

The gospel according to Philip Seymour Hoffman

An excerpt from the book *A Jesuit Off-Broadway* by Fr James Martin SJ



Fr James Martin SJ, left, with Philip Seymour Hoffman during the filming of *Doubt* (photo by Andy Schwartz)

Fr James Martin served as a consultant on the film *Doubt*, starring Philip Seymour Hoffman. The following are Martin's thoughts on Philip Seymour Hoffman as an actor, director and a human being.

During the first two weeks in January 2005, the cast of “*The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*”, which featured actors like Sam Rockwell and Eric Bogosian, traveled painstakingly through the text, as they sat around the plastic tables in New York’s Public Theater.

All along, Philip Seymour Hoffman offered, like any good teacher, insight, encouragement, and direction when needed.

Clad in rumpled jeans, a faded sweatshirt, and a woolen cap pulled over his reddish-blond hair, Phil, as everyone called him, projected a unique blend of relaxed intensity as a director. While he approached the text with an almost scholastic seriousness, carefully attending to every line in the script, he was nonetheless a relaxed presence among the cast.

Phil's style was a rarity, I would discover. I asked an actor friend, "Are directors normally that relaxed with the cast?" She laughed and said, "You're very lucky!"

From time to time, to illustrate a thorny point, or to describe the emotion that might underlie a scene, he would offer a story from his own life. "Did you ever have this experience?" Phil would ask, and recount a tale illustrating despair, or hope, or joy, or betrayal or trust.

It began to dawn on me that Phil was providing something like contemporary parables for the cast. In the Gospels, the parable is one of the primary ways in which Jesus of Nazareth communicates his understanding of elusive but important concepts.

In Luke's Gospel, for example, Jesus tells the crowd that one is to treat one's neighbor as oneself. But when asked, "Who is my neighbor?" he offers not a precise definition, but instead spins out the story of the Good Samaritan. When asked to explain what he means by the "kingdom of God," the central message of his preaching, Jesus likewise talks about mustard plants, wheat and weeds, and seeds falling on rocky ground.

C.H. Dodd, the great Scripture scholar, once offered a memorable definition of a parable: "A metaphor or simile drawn from nature or everyday life that so arrests the reader with its vividness or strangeness as to leave the intellect in sufficient doubt as to tease the mind into active thought."

In other words, parables are poetic explanations of concepts otherwise impossible to comprehend.

The concept of the kingdom of God, for example, is too rich to be encompassed by something as simple definition. And the notion of radical forgiveness is impossible to explain in a few words, no matter how carefully chosen.

Jesus grasped the benefit of telling a story about, say, a father's reconciliation with his prodigal son, and allowing the hearers to tease out the meaning of the story for themselves. Besides, even if Jesus had given a philosophic lecture to the predominantly peasant community, they probably wouldn't have understood him anyway.

Where a strictly worded definition can often be somewhat shallow and actually close down a person's thought, a story opens the hearer's mind and is endlessly deep. Stories carried meaning without having to be converted into concepts. The power of the parables of Jesus were that they went against the expectations of the audience, as when the Samaritan, hailing from a hated ethnic group, was ultimately revealed as the good guy who cares for the stranger.

Phil's direction embodied this insight. Beforehand I expected a director would say, "Say your lines like this." Or, "Move your arms like this." Instead, Phil provided the actors with a deeper level of understanding.

One actor said that Phil's direction enabled him to understand the script on a more personal level. This was also what parables did for the disciples whom Jesus had gathered around him.

At one point, I blurted this out. "You're doing just what Jesus did," I said to the cast. And Elizabeth Rodriguez, the outgoing actress who would play Saint Monica, laughed and said, "Hey, Phil is Jesus!"

When I asked Phil Hoffman about his directing style on "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot," he readily agreed with the inherent strength of the parable—or, in his words, the personal anecdote—in its ability to communicate more than a strictly worded directive.

"It's the way I normally direct," he said. "The anecdotes and stories spark a discussion with the actors and it starts a give-and-take about the character or the scene. And the more personal the better. If I can be open with my life, then the actors usually feel more comfortable expressing themselves through the work."

I asked if he ever felt the need to be more specific in his direction. “Sometimes you have to tell someone exactly what you want, but you can’t dictate,” he said. “You have to keep suggesting. Otherwise, the person becomes a sort of empty shell, and they end up performing in a way that’s not at all, well, spiritual.”

He offered another illustration. “It’s like if I were to tell you onstage that your character had to mix a bowl of oatmeal. I could tell you how to hold the pot and the bowl and the spoon, but unless you made the act your own, it would be just my way of doing it, not yours.”

In a sense, his approach mirrored the way that Jesus invited people to consider his message. For apart from the initial calls of the Apostles, which seem peremptory, brooking little dissent (“Follow me,” he says to Peter) most of Jesus’ preaching involves inviting his listeners to consider something new. Jesus approach was primarily one of invitation, inviting his followers to consider, to think about, to ponder. (“Consider the lilies...”)

Or, in Phil’s words, Jesus was always suggesting, in order that the decision to follow or not follow was always that person’s own decision.

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