

Angels with Dirty Faces

Priestly Images in Contemporary Cinema

Guerric DeBona, O.S.B.

The depiction of priests in American film over the last decades has been shaped by our communal values, conventions, and understandings, especially clerical celibacy. This article explores a few examples to show how and why these narrations have shifted and the issues these open up for the U.S. church.

A few years back, I suggested in the pages of this journal that religion and film in America formed a stalwart relationship in the 1930s and '40s and that Hollywood's use of priesthood as a "cultural icon" became a powerful agent of commercial success and social respectability for the American film industry (DeBona 2004). Even a cursory inquiry into the cinematic history of priests on the silver screen tells us that religious figures tend to mirror their respective time and function with varying degrees of signification. I intend to deal briefly here with the image of priesthood in American film culture over the last century since World War II. What are the narrative dynamics in these movies and how have the representations of priests depicted in these films been shaped by our communal values, conventions, and understandings, especially clerical celibacy? How has the image of the "studio period priest" altered since the early days of feature film? I hasten to add that the scope of these pages is meant to be speculative, impressionistic, and perhaps suggestive for launching a point of departure for future discussion

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on the cultural politics of religious figures in film. While a formalistic reading of some of these films might prove valuable, that is not my purpose. For those interested in a close reading of film and its relationship to theology, Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film* (1972) is a seminal guide. That said, my aim here is really quite simple: I am interested in how American film culture has written stories involving priests and how and why these narrations have shifted over the years.

For reasons of space, I am confining myself to a reflection on Hollywood's use of priest-as-cultural-symbol over the last several decades. A longer treatise on the subject would undoubtedly include a more exhaustive interrogation of the stylistics of the film, together with production histories and directorial issues involved. In my view, we also need a methodological apparatus to begin to understand the important dialogue that exists between popular film culture and religion, again a subject for a longer and sustained investigation elsewhere. I am hoping here in this short piece to suggest some coordinates that might make such an investigation possible.

The Collar and the Camera

The American film industry's self-censorship in the early sound era helped to establish religious figures, particularly priests, as reliable tools for cultural stability. In 1934 Hollywood implemented the Production Code of America, a self-regulating mechanism in response to organizations like the Catholic Legion of Decency. The PCA, which Thomas Doherty has recently explored in fascinating and great detail (2007) and which prohibited degrading religion or ridiculing any religious faith, specifically stated that, "Ministers of religion in their characters of ministers should not be used in comedy, as villains, or as unpleasant persons" (quoted in Pinsky, 60; see also Black 1994, 308). Besides the Production Code and its enforcer Joseph I. Breen, himself a Catholic, the image of the priesthood was shaped by the so-called social problem film or a version of that genre (at its peak from the 1930s–1950s), which specialized in revealing the plight of the disadvantaged and the working class. In a certain sense, the priest and the social problem film emerging in the Great Depression were made for each other: they were partners for Catholic immigrant audiences, eager to see the weaknesses of the social system explored in the culture at large. If priests were not subjects of the social problem film per se, they functioned as agents of good will in these narratives and, more often than not, societal change. With tight industry regulations in place and a useful genre to support his work, the studio period priest in the Golden Age of Hollywood could valiantly express the humanist interest of a film industry that supported FDR's New Deal and other economic and social reforms on into the 1950s. Thus, American film culture could use ministers of religion to further

advance (secular) public agenda while guaranteeing the place of enshrined institutional establishments, such as the church.

Priests played both a serviceable and symbolic role in feature films because of their celibate status as well. Since the early days of the silent pictures, Hollywood features had been the province of heterosexual romance. Now celibate priests could be used effectively and deliberately segregated from the romance plot of feature films for the symbolic interests of the narrative; that role was especially true for the social problem film or movies that dealt with domestic problems. They might be prison chaplains (Fr. Dolan in Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once*, 1937); a double to a friend gone bad (Fr. Jerry in *Angels with Dirty Faces*, 1938); a crooning pastor rebuilding a neighborhood (Fr. O'Malley in *Going My Way*, 1944, and *The Bells of*

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St. Mary's, 1945); urban reformers (Fr. Flannigan in *Boys Town*, 1941, or Fr. Barry in *On the Waterfront*, 1955); rescuers in a crumbling city (Fr. Mullin in *San Francisco*, 1936); or patrons of ex-cons (Fr. Dismas in *The Hoodlum Priest*, 1961); but never troubled lovers with a hint at a sexual history. As Mary Gordon says of Father Chuck O'Malley, "The model that Fr. Chuck offers is that of an endlessly giving ego, a position made possible not only through the suppression but the complete excision of desire. . . . Ever suggesting, by his informality, the possibility of intimacy, he is in fact rigorously refusing intimacy. An impermeable shield protects his life from outside contact" (74-75).

The "excision of desire" guarantees the very legibility of the priest as a religious and cultural symbol. His essential *lack* of emotional and sexual expression makes possible what Karl Rahner says is an experience of transcendence in the very act of seeing. "Every time we see an object, we look, as it were, beyond it, into the expanse of all that may be seen. We see something as well determined because, in this seeing, we are also aware of the unseen fullness of what may be seen" (158). Thus the clerically collared Crosby, O'Brien, and Tracy establish their viability not as vulnerable men who fall in love as much as religious representations of what might be disclosed—social justice, good works, the priest as "endlessly giving ego." Robbed of any form of natural self-disclosure, especially any hint of sexual expression, priests were very useful symbols. In the social problem film, they were important signifiers of an unambiguous message for urban culture of poverty and violence, and became all the more legible when the symbol was not compromised by a personal sexual

history. Parenthetically, a similar symbolic revelation is at stake in the parallel case of women religious. As Rebecca Sullivan observes, “By making sacrificial labor a crucial element of their religious identity, they brought the feminine ideals for working women to a higher, spiritual level. That delicate balance between self-abnegation and heroic purposefulness became central to the representation of nuns in popular culture” (57). But as we shall see, the function of the priest as a traditional symbol of transcendence and cultural stability begins to unravel shortly after World War II. The “endlessly giving ego” becomes both needy and vulnerable.

Trouble in Paradise: Two Missionary Priests

John Stahl's *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1944) invites us to consider the priest with a romantic past, who even had plans for marriage until that call was interrupted by a vocation to the priesthood. Based on A. J. Cronin's novel of the same title and set in Scotland, Francis Chisholm loses both parents in a tragic accident, only then to discover that his former girlfriend has fallen into a fatal illness. Hardly a symbol of cultural stability, he is something of a loner when Chisholm's rector takes him under his fatherly wing, and he eventually becomes a priest. Further, Chisholm is a bit unconventional, even unorthodox, which only intensifies his marginality. The priest has a global vision of his religion and society (his best friend is an atheist doctor). Soon after arriving in China, Chisholm adopts a native cassock instead of the more formal Roman variety. He visits Protestant missionaries and offers to collaborate with them. He even authorizes cremation (then forbidden by canon law) after the rebel soldiers kill several villagers. Chisholm's relationship with Mother Marie Veronica, the stern German nun who comes to the Chinese village to help run the school with two of her companion sisters, takes another look at celibacy as well. A woman of noble birth, Mother Veronica is at first resistant to Chisholm's blue-collar ways (he works the fields and cooks), but gradually becomes much enamored with the priest. They have an evolving, though distant, respect for one another that gradually becomes a poignant, amicable relationship. When Father Chisholm leaves the mission after many years there, Mother Veronica says, “My dear friend. I shall never forget you.”

Father Chisholm is a kind of post-World War II representation of a noirish, wounded male haunted by a romantic past, and *The Keys of the Kingdom* gives us a rare glimpse of romantic love transformed into a spiritual friendship. The romantic plot in the film shifts toward a more familial one: Chisholm's parents are killed, but his father is replaced, giving him lifelong guidance and a reason to remain boyish, devoted to the patriarch, and sexually inactive. Chisholm's romantic interest dies off only to be replaced by a lifelong female companion (Mother Veronica)

engaged in similar work. While there is not even a tiny spark in the film that the priest and the nun might be more than friends, the “impermeable shield” that helped Father Chuck fight the good fight has been laid aside. Chisholm is capable of adult love for a woman and his parting, tender remarks to Mother Veronica are a far cry from what Gordon calls “the most formal minuet” between Sister Benedict and Father Chuck in *The Bells of St. Mary’s* (1974).

Another film concerning a missionary priest also proves to be an illustrative window into the world of priestly celibacy and sexuality, albeit more provocatively. Father O’Banion in *Satan Never Sleeps* (1961) remains in a kind of persistent sexual jeopardy from the very first moments of the film. Produced and directed by Leo McCarey (who, interestingly enough, also directed *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St. Mary’s*), the film is obviously informed by both political and sexual revolutions occurring in the early 1960s. Like Chisholm, O’Banion (William Holden) is a missionary in China come to replace Father Bovard, an elderly pastor anxious to move on. But a young Chinese woman, Siu-Lan, has followed O’Banion and, since she has fallen in love with him, endlessly attempts to gain O’Banion’s sympathy and affection. “Stop tantalizing me!” O’Banion shouts. “Priests don’t marry,” he tells her again. “Become Protestant,” she says.

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Celibacy has taken a major turn in the film from previous representations by becoming a major structure of the plot, certainly a legacy of the Hollywood of the 1960s, which would produce more and more sexually provocative narratives. The use of a major star, famous for his virile romantic leads, to play the part of a sexually skittish priest also contributes to the tension in the film. Unlike Gregory Peck, who was an unknown and appears mild and boyish in his work as Father Chisholm, William Holden was at the height of his career as a matinee idol and that image only underlines his

fight to stay the course of celibate chastity. Unlike his priest-predecessors in earlier films, who could rely on conventional modes of behavior and a strong Catholic (immigrant) culture to support and sustain them, Holden is awash in China, surrounded by a few Christian martyrs (who, like the priest, remain faithful) and communist revolutionaries. O’Banion rarely appears in full clerical dress. With a rugged bomber jacket, he spends most of the movie looking much more like William Holden in *Stalag 17* or *Bridge Over the River Kwai* than a familiar priestly

symbol. O'Banion spends most of the film in a kind of sexual jeopardy, wrestling with the demons that tempt him to break his promise of celibacy.

In retrospect, *Satan Never Sleeps* appears at the juncture of an important displacement of the once familiar image of the Roman Catholic priest. It was at this very moment in the early 1960s when the studios themselves—and, indeed, American culture—was experiencing a significant upheaval. By early '60s, Hollywood became less and less preoccupied with social problems in the local urban neighborhood, for which priests were the ideal mediators, and more interested in global markets and the international scene. (Both *Keys of the Kingdom* and *Satan Never Sleeps* deal with priests involved with foreign missions, not domestic problems.) Furthermore, *Satan Never Sleeps* simply underlines the sexual confusion and eclectic vision of the 1960s. What use would the studio period priest of the 1930s have as a force of cultural stability in a changing society that was undergoing a sexual revolution? Or, for that matter, how would Pat O'Brien's or Spenser Tracy's priestly and Irish signification speak to the growing number of second- and third-generation immigrants of diverse cultural origin? Tellingly, the rough-and-ready, all-American priest O'Banion replaces his fussy elderly counterpart in the mission, Bovard, even as the old Hollywood image of priesthood appears to be on the wane. In the end, the old priest is done away with completely by the end of the movie, killed attempting to halt communist insurgents. Moreover, with the gradual collapse of the studio system and then the Production Code itself, it became clear that the industry was incapable of keeping up with self-regulation; that gradual collapse would indelibly mark the filmic narrations and influence the box office. In 1953, Otto Preminger made a daring, racy comedy, *The Moon Is Blue*, and released it without the seal of approval of the Production Code. Not only did the film do well at the box office, but it received Oscar nominations. Ironically, the film starred the man who would soon play Father O'Banion, William Holden. By 1968 the Code and its censors had collapsed, replaced by the familiar ratings system (G, PG, R, X—now NC17).

The Fall from Grace: Stumbling into the '70s and '80s

As its very title *Satan Never Sleeps* seems to suggest, the film is at the verge of asking the question: is celibacy possible? The Kinsey report on the "Sexual Behavior of the Human Male" released in 1948, as well as the study published on women five years later, both made explicit what was occurring in feature films. Hollywood melodramas, highly influenced by the rise of neo-Freudianism—increasingly popular in the 1950s with melodramas such as *Peyton Place* (1957) and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961)—show that sexual urgency and need determines both the plot and human happiness. Therefore, the human side of priesthood

becomes readily apparent in Stanley Kramer's *The Runner Stumbles* (1979) and intimates a complete break with the image of the studio period priest. The excision of desire gives way to the explosion of passion. Based on a true story of Father Brian Rivard, who falls in love with the new religion teacher, Sister Rita, the priest eventually finds himself accused of her murder. The tone of *The Runner Stumbles* is dark and moody, very untypical of studio films depicting religious. Set in the 1920s, Father Rivard (Dick van Dyke) is disillusioned with the church and exiled to a small, grimy, anti-Catholic community in Solona, Washington. Sister Rita enlivens the place, the students—and Father's affections. After trying to repress his feelings, Rivard explodes with emotion for Sister Rita, removing her veil and passionately kissing her in the rectory. More distressing, we learn later that Sister Rita has been killed and Father Rivard accused of her murder.

With a viable romantic entanglement between a priest and a religious woman, *The Runner Stumbles* is the first film I can think of in which the symbolic image of priesthood becomes completely deconstructed: first by sexual desire, then by a murder accusation, and then, finally, by complete institutional abandonment. By the end of the movie, Father Rivard is exonerated from the murder, but stripped of his priesthood together with his collar. Is he being punished for his sexual desire? The film seems to be suggesting that he is. The closing shots show him broken and weeping at Sister Rita's grave, with only a child to comfort him. The film is clearly informed by the politics of institutional disillusionment available almost everywhere in America in the late 1970s. "Priesthood"—or Hollywood's narrative construction of it in the late 1970s—becomes the site for rewriting the culture's distrust of authority, organizations (especially the church and its stand on sexual issues like contraception) and the conventional wisdom that celibacy is viable way of life. The final scenes of *The Runner Stumbles* contrast sharply and ironically with the studio period priests' triumphant building of a new church, an orphanage, or community in the midst of a Great Depression or a World War: though innocent of murder, the priest is disgraced because he has fallen from human desire, then defrocked and lead into the unknown. The film's claim is that the storm is not in society (the former province of priests on film) but within the interior space of the sexual self. In a certain sense, then, the cemetery scene at the end of *The Runner Stumbles* is the place not only for Sister Rita, but for the patriarchal image of priesthood; both have been laid to rest. Abandoned by the church and even God, Rivard faces a society devoid of both.

More redeeming but still disturbing is *True Confessions* (1981), an underrated gem directed by Ulu Grosbard, and recently restored on DVD. *True Confessions* is an indictment of how far the Earthly City remains from its Heavenly counterpart. In a way, both *The Runner Stumbles* and *True Confessions* are revisionist films with their respective refashioning of a subgenre, the priest film. Like *The Runner Stumbles*, *True Confessions* dismantles the cultural mystique of priesthood while leaving us with a more authentic witness. The film portrays an ambitious

monsignor, Desmond Spellacy (Robert DeNiro), and is set in an ugly, corroded, and moody Los Angeles of the 1940s. The police are called to a cheap whorehouse, only to find that a priest has died having sexual relations with a prostitute. Based on the novel of John Gregory Dunne, *True Confessions* portrays a church that traffics in sex and dishonesty and the priest who paid the price because of his willful contamination with evil. Police detective Tom Spellacy (Robert Duvall), the gritty brother of Monsignor Des, must investigate the murder of a porno star, and that graphic inquiry sets in motion the revelation of a secret world beneath his brother's activities, the business with which he is engaged and the church with which he is entwined. As chancellor of the archdiocese, Des has been awarding building contracts to Jack Armstrong, a corrupt and shrewd Irish developer. When Tom learns that Armstrong has been sexually involved with the dead woman (and morally compromised in everything except the murder), he arrests him. But the investigation also connects Des to the murdered prostitute, whom he coincidentally and innocently picked up hitchhiking. Guilt by association eventually lands Des in a lifetime appointment in a tiny parish in the desert, where he learns from an older pastor, Father Shamus, "what it means to be a priest." Unlike Father Rivard (who appears to be abandoned not only by the church but also by God), Des Spellacy is restored to another priesthood—more authentic, prophetic, and humble—and on the margins of society.

True Confessions is full of wonderful ironies that dismantle previous constructions of priesthood on celluloid. For instance, the mother of the dead prostitute says that the girl's favorite film was *Going My Way*. With a remark that gestures toward earlier, more pious depictions of priesthood at the cinema, the only honest person in the entire film (Fr. Shamus), ousted in a political maneuver to a small parish, tells his cardinal, "Show me a priest with a twinkle in his eye and I will show you a moron." Further, the usual doppelgänger literary device that uses priests as a foil to an evil Other in a film like *Angels with Dirty Faces*, contrasting the good Father Jerry Connelly (Pat O'Brian) and the criminal Rocky Sullivan (James Cagney), is problematized in *True Confessions*. Far from polarities, Des and his brother are both very human with the stain of sin on them both. DeNiro plays Des like a lithe, sinewy acrobat, effortlessly gliding on a trapeze—untouched and never a hair out of place. His body movements suggest his careful, flawless manner that hopes to access power. Paradoxically, it is the crude and foul-mouthed

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brother cop who becomes the priest's instrument for redemption. Just about everyone is dirty from someone else's corruption—or guilty by contamination and association. Indeed, Des hears the confession of both his brother and Jack Armstrong, and the shadows that cover the priest in both scenes suggest that he is literally infected by other people's sins. By the end of the film, however, we realize that the priest's involvement with human evil and power will be the source of both his downfall and redemption. As Des tells his brother when they reunite shortly before the priest's death, "I thought I was someone who I wasn't. . . you were my salvation."

As its title implies, *True Confessions* is a film about a double world: the salacious and seedy underworld of corrupt cops, prostitutes, and criminals, and the church with which it is entwined. The film brings these formally polarized worlds of heaven and earth together; it is ultimately a movie about the transformation of ambition and power into servitude for the love of God through an unlikely grace. In the end, the film hints at the resurrection beyond the corruption from which the priest has emerged. The "image" of priesthood, once so carefully cultivated by Des, may have collapsed (his older self, now riddled with cancer, is a far cry from his earlier, pristine image), but something of the suffering servant remains faithful and true.

The Mass Is Ended

The Runner Stumbles and *True Confessions* disclose a reality of priesthood formerly hidden only in symbol. Rivard's struggles with celibacy and Des's will to power remind us of the human face behind the image. Des's downfall from a well-constructed image to a flesh-and-bones, suffering servant may serve as a kind of allegory of the priest film in Hollywood. At first a cultural icon emptied of humanity (especially sexual desire) and signifying religious stability (guaranteed by censorship), "the priest" was a constructed reality, Hollywood's buoyant dispenser of patriarchal wisdom and architect of dreams. Like all straw men, even those wearing a collar, the priest imagined in Classic Hollywood was dismantled, much as the knot of a repressed culture became undone with the sexual revolution. From my perspective, I think that *True Confessions* brilliantly unwraps and then dissolves the powerful aura of an imagined, fictional cleric, while restoring the grace-filled symbol of the priest as a marginal prophet, a suffering servant. In the end, the kind of mass appeal that a Bing Crosby or Pat O'Brien priest had on a generation has long since disappeared.

Our look at representations of priests, particularly as Hollywood has managed that image over the last seventy-five years, opens up deeper issues that have yet to be researched. As far as I know, there exists no comprehensive cultural history of the American priesthood. The church could benefit from a look at popular and

cultural representations of clerics as they were portrayed, say, in the 1950s, the way that Stephanie Coontz writes of the American family in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (1992). Indeed, an investigation of the way in which priests have been portrayed over the years in American culture would help us to understand the current use of religious figures in contemporary cinema or other forms of popular culture. It should be obvious from this short inquiry that the church no longer has control of its images the way it once did when it was closely allied to the Production Code. Recognizing how religious images shape our society remains an important tool for evangelization. Until such a cultural study of priesthood is written, we will have to piece together the artifacts left to us by Father Flannigan in *Boy's Town* or Father Des in *True Confessions*. Or “just dial ‘O’ for O’Malley.”

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