movie?" That was the way some of the kinder and gentler folks put it. Others simply said that the movie was an accurate picture of reality and we ought to shut up. For the record, it should be known that many of those who offered these remarks were not uneducated. Stupid, perhaps, but they clearly showed evidence of having stayed in school for quite a while. Perhaps too long.

Surely there are those true believers out there for whom denial is the first, and only, response to reports of wrongdoing in the Catholic Church. I've met a few of them myself, but clearly they are in a small minority. Most loyal Catholics know that some priests and religious misbehave and that the response of some Church officials to reports of misbehavior has been painfully slow. Cardinal O'Connor himself has admitted that some priests have been very evil individuals. This should surprise no one. That there are rotten apples among the 57,000 priests in this country is uncontestable.

What this has to do with a movie that is rigged to show that Catholic priests are degenerates or tyrants, and that it is the Catholic Church itself that is responsible for this

condition, is beyond me. Even those who make such criticisms know that Hollywood could, if it wanted to, make a movie that depicted any group this way. But the fact that Hollywood doesn't do this is exactly the point we want to make. It doesn't because it is sensitive to the feelings of others. Save Catholics.

Those who think that "Priest" is an accurate picture of reality are no different than those who think that Jews are Shylocks and blacks are Sambos. They are bigoted fools.

Another criticism we got with regularity was that we should have been quiet lest we give the movie too much publicity. This is the bunker mentality that some Catholics have. Just duck and you won't get hit.

The bunker mentality is flawed many times over. First of all, Catholics have already been hit. Now it may be that some don't know it and that others don't want to admit it. But "Priest" found its mark when it was being scripted by Jimmy McGovern and directed by Antonia Bird. The only question, at least for the Catholic League, was whether we should strike back in a big way or just try to deflect the missile with a more oblique response. We chose to go all-out because the money behind the bomb was Disney. Not to hit back when Catholicism has been hit by the elite guard would have been a colossal mistake. It would have engendered more battles down the line. To appease bullies is to invite disaster.

As I said from the beginning, even if the movie made money, it didn't matter. Our sights were set on what might be coming down the road, not on what had already happened. But as it turns out, we seem not to have lost even this one. The movie was a flop. Outside of New York and Los Angeles, the film didn't work. Indeed, they'll be lucky to break even.

Other critics said we were censors bringing back the old days when the Catholic Church had a Legion of Decency. I wonder

what these same people said when Hollywood recently sought to bankrupt the entire state of Colorado just because the Beautiful People didn't like the way the Rocky Mountain High folks expressed themselves on a referendum. As for the Legion of Decency, the last time I checked it had no application to anyone who wasn't a Catholic, and being a Catholic has never been a terminal condition. It has always been possible to believe in nothing.

Perhaps my favorite complaint came from a woman who called me to say that yes, the movie is biased, but that I erred nonetheless in criticizing it. She reasoned that it could have been worse: while the film did treat the Church in a bad way, it left Catholics alone. By complaining, then, I was beckoning the offender to go after individual Catholics the next time. No doubt she has already consulted her travel agent to find out when the next boat leaves for overseas.

In any event, these are just some of the things that I had to endure by confronting the Disney-Miramax boys. I hope you had as much fun reading about it as I did in experiencing it. Now you know why I decided to study sociology: people are strange.