

Shining a Spotlight on the Catholic church



There's been a growing fascination among film-makers with the child abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. The latest, *Spotlight*, opens in Britain next week. It depicts an institution concerned first and foremost with its own protection

Just Imagine the scene: a studio pitching session. A young writer dives in, not wasting a second of the allotted five minutes. A story of salvation and redemption, he begins. OK, say the money men guardedly, not for the first time. A group of alienated youngsters, he continues, kids who've fallen through a patchy and indifferent care system, are taken in hand by ... a Catholic priest ... who provides them with a refuge, a community where they make their own rules. A pause. So who finds him out? say the studio execs. Where's the reckoning?

Boys Town, the 1938 Oscar-winner starring Spencer Tracy as Father Flanagan, would not get made today. Not because it is a lousy film – Tracy and Mickey Rooney are in fine form; the script posits the community as paradigm of inclusive egalitarian American society – but because the narrative is no longer plausible to audiences. In the film, it is Father Flanagan who accuses the American system of abusing young men by its arrogance and careless punishment. These days, the rhetoric would be reversed. The film is even tainted by association, following investigations and pending prosecutions of De La Salle brothers at a boys' home in Queensland, Australia, that took its name from the Oscar-winner.

The presumption in contemporary screen representations of the Church is of an organisation that has something to hide and, beyond that, is capable of sinister conspiracy. *Spotlight*, nominated for six Academy Awards including Best Picture, is released in Britain next week. The drama is based on events in 2001, when the “Spotlight” team at The Boston Globe began investigations, triggered by the John J. Geoghan case, into sexual abuse of children by other Catholic priests in Massachusetts.

Spotlight outlines the difficulties the team experienced in order to establish the facts. In particular, it depicts the collusion by many in the Boston establishment – police, schools, politicians, charities – to avert public gaze from evidence that was as horrifying as it was incomprehensible. This aversion has made much of the screen’s exploration of the theme problematic – as has the delay, often decades – between the crimes and their uncovering.

Most films about the child-abuse scandal within the Church are based on real cases, such as the award-winning Canadian television drama, *The Boys of St Vincent* (1992) about an orphanage run by Christian Brothers in Newfoundland. Both Amy Berg’s Oscar-nominated documentary, *Deliver Us From Evil* (2006), about Oliver O’Grady’s crimes against children while serving as a priest in northern California, or Alex Gibney’s *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God*, about abuse in Milwaukee and elsewhere, inevitably depend on the testimonies of survivors but rarely of perpetrators, although Berg did question O’Grady.

The effort needed for victims to speak out is heart rending. *Mea Maxima Culpa* acts not only as a documentary but also metaphor since many of the victims were profoundly deaf and sometimes mute; they were literally struggling against silence with expression and sign language, reaching in vain to the very top of the Church for acknowledgement.

Among recent dramas, the predicament of a victim of abuse by the Christian Brothers at another Australian home, this time for immigrant orphans, forms an unforgettable segment of Jim Loach’s 2010 *Oranges and Sunshine*. David Wenham gives a performance of great complexity and dignity as a ruggedly masculine middle-aged man, a loyal donor to the very institution that harmed him, who must acknowledge that his gratitude is built on betrayal.

Silence from the perpetrators, lack of redress, a degree of incredulity at the scale of the crimes, all of that frustration dogs *Spotlight* – and not just thematically. As a treatment it is admirably sober (no lurid reconstructions, for example), yet as drama at times unsatisfying. Director and co-writer Tom McCarthy has assembled a strong cast, including Mark Ruffalo and Michael Keaton, but the onscreen efforts of the journalists do not always deliver the requisite tension, suspense and conflict.

The guilty men remain just out of sight, glimpsed now and then through doorways, still enjoying the vestiges of official protection, still living in safe houses. There is one chilling exchange in which a sheltered priest denies any wrongdoing, since he took no pleasure in the alleged practices (a bit of casuistry that’s been heard in several cases). But the shocked reaction of the reporter is as close to catharsis as this drama gets; the film operates rather as analysis of the way we all contribute to the suffering of the innocent by our indifference and acceptance of hierarchical authority.

The film portrays the Church as a powerful, silencing organisation with superficially affable, eloquent enforcers. Most of the “*Spotlight*” journalists were raised as Catholics. Some who lapsed thought they might return one day. The film suggests that what they learned destroyed that option. A crucial juncture in the plot is a telephone discussion between the journalists and former Benedictine monk and priest Richard Sipe, who has served in trials as expert witness on celibacy and mental health within the Church. (Sipe also appears in the documentary *Mea Maxima Culpa*).

Now a writer and sociologist, Sipe’s findings suggest only half of priests are celibate, holding that

“this creates a culture of secrecy that tolerates and even protects paedophiles”, and that as many as six per cent of all priests may have been at some time involved in sexual activity with minors. It is more than a few bad apples, he suggests; it is a recognisable psychiatric phenomenon.

So where do you find a good priest onscreen today? Not in John Patrick Shanley’s play *Doubt* transferred to the big screen in 2008. A story of nuns and a priest disputing the management of a school, it was a kind of “who done what”, a psychological mystery. Its real subject, though, was control rather than abuse. Its climax was rightly a verbal duel between Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman.

Father James, the priest played by Brendan Gleeson at the centre of John Michael McDonagh’s 2014 film *Calvary*, is a good man (not a paragon, perhaps, but certainly not guilty of crimes against children) who is forced to atone for the sins of others in a community warped by various abuses. He also becomes a victim of sorts, when a man repeatedly raped as a child by a priest chooses Father James to hear his horrific experiences in the confessional.

Have you sought professional help? asks the good priest. Why? the voice continues bitterly, “so I could learn how to ‘cope’? ... Maybe I don’t want to learn to live with it.” Redress is impractical since the perpetrator is dead. And in any case, what would be the point of killing a guilty priest? Killing a good one, now that would be a shock, continues the voice. *Calvary* is, as it should be, shocking about the effect of the crimes. At the same time, the film challenges an increasingly prevalent cynicism about the office of the priesthood.

And then there is *The Club*, a Chilean film, winner of the Silver Bear in Berlin, to be released in Britain on Good Friday. Writer/director Pablo Larraín has set his arresting drama in a remote coastal town where a group of middle-aged and elderly men pass the days in a house apart from the community. A housekeeper co-ordinates their activities – reading, communal meals, hobbies. The atmosphere is cordial, inmates endearing, if eccentric: it might seem a Latin American Craggy Island, lacking only a Father Ted.

In fact, it is a safe house, of the type organised by the Congregation of the Servants of the Paraclete. A stranger appears outside, shouting incoherent phrases, obscene yet incontrovertible. There will be no consoling resolution but will those inside finally confront the reality? Larraín’s brilliance here is to put the audience with the inmates – a disturbing experience that reminds us that we are dealing with human beings, not distant statistics.

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