

THE WORD MADE FILM

The Portrayal of Christ in Contemporary Film:  
Strategies for the Catholic Church

A Senior Studies Report

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Christopher Carpenter  
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Saint Meinrad College  
St. Meinrad, Indiana

The life of Jesus Christ has long been a favorite subject of filmmakers, and cinematic interpretations of Jesus' life have held a fascination for film audiences virtually from the birth of the film medium. As early as 1916, films that depicted Christ, such as D. W. Griffith's Intolerance and Thomas Ince's Civilization, were financially successful, and "Jesus Christ was discovered as a marketable commodity by Hollywood in the industry's infancy" (Singer 44). Due to the film medium's ability to reach and influence a world-wide audience, positive depictions of the life, ministry, and person of Christ such as King of Kings (1961) and The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) have been encouraged by the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations through the years (Singer 45-47). For the most part, the film industry has been eager to satisfy the worldwide body of believing Christians, and the industry has benefitted financially as a result of the overall success of such films about Christ.

Controversy has resulted at times when filmmakers have tried to challenge the traditional institutional teachings about Jesus and have presented depictions

or ideas contrary to the commonly-held beliefs of Catholics, such as the 1976 film The Passover Plot and 1979's Life of Brian (Singer 45-47). The Church has tended to respond harshly to such unorthodox portrayals of Christ's life, verbally denouncing such films and forbidding Catholics to see them, thereby attempting to limit the film's potential market and success. In turn, the film industry has tended to respond angrily, verbally criticizing Church leaders and changing film advertising and release strategies to try to gain Catholic viewers.

The history of the film industry's use of Christ's life as a subject for artistic exploration and financial gain, and the conflicts that have arisen with the Catholic Church, is worth exploring. Strategies the Church should develop for determining its response to contemporary motion pictures that present unorthodox or inaccurate images and portrayals of Jesus Christ will be examined, as well as ways these films may be calling the Church to opportunities for learning, growth, and the strengthening of Christ's public image.

The early portrayals of Christ were treated with devout respect. Films such as Intolerance and Civilization, both released in 1916, revealed little more of Christ than His limbs and backside because

filmmakers at first considered Jesus to be "too holy" to be viewed face-forward (Singer 44). Christ's dialogue in these early films, which rarely went beyond scriptural quotes, was almost always spoken in an authoritarian, pietistic manner. According to Corliss, Christ and His disciples in these films:

...spoke the King's English: King James', with an assist from any screenwriter willing to gussy up his fustian. In these prim tones, the heart's revolution that Jesus preached became an Oxford don's lecture, and his ghastly, redemptive death a tableau painted on velvet (Corliss 36).

Such reverent portrayals of Christ pleased the faithful and rarely, if ever, were cause for protest.

In more recent times, however, both the portrayals of Christ in motion pictures and the Church's reception of such portrayals have changed dramatically. The growth of the Christ story as a successful, money-making commodity for filmmakers combined with advances in twentieth-century biblical scholarship. According to Hurley, biblical scholarship "succeeded in breaking the monopolistic grip that the Christian Church had maintained for centuries in its presentation of the Christ of Faith" (Hurley 61). This resulted in "secular, at times irreverent, interpretations of Jesus in literature and drama" (Ibid.) as the traditional artistic respect for Christ dissipated in the light of the discoveries that biblical scholarship

produced about Christ's life. Between the 1950's and 1970's, "Hollywood movies de-mythologized Christ, His disciples, and all the generations of believers who followed...divinity was out; humanity was in" (Keyser 38). From that point on, the majority of films produced about Christ would emphasize the human part of His nature.

This shift from the emphasis on Christ's divine nature to the emphasis on His human nature inspired mixed reactions from the Church and from the public. The visually spectacular King of Kings (1961) and The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) were Church-approved but did not find overwhelming critical or financial success (Singer 45-47). Both are faithful to their scriptural source material but are also long and slow-paced, and The Greatest Story Ever Told is burdened by an all-star cast that distracts the viewer from the story's credibility. The Passover Plot (1976), which showed Christ deliberately setting the stage for His crucifixion, was denounced by the Church and was a box-office flop (Ibid.). Apparently, this film's plot was perceived as a smear on the redemptive nature of Christ's self-sacrifice, and it turned away whatever potential audience it had. The British comedy troupe Monty Python's irreverent spoof Life of Brian (1979) was likewise deemed blasphemous by the Church, but was

a box-office hit (Singer 45-47).. While it does not attack Christ in particular, Life of Brian was offensive for its plot, which follows the life of a man named Brian who is born at the same time as Christ in Bethlehem and who is later mistakenly perceived to be the Messiah. Also controversial and successful was Franco Zeffirelli's 1977 television miniseries, Jesus of Nazareth (Ibid.), which was another star-studded, overlong depiction of Christ's life. All of these films stress Christ's human nature and fail to present His divine nature in any extensive detail.

Three particularly troublesome cinematic portrayals of Christ produced during the last twenty years and the reception they have received from the Church pose particular problems for the Church and its relationship with the media. The Ruling Class (1972), Jesus Christ Superstar (1973), and The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) were all initially criticized by the Catholic Church but ended up meeting with varying levels of critical acceptance, financial success, and public popularity. The most effective way the Church can criticize such films without having the ensuing controversy contribute to the success of such films is yet to be discovered, but the Church can and should develop more effective strategies to determine its response to future films

about Jesus Christ.

The Ruling Class, produced in England and released in England and America in 1972, is described as "one of the most outrageous, offensive, and magnificent film satires" (Magill 2070), as well as "one of the most controversial films of the 1970's and one of the most wicked satires in cinema history" (Ibid.). The film's outrageousness and offensiveness are what sparked the controversy surrounding the film, and to some extent contributed to the film's popularity and appeal; it's one-of-a-kind in its storyline and style. It is a satire of the British class system and of organized religion, and is often so brutal in its attack that it ultimately is a very black comedy.

The film's plot concerns Jack, the 14th Earl of Gurney, who has spent eight years in an insane asylum for believing he is Jesus Christ. Jack is released upon the death of his father, from whom he has inherited the family fortune, and returns to the family manse in the traditional beard, flowing hair, and robe of Christ. He also has a life-sized cross in tow, which he hangs in the living room and sleeps on. Jack's scandalized family decides on a last-ditch attempt to "cure" Jack of his delusion by pitting him against another lunatic who also claims to be God. While the plan does

work, it soon becomes clear that Jack still is not quite right, for he now believes himself to be Jack the Ripper. Jack has gone from identifying with the New Testament God of love and peace to identifying with a wrathful mass murderer, and it is only as the latter that he is embraced by society.

The Ruling Class was targeted upon its release for its depiction of "the hypocrisy of organized religion" (Magill 2070) as well as for its depiction of Christ.

In the film:

The dissection of the British upper class is inextricably intertwined with an allegory of the Church, and there are moments that may prove uncomfortable for some audiences because it showcases a man who thinks he is Jesus Christ although he may really be Jack the Ripper. (Curtright, Wichita Eagle).

Magill concurs that the film's statement that "a Jack the Ripper would be more assured of success in the contemporary world than would Jesus Christ is by no means a comfortable one" (Magill 2072), but it is thought-provoking. This statement leads the viewer to question if the values Christ taught have truly been forgotten by society and, if so, what kind of values society upholds and what kind of people it puts into power.

The image of Christ presented by writer Peter Barnes, director Peter Medak, and actor Peter O'Toole, who won



an Academy Award nomination for Best Actor for his portrayal of Jack (Magill 2072), requires analysis. Despite the clearly stated insanity of the character, Jack's conviction that he is Jesus Christ and some of his actions and statements while in this guise are unorthodox and are shocking to some viewers. Jack/Jesus claims to love everyone "from the bottom of my heart to the tip of my penis", and proves this by having sex and conceiving a child with his wife in the film. This depiction goes against the traditional belief that Jesus was unmarried and a celibate. When asked how he knows he is God, Jack/Jesus replies, "because every time I pray to Him I find I'm talking to myself." Jack could be accused of blasphemy for equating himself with divinity. Occasionally, Jack/Jesus interrupts the story by spontaneously bursting into song, leading production numbers to "The Varsity Drag", "My Blue Heaven", and "Dry Bones". These numbers are used to illustrate the possibility of religious and society leaders using song-and-dance techniques to gain popularity. When confronted with fear and the challenges of others to his "divinity", Jack/Jesus climbs onto and clings to the cross on his wall. At other times he sleeps and meditates on it, indicating his use of it as a security blanket, a use that the real Christ did not see in the

cross He was crucified on.

The United States Catholic Conference (U.S.C.C.), a communications monitoring board composed of clergy and lay people, assigned The Ruling Class an "A-IV" classification, designating it "suitable for adults, with reservations" (Herx and Zaza 6). The A-IV classification:

...refers to certain movies which are not morally offensive in themselves but do require some analysis and explanation to avoid mistaken interpretations and false conclusions" (Ibid.).

While stopping short of calling a film offensive or blasphemous, the A-IV designation connotes that a film is a borderline case that just misses offensiveness or blasphemy. Also, the film could still be perceived as offensive or blasphemous by an individual viewer who may not receive the "analysis and explanation" that the U.S.C.C. says the film requires.

The Ruling Class was greeted with considerable critical acclaim. While the Los Angeles Times criticized the film upon its American release for being "...snail-slow, slag-heavy, shrill and gesticulating" (Magill 2071), the film received many more commendable notices, including one which called it, "one of the best adaptations of a play to the screen ever" (Williams, Sacramento Bee). In addition to Peter O'Toole's Academy Award

nomination, the film was honored as one of the National Board of Review's top-ten best English-language films of 1972 (Steinberg 247).

The film was not, however, an immediate box-office hit. According to Magill, "The Ruling Class did not prove to be an exceptional success" (Magill 2072), at least not on its initial release. This was perhaps due to the controversial plot of the film as well as the bizarre style employed in telling the story on the screen. It did go on to acquire a cult following in the United States and England in the years following its first release (Ryan, Philadelphia Inquirer), possibly for the same reasons that it at first failed. The film enjoyed a heavily-publicized American re-release in 1983, when eleven minutes of previously missing footage were restored to the film in an effort to cash in on Peter O'Toole's resurgent popularity that year as a result of his Academy Award-nominated performance in My Favorite Year (Siskel, Chicago Tribune). Reliable box office figures regarding the financial success of the film are difficult to acquire due to the film's age, to its primary exhibition on the art house circuit, and to the fact that its American release company, Embassy Pictures, has since been acquired by another company, according to Entertainment Data, an agency that tracks

film grosses.

In 1970, two young composers, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, had made an impact in the music industry with a rock opera that they had written and released as a record, Jesus Christ Superstar. An international stage production of the opera met with great success in 1971, and a film version, directed by Norman Jewison, followed in 1973 (Magill 1216-1217). No previous attempt at a contemporary musical setting of the Gospels met with as much success as Webber and Rice's. According to Broeske:

In concept and presentation, Jesus Christ Superstar...defies the conventional telling of the Christ story. With its all-musical delivery resulting in the absence of dialogue, as well as in its story line's bizarre merging of ancient and contemporary strains, (the film) ranks as perhaps the most innovative work about Jesus Christ ever made. It is also one of the most controversial (qtd. in Magill 1216-1217).

Shot in a play-within-a-play format, the film depicts a troupe of actors who go out into the Israeli desert, where the film was made, to reenact Christ's passion and death. While this seems non-controversial,

since its inception and throughout its evolution, Jesus Christ Superstar has generated discussion because of its very contemporary depiction of the last seven days of Christ's life (Magill 1217).

The costuming is a strange mish-mash of period and contemporary styles; what sets there are, since most

of the film takes place in caves, gardens, or on mountaintops, are abstract; the music is primarily rock and roll, and the dancing frenetic. The story is primarily told from the point of view of Judas, Jesus' betrayer. Mary Magdalene sings of her intense love for Jesus, and Jesus is shown to struggle with His love for her. There is a concentration on the political aspect of Jesus' actions and character, and on His followers' attempts to manipulate and further empower Jesus' position. The song lyrics employ lingo of the late 1960's and early 1970's: "What's the buzz?", "Try not to turn onto troubles that might get you down", and Jesus Christ referred to as "J. C.". The film has something of a "hippie" sensibility to it as a result.

There is much that is unconventional in the actual portrayal of Christ as well. He is depicted as a revolutionary figure, "or at very least an anti-establishment figure who is beset by self-doubts" (Martin 68). He is an emotional Jesus, revealing feelings of anger, fear, sorrow, love and distress through the course of the film. He sings of being overburdened and too heavily demanded in His ministry and of being uncertain whether or not He can fulfill God's mission. True to the film's title, Christ comes across as a "fledgling superstar" (Keyser 38), uncomfortable with His popularity

while at the same time realizing it is necessary to some extent for the success of His redemptive mission. Physically, actor Ted Neeley looks the part, at least as Jesus has traditionally been artistically depicted, and there is a strong concentration on the part of director Jewison on Jesus' eyes--they are light in shade and color but intense and all-seeing.

Perhaps the most jarring aspect of the portrayal of Christ in Jesus Christ Superstar, at least at the time of the film's release, is the fact that He sings. Apart from the satiric musical numbers in The Ruling Class the previous year, there had never been a musical production of the life of Christ, although the musical Godspell, which depicts a contemporary life of Christ in New York City, followed the success of Jesus Christ Superstar (Dart D7). Though critical reactions to the musical score were positive, they were considerably less favorable toward the score's adaptation to the screen and Neeley's renditions of the songs. The Medved brothers, in their satiric book The Golden Turkey Awards, describe Neeley's performance this way: "He shrieks, pouts, grits his teeth, rolls his eyes, and twitches intermittently" (Medved 130). Zimmerman of Newsweek said that Neeley's "Jesus often recalls Charles Manson" (qtd. in Medved 130), and Williamson of Playboy declared

that Neeley's "portrayal of Jesus ought to fix him permanently in public memory as the Screamin' Jesus" (qtd. in Medved 130). However, the score's adaptation, conducted by Andre Previn for the film, did receive an Academy Award nomination, the only nomination the film received (Magill 1219). Apparently the Academy believed that nothing in the film deserved merit except for Webber and Rice's score, but its failure to honor anything else in the film version would do little to harm the popularity of the work.

The film's theatrical release was met with protest, as the stage version before it had been. Many Christians, including Catholics, regarded the liberties taken with the New Testament roots of the story as blasphemous (Thompson 28:1). These liberties include the exploration of Jesus' and Mary Magdalene's love for each other and the depiction of Judas, which is much more positive than the traditional attitudes toward Jesus' betrayer. The film was also condemned by the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, which called the film "a 'catastrophe' to Christian-Jewish relations" (Magill 1216) for allegedly promoting anti-Semitism. There were objections to the film's rock-and-roll, song-and-dance style and to the film's depiction of Judas as a black man, but some religious leaders did

approve of the film, particularly the leaders of the then-popular "Jesus Movement" (Magill 1216). Perhaps they affirmed the film's realistic depiction of Christ, with its emphasis on His humanity, as well as the contemporary setting and music employed to make Christ's story relevant to young people.

The Catholic Church did not get directly involved in the controversy that surrounded Jesus Christ Superstar. The U.S.C.C. assigned the film an "A-III" rating, making it suitable for adult viewing only (Herx and Zaza 144). Of the film, the Conference said:

Screen version of the Andrew Lloyd Webber-Tim Rice musical adds a completely new dimension and drive to the music by virtue of a cinematography that enhances the original songs but also threatens to overwhelm them. Entertaining as musical theater, it can also be seen as a sincere if naive effort to tell the story of Jesus in contemporary and ethical terms (Ibid.).

The Conference does not specify what it perceives as "naive" about the storytelling of Jesus Christ Superstar, since it is an intelligent musical. The film is at times theologically simplistic, and perhaps this is what the Conference means to say, but it is respectful of Christ and His Passion.

In its initial release, Jesus Christ Superstar was an international box office hit, earning \$13.3 million dollars to become the eighth highest-grossing film of



1973 (Steinberg 183), and subsequent re-releases, television broadcasts, and videotape sales have made it a perennial favorite worldwide. The film was even chosen in 1975 as one of the forty-five all-time favorite films in a poll of French film critics (Ibid.). The musical's employment of modern music and dance and its contemporary-looking cast has attracted people to its topical exploration of the life and person of Jesus and ensured the film success. According to Morris, "after initial resistance Christians came to embrace Christ as a righteous rocker in Jesus Christ Superstar" (Morris 48). Today, the film is used by some Catholic parishes to illustrate Christ's ministry and Passion, particularly to youth groups, who find the film appealing for its contemporary music and plot.

After fifteen years of only occasional controversial film portrayals of Christ, The Passover Plot and Jesus of Nazareth primary among them (Singer 44-47), the singularly most challenging depiction of Christ in film history reached movie theaters and met enormous resistance from religious leaders and believers. Director Martin Scorsese's 1988 film of Nikos Kazantzakis' 1955 novel The Last Temptation of Christ presented a revisionist telling of the Christ story in which Jesus is "anything but the divine-to-the-core, celluloid saint depicted

in the standard according-to-Hollywood Bible epic" (Grogan 40). The emphasis on Christ's human nature reaches its highest level thus far in Scorsese's film, which presents Jesus as first oblivious to His divine calling, then resistant to it, and, finally, reluctant to embrace it until the very moment of His death.

Scorsese, a life-long Catholic who had studied for the priesthood before becoming the director of such acclaimed films as Mean Streets, Taxi Driver, and Raging Bull (Grogan 40), had first attempted to film The Last Temptation of Christ in 1983, but the studio financing the film, Paramount Pictures, pulled financing on the production after being deluged with letters condemning the studio and the film for blasphemy (Broeske VI:1). Apparently, Paramount feared that the film's future chances for success would be jeopardized by such protests and decided it was in its best interests to cancel the project. Four years later, Universal Studios announced a multi-film agreement with Scorsese which would include production of The Last Temptation of Christ. The film went into production in Morocco in October, 1987, under the title The Passion, in an attempt to dissuade any religious protesters (Broeske VI:1). Under this title, the production company would not be troubled by those who would be immediately drawn to protest if they knew

the real title and the controversial nature of the plot. The \$6.5 million production wrapped several months later and was scheduled for a Fall, 1988 theatrical release (Broeske VI:1).

The plot of the film is troublesome for the numerous non-scriptural embellishments made in its depiction of the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus is introduced in the film as a carpenter, but His main business comes from building the crosses that the Romans use for their crucifixions; Jesus even carries the crosses to Calvary when they are ready to be used. He refuses to join His fellow Jews in the resistance against the Roman occupation as a way of rejecting His divine call, a call he is hearing more and more strongly. As Jesus says to Judas in the film, "I want Him to choose someone else; I want to destroy every one of His messiahs!" Jesus also admits His own sinfulness, saying "I'm a liar, I'm a hypocrite, I'm afraid of everything...my God is fear; Lucifer is inside of me". There is an emphasis in the film on Jesus' relationship with Mary Magdalene. They have apparently been in love with each other since they were children, and it is hinted that it is Jesus' inability to commit to Mary that has led her to a life of prostitution. In one scene, Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, "I want you to forgive me; I've

done too many bad things...the worst things I've done have been to you".

Once past the first forty-five minutes of the film's nearly three-hour running time, it is a relatively traditional telling of Jesus' ministry and Passion, although it does defer substantially to reveal that Judas betrayed Jesus only at Jesus' behest, so as to fulfill His mission of redemption. The most discussed segment of the film, however, is its final half-hour depicting Jesus' "last temptation", a fantasy-vision He has as a result of Satan's last attempt to sway Jesus from His mission as He is dying on the cross. Jesus is given a look at the remainder of His life should He choose not to sacrifice Himself, a life that includes His marriage to Mary Magdalene, a later, bigamous marriage to the sisters Mary and Martha that results in children for Him to father, and His growth to old age. It is only on His deathbed during the burning of Jerusalem that He is visited in His vision by the aged apostles, who reveal the vision to be a temptation of Satan. Finally gaining the conviction to fulfill His mission, Jesus implores God to accept Him as the Messiah, and the film ends with Jesus' death on the cross.

During the summer prior to the film's scheduled Fall, 1988 release date, a copy of an early-draft script

of the film was stolen from Universal Studios and its contents were subsequently leaked to several Christian leaders (Ankerberg and Weldon 41). These leaders and others who got a look at the bootleg script soon began protesting to Universal about its contents. They demanded that the film not be released based on their objections to the script, despite the fact that several of the scenes and dialogue they found particularly objectionable in this early draft were not even in the final shooting script (Grogan 41). Whether the final script was changed as a result of these protests or had been changed beforehand is not clear, but the changes that were made still did not placate the objectors.

In a short time, the concerns religious leaders had about the film reached their congregations, and many Christians were moved to action. According to Morris, "Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ unleashed a public outcry of a magnitude unprecedented in the history of religious films" (Morris 44). A media campaign was launched by several Christian groups and churches. Militant fundamentalists as well as mainstream churches, including the Catholic Church, attempted to block the film's release. Their effort was successful to some extent:

Rallying support via telephone and television,

the growing number of protesters so intimidated theater owners that several movie chains refused to play Scorsese's film (Morris 44).

These chains, including the United Artists theater chain, the nation's largest (Grogan 43), apparently were daunted by the thought of crowds of protesters on their doorsteps and the threat of customer boycotts.

Scorsese and Universal leaped to the film's defense, declaring that Freedom of Speech would be defended at all costs, and, "in an apparent attempt to short-circuit mounting protests by fundamentalist factions within the religious community" (Morris 44), decided to move the film's release date up to mid-August, nearly a month-and-a-half ahead of schedule, so as to "let the American public form its own opinion" (qtd. in Pitre 1), according to a statement issued by Universal. This strategy would see the film released before any decisive counter-strategy could be devised by the film's opponents.

The Last Temptation of Christ opened on August 12, 1988 in only nine theaters nationwide and was greeted by hordes of picketers and record-breaking business (Easton, 16 Aug. 1988: VI:1). The following weekend it opened in more theaters in more cities with the same results (Ibid.). The film received mixed reviews from the Christian leaders who did chance to see it, with "descriptions ranging from 'an affirmation of faith'

to 'the work of twisted minds'" (qtd. in San Diego Union, 15 July 1988: E18). According to Riley, national director at the time for Morality in Media, a religious media-monitoring board, the film was objectionable because it contained "...nudity, lasciviousness, implied homosexuality, the denial of the authenticity of Christ being the son of God" (Ibid.). However, according to Lee, a film reviewer and former spokesman for the Lutheran Council, the film:

...is an affirmation of faith...it's controversial and problematic, but not disrespectful of faith in Jesus Christ as the redeemer of the world, and that's not bad for a Hollywood film (Ibid.).

Film critics had mixed reactions to the film, with some praising it as Scorsese's masterpiece and one of 1988's best films, while others thought it an embarrassment not worthy of the controversy. Most agreed, however, that Willem Dafoe's portrayal of Christ was noteworthy, especially for a film in the biblical genre. Morris praised the film's depiction of Christ, saying:

Gone is the starchiness that tends to mummify the actor playing the lead role. Willem Dafoe's Jesus is a virile and energetic Nazarene. Here is a Christ who laughs and cries and dances (Morris 47).

The film critic for the Charlotte Observer commented on the spiritual importance of Dafoe's performance, saying:

Conventional as Dafoe looks, he gives Jesus a complexity that's unconventional for movies, and his victory over sin could satisfy even an unbeliever (Charlotte Observer, 18 Aug. 1988).

The Catholic Church did not respond favorably to The Last Temptation of Christ. Church officials decided that the film's depiction of Christ was "clearly contrary to the teachings of the Church" (qtd. in Los Angeles Times, 15 July 1988), and they urged Catholics to boycott the film and its parent company, Universal Studios. The U.S.C.C. assigned the film an "O" rating, designating the film as "morally offensive" to Christians, not only because of its depiction of Christ but also because "the movie dwells on sexual rather than spiritual love and contains excessive graphic violence" (Ibid.). Bishop Anthony Bosco, chairman of the Communications Committee of the U.S.C.C., justified the condemnation given the film by saying "the film was seeking to discuss the humanity of Christ, which has always intrigued theologians...it is a distorted picture" (qtd. in USA Today, 11 Aug. 1988, "A2"). Just because a film offers a "distorted picture" of Christ does not, however, mean the picture is necessarily morally offensive and without merit. By concentrating on Christ's humanity, the film explores the fears and frailties of Christ, but this does not reveal Him to be any less divine.



Ultimately, the Catholic Church hoped to downplay its attitude toward the film and avoid blowing the controversy out of proportion. However, many local parishes organized petition protests and picket groups, much to the consternation of Church officials such as Bishop Thomas O'Brien of the diocese of Phoenix, Arizona, who feared that such forms of protest would only draw more publicity to the film (Perkes Fl).

Bishop O'Brien's fears seemed to be realized in the film's record-breaking opening. The film grossed \$44,579 per screen, an astronomically high per-screen average, in its first three days of release at nine theaters (Easton, 16 Aug. 1988, VI:1). The high grosses carried over when the film opened in wider release the following week (Ibid.), showing that the publicity had instilled an eagerness to see the film within the American public. The film's grosses tapered off somewhat by the fourth or fifth week, most probably due to the fact that the film never got an extremely wide release because of the theater chains' refusal to exhibit it; the Cineplex Odeon chain, owned by Universal Pictures' parent company, MCA, was the only chain that ultimately showed the film (Gleiberman 170). In most cities, it only played in one or two usually independently-owned theaters. As of October 20, 1988, The Last Temptation of Christ had

grossed \$9.7 million in the United States (Hollywood Reporter 35), not a blockbuster figure but respectable for a biblical epic released during the teenage-oriented, summer-movie months. The film grossed more in its subsequent overseas release and has been popular since its release on video, possibly because people feel safer watching it in the privacy of their own homes.

These three particular films, The Ruling Class, Jesus Christ Superstar, and The Last Temptation of Christ, as well as other films that depict Jesus Christ in a controversial manner, present a dilemma for the Church: how to criticize or condemn such portrayals without generating further public interest in them. While the Catholic Church did not attack these films with the apparent zeal that some Protestant churches did, it did make its position known to its fifty-three million members (Los Angeles Times, 15 July 1988) and, subsequently, to the media. Most distressing is the fact that the majority of priests and religious leaders who most heavily criticized The Last Temptation of Christ never saw the film (Rackham Fl); they were basing their criticisms for the most part on hearsay. As the finished film differed in some respects from the early-draft script that most clergy had heard about or were acquainted with, many of the specific allegations against the film

were no longer valid by the time the film was released; some originally offensive dialogue and scenes had either been rewritten or removed altogether.

At the same time, some of the positive statements these depictions of Christ make on such issues as the dual nature of Christ (The Last Temptation of Christ), the alternative means of presenting the life of Christ (Jesus Christ Superstar), and the dysfunction that can be present in organized religion and in society as a whole (The Ruling Class) have been virtually ignored by the Church. For example, the U.S.C.C. cited the graphic violence depicted in The Last Temptation of Christ as part of its reasoning for declaring the film morally offensive. What the Conference did not seem to consider was that the most graphic violence in the film is part of the crucifixion scene, "the strongest such scene of all time" (Clark D1). It was also the first time the depiction of the crucifixion was historically correct. According to Morris:

The harsh realism of this filmic passion enables one to understand why crucifixion, with its denounced, stripped, and nailed victims, was considered the most painful and demeaning form of execution in the entire Roman world (Morris 46).

While definitely intense to view, this is fundamental, factual information for Christians to receive, and it is conceivable that a personal understanding of Christ's

Passion can change and deepen as a result of viewing this scene in the film.

What the Catholic Church needs to do is to present a more fully informed analysis of such cinematic portrayals of Christ to its members, avoiding sweeping judgements and condemnations and concentrating instead on identifying and accepting the attributes of such films. Granted, some films may indeed have few redeeming values for Catholics, but other films may have noteworthy statements to make. The films that do not have redeeming values for Catholics should be quietly ignored by the Church, and picketing, boycotts, and letter-writing campaigns should all be abandoned. The U.S.C.C. may be effective at communicating its criticisms on a national level, but perhaps such analysis and criticism could be even more effective at a diocesan or parish level, where the concerns of certain age groups or minorities regarding such films could be better ascertained and taken into consideration. A rock-and-roll musical like Jesus Christ Superstar has limited appeal to senior citizen audiences, but can serve as an appealing and effective tool in educating young Catholics. Likewise, a three-hour long biblical epic like The Last Temptation of Christ may be difficult for teenagers to sit through, but may be thought-provoking fare for older Catholics.

Bishop Bosco of the U.S.C.C. admits that he doesn't "purport to be a movie critic" (qtd. in USA Today, 11 Aug. 1988, A2), and since most of those who sit on the Communications Committee of the U.S.C.C. are not trained movie critics, the opinions of trained critics and film scholars should be taken into consideration when reviewing and rating such films. These criticisms should then be evaluated in the context of Catholic understanding and teaching before a final morality rating is given to the film. To be sure, some critics are more reputable than others and their opinions would be more valuable in consultations, but to fail to consider any professional critics' evaluations of such films is misguided.

The Church needs to become better educated about the business of professional filmmaking, the artistic and financial development of controversial films, and the motives of the film company executives and the filmmakers responsible for these films. It is inappropriately judgemental for a priest to tell his congregation, as one Arizona priest did, that "the film producers' god is money...if they could make \$1 on their grandmother, they'd do it; if it cost her her soul, they couldn't care less" (qtd. in Rackham Fl). Filmmaking is a multi-million dollar industry, but it is also a medium for artistic expression and, in the case of these

films depicting Christ, a means of spiritual expression. Scorsese described The Last Temptation of Christ as being for him "like a prayer...it is my way of worshipping" (Grogan 43), and Jewison described his Jesus Christ Superstar as being a "spiritual experience, and it's beautiful" (Medved 132). While it is possible for some directors to make such statements for the sake of publicity, these two men are two of the most respected filmmakers in the business and among audiences. It is also significant to remember that Scorsese was a one-time seminarian and still considers himself a Catholic (Grogan 42), and it is doubtful that blasphemy is his intention in any of his works.

At the time of the release of The Last Temptation of Christ, the U.S.C.C. suggested that the Catholic Church use the film's release "as an opportunity to place before our people again the true image of Christ" (Los Angeles Times, 15 July 1988). This is a commendable notion, but the U.S.C.C. did not suggest or stipulate how this was to be accomplished. The Church needs to sponsor better film and media educational programs, particularly to address controversial films. This could take several forms, the most effective of which might be a set response program formed at a diocesan level that could then be implemented in parishes, either as

an ongoing educational program or as an "ad hoc" program to be used only in response to a media crisis. The first approach may be preferable in order to instill a continuous, and ever-increasing, awareness within individual church members.

A diocesan committee would have the responsibility of researching and collecting information, including critical reviews, regarding a particular film and would then conduct a moral evaluation with the bishop. The results would then be dispersed to individual parishes for implementation in the form of the priests' homilies, parish discussion groups, a parish-wide meeting or meetings, group screenings of pertinent films, and whatever other means can be developed that are practical and constructive. This approach would involve experimentation to be sure, and this could be monitored on a national level by the U.S.C.C. or the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (N.C.C.B.). Even if official protest should ultimately be deemed the best measure against an offensive portrayal of Christ, education and evaluation should be implemented first.

The best way for the Catholic Church to foster positive depictions of Christ in film may be for the Church to produce such films. The Church should make greater strides in involving itself directly in film

and media production and in the Hollywood process, even possibly to the extent of becoming an industry participant itself. This would assure the Church an opportunity to better assert the images and ideals that it upholds. In the last few years, the Paulists, a Catholic religious order, financed Romero, a 1989 film based on the life of martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador. Released under the company title "Paulist Pictures", it is a religious film that doesn't cater exclusively to Catholics, and the presence of actor Raul Julia in the title role helped to bring the film international critical attention.

The Catholic Church has the financial means for future ventures into the film industry, and there are many talented artists both within and outside the Church who could be enlisted to create topical, appealing films about Jesus or other religious figures and events that have the potential to reach contemporary audiences yet not be offensive to the Church or blasphemous to the image of Christ. For such films to be topical and realistic, however, the Church might have to allow for some moral leeway for appropriate and essential, though not excessive, depictions of sex and violence. Just because a film contains a graphically violent crucifixion scene or depicts the full details of Mary Magdalene's



sexual immorality should not be immediate cause for a "morally offensive" label. A financial investment by the Church in the film industry might not be instantly profitable, but it may be spiritually beneficial and, in time, might prove to be financially successful as well.

Strategies the Catholic Church should adopt in response to contemporary filmic depictions of Jesus Christ and other religious figures include:

1. The acquisition of a better institutional understanding of the film industry and filmmaking process;
2. The creation of more consultative film analysis and rating practices;
3. The establishment of film and media education programs on a diocesan and/or parish level; and
4. The growth of actual involvement on the part of the Church in the film production process.

By employing and testing these strategies, as well as developing others, the Church and the powers-that-be in the media could establish stronger means of communication and inter-involvement that could help each to realize the benefits and strengths they have to offer one another. At the same time, the Church could assert its teachings and create its own cinematic

depictions and portrayals of Christ and Christian values. The Church can't stop negative or offensive religious portrayals from reaching audiences, but it could provide educational opportunities and offer alternative films to combat such portrayals.

A chance to implement some of these strategies is forthcoming. Director Paul Verhoeven of RoboCop and Total Recall fame, two films noted for their graphic violence, recently announced his plans to direct Christ the Man, an "historical rather than theological look at the life of Jesus" (Parker C4). Rather than dusting off its picket signs and printing boycott sheets, the Catholic Church should look to such a film for its challenging presentation and see it as an opportunity to strengthen respect for and protection of the image of Christ. At the same time, the Church should increase its awareness of the artistic and spiritual benefits that such a portrayal may indeed possess. By taking these steps, an equilibrium may be achieved between the Church's need for respect and the artist's right to expression, and the message of Christ may more fully reach His faithful.

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