

# Holy Moments

## Faith and Values at the Movies

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An overview of the church's pastoral approach to the media—from caution and censorship, to education and formation—offers a starting point for considering cinema as a holy moment. Being aware of and articulating our values offers us criteria for choosing films, and once chosen, how we make meaning from them.

The treasury of teaching and guidance on media, beginning with movies in 1936, is one of the best-kept secrets of the Catholic Church. All of the popes, the Second Vatican Council, and the pontifical councils that wrote about media and communication in the following decades took as their point of departure the principle that the media are “gifts of God.” The ordinary person-in-the-pew and most clergy and religious have little idea that the Catholic Church has developed over the years a library of media teaching rooted at first in morality and censorship, and then later in a theology of Trinitarian communication and the theology of the Incarnation. It is a developing yet consistent body of thought, catechesis, and pastoral insight that offers suggestions for educating and interacting with the media through communication and dialogue. Since 1936, sixteen major encyclicals and documents have been issued on this topic. Then from 1967, each pope from Paul VI to Benedict XVI has written an annual message for the World Day of Communication (WDC). The theme for 2011 is “Truth, Proclamation, and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age.” Every seminary in the world was to have included training in communications and media starting in 1986 according to the

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*Guide to the Training of Future Priests Concerning the Instruments of Social Communication.* To my knowledge, no major seminary in the United States has such a program, although some offer a course in media and communications. At another seminary, courses in film and spirituality are taught, but this is hardly sufficient since communication and media are not integrated across the entire curriculum. John Paul II's final document, *The Rapid Development*, an apt capstone to his life and work, speaks of communication, media, and merging technologies, and effective ways individual Christians and the Church can respond to this ever-moving phenomenon.

### ***Media Legacy of the Church***

Pope Pius XI's *Vigilanti Cura* (On Motion Pictures) identified the tension between contemporary leisure and moral living that continues to aggravate parents and pastoral ministers today. He called movie-going a "diversion," "recreation," and "amusement," and considered it mostly "an occasion of sin." Though the document evinces the fact that the church has never had an easy relationship with entertainment, it did acknowledge the positive dimension of cinema:

[It can] arouse noble ideals of life . . . to present truth and virtue under attractive forms, to create, or at least to favor understanding among nations, social classes, and races, to champion the cause of justice, to give new life to the claims of virtue, and to contribute positively to the genesis of a just social order in the world. (Pope Pius XI, 1936)

*Vigilanti Cura* glows with praise for the Legion of Decency, which was founded in the United States in 1934. Pius XI called for each nation to establish an office to review and rate films as the Legion of Decency was doing in the United States. Although started by Catholics, the early Legion of Decency included like-minded Protestants and Jews. One of the legion's main activities was to collect annually signed pledges to ". . . condemn all indecent and immoral motion pictures" and "to unite to protest against them." In 1965 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Office for Film and Broadcast (OFB) replaced the Legion of Decency. Between 2003 and 2004, the OFB launched the campaign "Renewing the Mind of the Media," a pledge program that took a more positive turn than that of the Legion of Decency. Members of participating dioceses and parishes were asked to pledge to "encourage media leaders to act responsibly" and "to reject media . . . that demean the dignity of the human person." The signed cards were then dropped into the collection basket (an online form was also available) and for the first two or three years these were counted and used to demonstrate to industry leaders in

Hollywood that people wanted good films. The campaign fizzled due to unclarified goals and lack of planning but the information continues to be available on the USCCB website (in 2010, the OFB became a department of the Catholic News Service).

Following *Vigilanti Cura* was Pope Pius XII's 1957 encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* (On Motion Pictures, Radio, and Television), which directly addressed the entertainment industry. In the document, Pius XI encouraged education and evangelization in the popular media, and emphasized the mutually inclusive relationship between “communication and culture,” bridging them together in one sentence.

The Second Vatican Council issued *Inter Mirifica* (The Declaration on the Media of Social Communications). It bears the same date—December 4, 1963—as *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), a good companion piece to the document since liturgy is also a drama in which we participate, a story of what came before and what will be. *Inter Mirifica* is the least developed of the conciliar documents. However, it is an umbilical cord that helped bring the Catholic Church into the modern world, one already permeated by the ubiquitous sights and sounds of mediated messages. What is considered as the Catholic Church's magna carta on media and communications is *Communio et Progressio* (Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication). Commissioned by Vatican II to complete *Inter Mirifica*, this 1971 document lays a theological foundation for social communication rooted in the Incarnation. It underscores the church's right to teach about media technology, and offers pastoral guidelines to encourage dialogue with the institutions of entertainment and news media.

*Aetatis Novae* (Dawn of a New Era), issued in 1992, is the first document to propose media literacy education for the family and for faith formation in general; it calls for a deeper and more mindful engagement with the culture created by the media through inquiry.

The “World of Entertainment” was the theme of *Gaudete* Sunday during the Jubilee Year 2000. That day Pope John Paul II said:

It is impossible to think of a new evangelization that does not involve your world, the world of entertainment, which is so important in forming minds and habits. I am thinking of the many initiatives which present the Bible message and the very rich heritage of the Christian tradition in the language of forms, sounds and images through the theatre, cinema and television. I am also thinking of those works and programs that are not explicitly religious but are still capable of speaking to peoples' hearts, prompting them to wonder, to question and to reflect.

This overview serves as an introduction to the topic of cinema, faith, and values. It outlines the development of the church's pastoral approach to the media—from caution and censorship, to education and formation—in its continuing navigation and interaction with the world of popular culture, which includes cinema.

## *Cinema as Holy Moments*

Since the invention of cinema in 1895, great filmmakers have generated possibilities for understanding the human condition by telling stories through image and sound. The very best films are successful because of their preference for story and art over message. The authentic art connection is what evokes the religious and spiritual experience of transcendence in film.

Richard Linklater captured the essence of this perspective in his 2001 film *Waking Life*, about a young man searching for meaning in one long dream sequence. At one point the young man drifts into a movie theater where the poet David Jewel is interviewing the filmmaker Caveh Zahedi about the transcendent meaning of film. In a most surprising sequence Zahedi speaks about the French Catholic film critic André Bazin's (1918–1958) belief that every camera shot is the incarnation of God manifesting the divine in creation—and that the audience's encounter with God, and this manifestation of God, is a holy moment. We see it in one another's faces as the reflected light from the screen outlines our profiles in the darkness.

The amazing, existential reality of film is that it mediates relationships through cinematic stories, with ideas and themes connected by visual and aural motifs and symbols. These stories, already mediated by celluloid or by digital means, take place entirely in our heads because of the phenomenon of persistence of vision. Through the experience of film we make meaning, we come to an understanding of that desire that something matters (Sanders, ix). And yet, much to the regret of many, film disappoints because it often fails to teach obvious lessons or hammer home a message. In this regard, the words of the great American film critic Roger Ebert offer precious insight: the purpose of film is not to teach Sunday school; it is to tell stories. Film is the landscape for the moral imagination. A young woman I met at the end of Ron Howard's 2003 film *The Missing* told me that the reason she and her friends go to movies is to figure out their lives, especially when a big decision has to be made. Fascinated by this encounter, I asked: "Would you like to go and have a cup of coffee with me?" During our conversation I continued: "Don't you think going to church or making a retreat or speaking to a spiritual director would be a good way to discern life's choices, more so than a film?" She responded: "Church? All they do is preach at you. That doesn't touch me. But here it's a different world and I can think about how other people live." A holy moment.

And then there is *Joe vs. the Volcano*, John Patrick Shanley's 1990 tale about a man (Tom Hanks) who finds no meaning in the aimless humdrum of life and is a hypochondriac. His frustrated physician tells him he has a brain cloud and that he should go out and live life to the full because he is going to die. For almost ten years I have had the privilege of being a director for the National Film Retreat. This retreat is for people who love movies, spirituality, and theology, coming together to screen films according to a theme, to converse, pray, and break bread.

Each year one lady would suggest that we use *Joe vs. the Volcano* in the retreat and finally announced that she wasn't coming to another retreat until we did. The founding director of the retreat cannot stand the film as he considers it "stupid." The lady thought differently, and as I came to find out, a young boy named Jim found it life-saving. I met Jim's wife Ann at a conference and I was telling this story of how good people can view the same film, like *Joe vs. the Volcano*, and see it, interpret it, make meaning from it, quite differently because of age, education, faith, moral development, and most importantly, life experience. Ann raised her hand (very excitedly) and told the group, tears running down her face, that *Joe vs. the Volcano* had saved her husband's life. When he was nine years old he tried to commit suicide—more than once. He survived and a couple of years later, he and his mom went to see *Joe vs. the Volcano*. As they came out of the theater, Jim turned to his mom and said, "That's me, Mom. I have a brain cloud. And I don't have to die. I can live" (see Pacatte). A holy moment. I would like to be that filmmaker who made a movie that would save one child's life.

### *Content vs. Context*

In 1990 film academic Ellen Draper wrote an article entitled "Controversy Has Probably Destroyed Forever the Context: The Miracle and Movie Censorship in America in the Fifties." I won't go into the controversy that resulted in a significant Supreme Court decision extending first Amendment protection to films. However, I would like to make the point that the polarization between content and context in the minds of the U.S. audience even today regarding cinema stories has resulted in a kind of cultural, religious, and moral schizophrenia—often by people who don't even go to the movies. As in the 1950s, and the Progressive Era of the early part of the twentieth century, so today, audiences let themselves be scared into a reactionary mode because they trust the opinion of someone else rather than defining terms, articulating values as criteria, and thinking for themselves. For example, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights spawned controversy over Chris Weitz's 2007 film *The Golden Compass* vis-à-vis its source material, Philip Pullman's book trilogy *His Dark Materials*. This is a case of a visceral reaction to the perception of a book series and a film—the content—taken out of context. Without ever having seen the film, the league sent out a press kit of information with a booklet entitled, *The Golden Compass: Agenda Unmasked*, to at least 500 Catholic schools (their website says more than 20,000 copies were sold). This campaign started two months before the film's release and caused a moral panic, one factor that helped put *The Golden Compass* book in the top ten censorship-challenged books of 2007. The league's contention is that the film was being falsely advertised as a fantasy rather than a tool of atheism and an attack on the Catholic

Church. In truth, author Pullman, who identifies himself as a “Church of England atheist,” does kill “god” in the third volume of his trilogy. This does not happen in either *The Golden Compass*, the first volume of the trilogy, or the film. Yet if people had read the series, they would have realized that Pullman was actually doing us a favor by killing off this old, distant, mean, pessimistic image of a god; the god of the Puritans; the god of Bruce Nolan (Jim Carrey) in Tom Shadyac’s 2003 theological film treatise, *Bruce Almighty* [Bruce: “God is a mean kid sitting on an anthill with a magnifying glass, and I’m the ant. He could fix my life in five minutes if He wanted to, but he’d rather burn off my feelers and watch me squirm”]; and a negative God-image of fundamentalist Christians of every stripe. At any rate, New Line Cinema tried fairly well to be sensitive to Catholic or religious concerns by removing 99 percent of religious references from the film (and fatally changing the end of the story leading to a disappointing box office in the United States but winning an Oscar in 2008 for special effects). However, the controversy sparked by the Catholic League over the films, based on the books, led to a reaction that has perhaps destroyed the context to question Pullman’s books and the opportunity to give and receive a well-reasoned response.

The Catholic League caused a moral panic with their own “materials” that linked three dense books with an innocuous film adaptation and missed a golden opportunity to teach critical thinking skills and how to discern cinematic stories. Whether by explicitly or implicitly calling for a boycott of a film or book, the reality is that boycotts only serve to teach people how to boycott, not to question, to think for themselves, to seek out information for guidance, or to motivate film choices for their children. Inciting fear is an empty pedagogy that provides a hollow premise for choosing a film or making meaning from it. In effect, this approach stunts human and spiritual growth.

Filmmaker Gabor Csupo’s 2007 eponymous cinematic interpretation of *The Bridge to Terabithia*, a Newberry Award-winning novel by Katherine Paterson (1977), presents another example of content over context controversy. Some teachers, librarians, and Christian folk took issue with the film because of the mild language and the child Leslie Burke’s image of God—“I seriously do not think God goes around damning people to hell. He’s too busy running all this! [meaning creation]”—and because she dies at the end. Although the film on DVD continues to be popular, the novel was one of the most frequently banned or challenged books

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in the United States in the 1990s and into the 2000s. However, thoughtful viewers, of whom I would like to count myself, saw this scene in the film as luminous, a holy moment, to be savored.

### *A Values-based Strategy of Inquiry*

The need for teaching and developing critical thinking skills for all, including teachers and librarians, is an educational and faith formation imperative for the twenty-first century. Moral panics and boycotts based on content analysis over contextual understanding raise the heat for a moment, but shed little, if any, light on our stories, nor do they promote deeper understanding of our humanity. In both *Media Mindfulness: Educating Teens about Faith and Media* and *Our Media World: Teaching Kids K-8 about Faith and Media*, my co-author Sister Gretchen Hailer and I begin strategy-building based on the need for each person to articulate their values, those key overarching human and Gospel ideals that guide their lives. At workshops most people mention integrity, family, community, love, faith, patience, justice, and generosity and empathy. We propose that being aware of our values by articulating them offers us immediate access to criteria for choosing films, and once chosen, how we make meaning from them. In this way parents can motivate their decisions about media choices, and thus share values with their children from a young age.

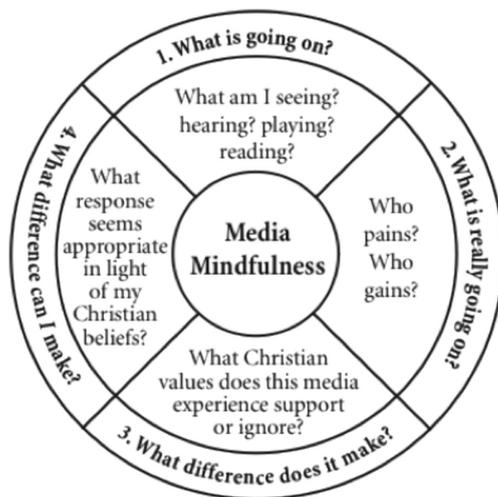
A second dimension to building a faith-based media strategy that works is to encourage critical thinking (as opposed to negative thinking) by explicitly teaching and implicitly integrating the elements of storytelling and literary forms and questioning the text (books, television programs, songs, films, interactive role-playing video games that are converging via the Internet) in age-appropriate ways from the child's early years. This means experiencing the film or media form with them; asking questions about what is going on in the story, about characters and what motivates them; making connections to their own experiences and reality; and pointing out metaphor, analogies, visual motifs, and feelings elicited by sound. Above all, the focus on empathy, that is, asking how the child would feel in that character's place, is a way to teach "the golden rule" and build character through stories.

Recently, I presented a workshop on how to integrate media literacy and faith life to members of the RCIA at a local parish. One father of a three-year-old said that his son's favorite show is Mickey Mouse. Although he admits it is a challenge, he watches it with his son for at least two hours over the course of each week, and they talk about what's going on, if what the characters are doing is good and fair, or if they could choose something better, and so forth. What this father is doing is much more than media awareness, however. He is creating a relationship with his son that can endure because it makes communication normal. He is creating

a culture of communication and values within his family. We often have to talk about things that don't matter so that when the time comes, we can talk about things that do matter.

There are four questions that round out a strategy for engaging in movies that every parent, teacher, and minister can learn by heart in order to make media mindfulness second nature. These questions are based in theological reflection and social analysis. Almost like a mantra, ask of the story: (1) What's going on? (2) What's really going on? (3) Does it make a difference? and (4) How can I make a difference?

### Media Mindfulness Strategy\*



My mantra is: “Control lasts for the moment; communication lasts a lifetime.”

### All about Stories

The Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello expressed Jesus’ own pedagogy when he spoke about the power of narrative in *One Minute Wisdom*: “The shortest distance between a human person and Truth is a story.” Yet when the believer encounters stories in the secular arena, especially when the culture divides religious

\* This diagram is adapted from *Believing in a Media Culture*, by Gretchen Hailer, Thomas Zanzig, and Marilyn Kielbasa (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1996), page 38. Copyright © 1996 by Saint Mary’s Press. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

belief and morality into black and white categories like the simplistic good vs. evil comic book-into-film genre, they must grapple at some point with the distinction between fact and truth in storytelling. At some point they will need to struggle with this paradox: what does it mean to say that everything in the Bible is true and that some of it actually happened? In order to respond, we need to understand literary forms (e.g., allegory, hymn, myth, parable) and genre or categories (e.g., history, biography, law, prophesy, apocalyptic). Some historical events in the Scriptures can be confirmed by other sources. Others, such as the creation narrative, though written as history, are unscientific, that is, not factual. However, it is true. It is as Pope Benedict XVI affirms in the 2010 post-synodal exhortation *Verbum Domini* (The Word of the Lord):

In rediscovering the interplay between the different senses of Scripture it thus becomes essential to grasp the *passage from letter to spirit*. This is not an automatic, spontaneous passage; rather, the letter needs to be transcended: “the word of God can never simply be equated with the letter of the text. To attain to it involves a progression and a process of understanding guided by the inner movement of the whole corpus, and hence it also has to become a vital process” [Benedict XVI, “Address to Representatives of the World of Culture at the ‘Collège des Bernardins’ in Paris” (September 12, 2008): AAS 100 (2008): 726.] Here we see the reason why an authentic process of interpretation is never purely an intellectual process but also a lived one, demanding full engagement in the life of the Church, which is life ‘according to the Spirit’ (Gal 5:16). (Part I, n. 38)

The reason this consideration is important in the framework of this article is that a similar application can be made to cinema so that we can identify and enjoy the holy in a fictional story that may turn out to be a parable or a fantasy tale or a fable. Filmmakers can employ allegory and visual or aural motifs not to communicate fact but because they contain truth. A film can be based on a true story but we know some events were compressed or some of the characters didn’t really exist. Yet the truth of the story is evident. And if the film is good art, if it tells the truth about human reality, even through the darkness, it will rise to the level of good theology. Media mindfulness can provide the wisdom to know the difference.

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