

SACRAMENT AND FILM: FINDING THE SACRED ONSCREEN

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Sacrament and Film: Finding the Sacred Onscreen

Chapter 1: The Importance of Film in Culture and Religion

Since the invention of still pictures in the mid-nineteenth century and moving pictures in the late nineteenth century, American culture has lost some of its affinity for the printed word and now increasingly relies on images to obtain information. Today, images from television, photographs, movies, and advertisements bombard modern Americans in every city—and we allow it to pervade every aspect of our lives. Our demand for information from images has created 24-hour television news channels, weekly news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, and million dollar ad campaigns from mega-corporations like Pepsi and Nike. We demand information from images, but increasingly we demand to be entertained as well. Television and movies provide the entertainment we want. Our newest cultural obsession with reality and human reaction has produced dozens of “reality shows” on television, featuring people “just like us” ruthlessly competing for money and glory. Video games have become gradually more realistic and graphic. Computer games allow us to role-play in fantasy games or even play God. Multiplex cinemas with twenty or even thirty screens offer instant visual gratification in anything we please: drama, romance, comedy, action, horror, fantasy, even animation.

What is it about the images of a film, flickering across a huge, white screen combined with the film’s sound of voices, music, noises, and effects that produces such a deeply cathartic response among some moviegoers? When we go to the movies, are we simply experiencing and reacting to a story? Is it possible that something deeper and more divine reaching out to us? It is possible that we can experience both. More simply,

why is our society's obsessed with the movies—and what are their roles in our religious experience?

The Cinematic Experience

On a basic level, film provides us with entertainment. Millions of Americans flock to the cinema every week to see the latest action flick or sentimental love story. For a mere eight dollars, we can escape from our troubles and the world for two hours. The cinematic experience is, at its core, escapist. Through the two hours it takes to watch a film, the action on the screen never stops, and we are to believe (and encouraged to imagine) it continues even after the last credit is run and the lights come up once again. Perhaps we process this experience in comparison to our lives—they too will continue after the lights come up; the story goes on. We believe that after viewing a movie we will emerge from the experience, relaxed and renewed for the “real world.”

On the other hand, we also go to the movies to be changed. We expect certain viewpoints, ideas, emotions, and situations to be shown to us on the screen, and to some degree, we expect the actors to show us how to react to them (or not). We attend a movie to learn about a certain event or person, or to discover a story and its outcome (and subsequent moral). We want to leave the cinema enlightened and “charged” about the film and its subject, so that we might tell others the story and perhaps even take action to change something in our world.

How does the cinematic experience affect us? The French film critic André Bazin recognized the “total myth of cinema.” that is, the attempt of cinema “to replicate reality completely.”¹ Through sight and sound, as well as emotional (and sometimes even

¹ Gabler, Neal. Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998), 47.

visceral) experience, the film reel recreates reality right before us on a giant screen. The movies “[play] in our heads and [seem] to replicate our own consciousness;”² we join the film’s reality with our own and create a world of possibilities—or impossible dreams. We love movies because we think we can learn everything about life and living from them, even things we have never or will never experience: love, childbirth, murder, suicide, war, the supernatural, and more. Psychologically, film helps us determine our self-image in terms of how or what we *are* and *are not*. With the aid of film, we are able to define our human characteristics and ourselves in positive and negative terms and in terms of reality and fantasy (what is real and not real, what is possible and impossible).³

Film, Culture, and Society

Socially, film represents the “social experiences of the species,” recreates our environment, and reflects it back at us so that we can better understand the world and the common human experience.⁴ The range of human experience includes tragic (*Schindler’s List*), comic (*Dogma*), heroic (*Run Lola Run*), seemingly insignificant (*Forrest Gump*), and everything in between. Films also reinforce social norms: through film, we are told what a woman looks and acts like, what a man looks and acts like, how we react in certain situations, and the outcomes for certain types of people. Summarily, Robert K. Johnston states

... the fact that movies play an increasingly significant role in defining both our society and ourselves seems beyond dispute. Movies broaden our exposure to life and provide alternate readings of life’s meaning and

² Gabler. 50.

³ Hurley, Neil P. *Theology through Film* (New York City: Harper & Row, 1970), 10.

⁴ Hurley. 10.

significance. Values and images are formed in response to life's experiences, with movies providing the data of countless new stories.⁵

However, there is a negative side to America's love affair with film. Ever since the popularity of film exploded in the 1920s, we have supported and contributed to a culture obsessed with celebrity, fame, and sensationalism. Johnson states, and Gabler would agree, that

American culture itself [is] taking on the characteristics of a movie. Life has become show business, where we each play a role and long for our moment of celebrity...It is not politics or economics, but entertainment 'that is arguably the most pervasive, powerful, and ineluctable force of our time—a force so overwhelming that it has finally metastasized into life.'⁶

Fame is the desire (perhaps we could even say religion) of the moment, created by our obsession with actors, actresses, directors, places, and more. Often, movies are so well executed that we become completely engrossed in the lives onscreen and usually forget that these lives are fiction, and exaggerated fiction at that. Some might even argue that film (in addition to today's multi-mass-media bombardment) has impeded our visual imaginations so that we would rather see a movie than read the original novel (the film provides the visualization for the story it tells, as opposed to our imagining the places and situations of a novel). Perhaps we even imagine our favorite characters in a book not as fictional individuals but as famous actors and actresses playing those characters. Deacy claims "the movie theatre continues to function as 'a place where we are encouraged to accept the fantasies we see in front of us' as a substitute for the reality of the empirical

⁵ Johnston, Robert K. Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000), 24.

⁶ Johnston, 23. (See also Gabler, 9.)

world in which we live.”⁷ Because of the cinema’s detachment from the real world, “[f]ilm also provides a sense of otherness...because the movie experience resembles the dream state and mythmaking.”⁸ Very little that has to do with movies is “real,” yet the illusion film presents to us is that it is actual and reality.

American Christianity and the Film Industry: A Short History

With the recognition of film as a valid means of learning and inquiry, the question of film’s importance in spirituality has come to the foreground in the past 35 or so years. Prior to that, however, the relationship between the film industry and Christian churches in America was antagonistic. Regardless of whether church attendance is rising or not among the young or old, the film industry is noticeably expanding by hundreds of millions of dollars each year (the top three films of 2003 have together grossed over a billion dollars worldwide). While movies and the film industry see themselves as constantly reinventing and improving themselves to suit the demands of American culture, moviemakers (who view themselves and their projects as progressive and modern) see the conservative Church work through change slowly and, from a cultural and societal standpoint, almost painfully.

As the earliest films experimented with vision and effect, some of the very first films created were religious, such as *The Horitz Passion Play* (1897) and the *Passion Play of Oberammergau* (1898)⁹. Early twentieth century film often promoted Christian values and beliefs with reverence, despite the growing demand for films that were strictly

⁷ Deacy, Christopher. Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), 32.

⁸ Martin, Joel W. and Ostwald Jr., Conrad E., eds. Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), 155.

⁹ Incidentally, the *Passion Play of Oberammergau* was filmed in winter in New York City, but claimed to be an authentic version of the German passion play (Johnston, 32).

entertaining (and therefore not religious). However, by the end of World War I, audiences demanded sexy young starlets, dashing handsome leading men, compromising situations, monsters, gangsters, booze and anything else seemingly forbidden by the conservative Church. In the late 1920s, both Catholic and Protestant Church leaders attempted to stop young people from attending the movies because of the immorality depicted and promoted onscreen. Preaching, threats, even punishments were leveled at those caught indulging in the visual pleasures of film.¹⁰ The Hayes Codes of 1927 and 1930 (appointed by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) regulated how much “debauchery” could be shown in a film (nudity, violence, sexuality, language, anti-patriotism and even mockery of clergy were censored).¹¹ Both the Catholic and Episcopalian churches created organizations in an attempt to put an end to the immorality in film.¹² In 1933, the Catholic Church created and attempted to enforce a rating system that deemed which films were appropriate for Christians to watch (“A” for approved, “C” for condemned—note the use of religious language!).¹³ However, the film industry continued to push the envelope, and in 1966 at the request of Conservative Christian and social groups, the Motion Picture Association of America created the first version of the rating system still enforced today (G, PG, PG-13, R, X). Even today, controversy regarding decency and the rating system still rages.¹⁴

¹⁰ Johnston, 34-35.

¹¹ Johnston, 35.

¹² The Catholic organization was known as the Legion of Decency; the Episcopalian as the Episcopalian Committee on Motion Pictures (Johnston 35).

¹³ “By 1936, 91 percent of the movies that the Legion reviews were given an “A” rating, and only 13 out of 1,271 movies were labeled “C” (Johnston, 35-36).

¹⁴ The 1999 movie *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* is a cartoon aimed at high school aged boys, but was given an “R” rating, which would prevent them from seeing them without parental permission (or other means).

Since the 1960s, the Church (both Catholic and Protestant denominations) has held a wary and cautious attitude toward film—and rightly so. Although the Church has not been entirely fair to the film industry, the movies have certainly given the Church a right to act as it has. Early silent films that depicted clergy often showed them as either unassuming fools (acting with “blind faith”) or licentious, lewd, and seducers of innocent women. Critics even praised early “religious” films such as *The Ten Commandments* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* more for their famous lead actors, “realistic” special effects, and “on-location” shoots than their accurate portrayals of Biblical accounts. In time, the relationship between the film industry and the Church became static and remained distant. In today’s films, language, morality, and actions of the movie characters are, more often than not, very un-Christian. Contemporary films like *Dogma* and, more recently, *The Passion of the Christ* once again have aroused concern within the Church with regard to the film industry, and more than ever before, religion and film seem to be a hot topic.

The Question of Film and Religion

Analyzing this antagonistic relationship a step further, it is possible to conceive that American society and culture has turned film itself into a religion.¹⁵ We worship movie characters portrayed by unrealistically beautiful actors and actresses in the darkened sanctuary of the cinema. Celebrity magazines have become our Bibles, and we model our homes and lifestyles after the rich and famous. Do we—consciously or unconsciously—seek spiritual fulfillment apart from church? On the other hand, as

¹⁵ Lyden, John C. Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals (New York City: New York University Press, 2003), 3.

Johnston asks, "is the movie theater simply a poor substitute for the church?"¹⁶ Perhaps it is that we like our spiritual experiences wrapped in a neat little 120-minute package where the protagonist may die at the end, but we as the film's audience understand the significance of his or her suffering. Alternatively, perhaps our spiritual search can be revealed in something else, a glimpse of God's Ultimate Presence in *The Shawshank Redemption* or the experience of the core of humanity in *Sophie's Choice*. Is it possible to obtain the same spiritual experience in the cinema that so many of us have experienced in Christian worship? Do contemporary Christians need theology "to be pushed out of its sacred enclosures, to plug itself into other languages and forms of knowing"?¹⁷

"Seeking More:" The Possibility of Film as a Supplement to Religion

Although the mode of worship and liturgy in a church sanctuary sufficed for Christians for hundreds of years, we cannot deny that today's Christians seek more. They read books to foster faith, attend small group Bible studies, play Christian rock music on their stereos, and yes, even see films to supplement their faith life. If we as Christians believe that "God is with us at every moment and in every place,"¹⁸ then the cinema certainly has potential to be a sacred place where we encounter God (and where God encounters us as well). It is most important to remember that Christians should not use the cinema as a substitute for religion or communal worship as we practice in church (for then they would no longer be Christians but worshipers of the un-reality of film), but instead as a supplement to religious study. There are, though, religious experiences in viewing film. As Martin and Ostwald state, "a film [can] participate in the construction

¹⁶ Johnston, 21.

¹⁷ Deacy, 18.

¹⁸ Deacy, 19.

of an overarching religious sensibility and perspective on ultimate matters, a theology."¹⁹ Through film, we can learn about the choices of others (whether actual or fictional), which can contribute to one's own theology and perspective on the world. Sara Anson Vaux suggests that

...[movies] provide us with a fantasy arena where we can test situations and relationships that in ordinary life we may be too preoccupied or timid or frightened to think through; movies also provide us with safe boundaries...But most critically, they stimulate us to imagine how we can translate our own beliefs and values from the protected shelter of our places of worship out into the worlds of chance and choice.²⁰

Advocates of film as a religious supplement must be aware of the concerns of today's conservative Christians. John C. Lyden notes

Like any other aspect of culture, including every religion, popular culture is likely to have aspects with which each of us might agree and other that we would reject. We will not all agree on which aspects to accept and which to reject, but probably we would all admit that there are aspects we like as well as aspects we dislike."²¹

Accordingly, there are aspects of Christianity that we encounter in film that must be defined and questions that need to be answered. If it is feasible that we can encounter God through film, does that mean what we see in film can be sacramental? How is the church's definition *sacrament* applicable in terms of film and Christianity? Can some films be considered sacrament? Granted, this last question will be different for nearly

¹⁹ Martin and Ostwald, 13.

²⁰ Vaux, Sara Anson. *Finding Meaning at the Movies* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 20.

²¹ Lyden, 2.

every single person, but there are some films that share common themes of sacramentality. Paul Tillich stated that no one religion can engender, symbolize or point to the true nature of God, just as no film could fully reveal to us the divine.²² However, through sacrament in any form representing any religion, we can get intimations of the Ultimate.

Chapter 2: Experiencing Film: Sacrament or Symbol?

When we discuss the possible sacramentality of film, the first question we must ask is not whether film is sacramental or not, but what is sacrament? This is problematic, since various Christian denominations and theologians define sacrament differently. It is possible that there are many more sacraments in the world than those recognized by traditional Christianity. After examining some of the most prominent definitions of sacrament as defined by Christian denominations and theologians, it will be possible to decide whether film can be sacramental or not, and why.

What is Sacrament?

Christian sacraments—those instituted and utilized in the Church—can be defined as acts established by Jesus Christ in the New Testament of the Bible. These acts are understood to serve as channels to and from God and, as Ernest J. Fiedler and R. Benjamin Garrison assert, fulfill our human need to be cleansed and made whole, to have something in common with the rest of humanity, to establish community and celebration with other Christians, and to enact the divine mystery of God.²³ Christians acknowledge that the most important events in our faith lives are the ones instituted by Christ. This includes baptism, and Eucharist (Holy Communion), and others both Church-instituted

²² Tillich, Paul. *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1957). 42.

²³ Fiedler, Ernest J. and Garrison, R. Benjamin. *The Sacraments: An Experiment in Ecumenical History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 12-18.

and not. Jenson states that there is the possibility for "a large and changing number of sacraments."²⁴ The question is, where can we find these sacraments? How do we know they are sacramental?

However, there is more to this definition. A sacrament can work while we are consciously performing it, but it also can happen to us without our knowledge. Whether we understand or not that God is connecting with us in sacrament is negligible; it is the presence of God that is important. We should be open to whatever God reveals to us through sacrament as well. Sacrament is the means by which God relates to us in a way that we can understand. Sacraments, in fact, facilitate the effectiveness of the vastness of God's sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us, an event that is often too difficult to relate wholly into our lives.²⁵ Through our human faith, sacraments function for us: we have faith that God is relating with us through them, and so God does.²⁶

Christianity and Sacrament

To understand the role of sacrament in today's world, it is important to recognize how two presumably different Christian denominations—Catholicism and Lutheranism—define and utilize sacrament in practice and liturgy. It is possible that the two are not that different in their assessments of sacramental meaning and importance.

The Catholic Church institutes seven sacraments²⁷ for its members. Catholic Christians believe that the sacraments, through a person's desire to reach toward God in

²⁴ Jenson, Robert W. Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 11.

²⁵ Lee, Bernard. The Becoming of the Church: A Process Theology of the Structure of Christian Experience (New York: Paulist Press, 1974), 225.

²⁶ Baillie, Donald M. The Theology of Sacraments (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), 53.

²⁷ The Catholic Church's seven sacraments are baptism, Eucharist, reconciliation, confirmation, marriage, anointing the sick, and holy orders.

faith, place him/her in relation with Christ.²⁸ Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit dwells within the baptized and is renewed at the receiving of sacraments.²⁹ The historically traditional view of Catholicism perceives Catholics' acts of faith as gestures toward redemption, where the sacrament is the mode for inspiring these works. However, "sacraments function as strong movements of encounter with God but they are not exclusive channels of grace."³⁰ The grace of God gifts us with faith, but sacraments open up new opportunities for us to connect with God. Like other holy experiences, "sacraments are understood as part of the continuum of the graced life experience in all life."³¹ The Catholic tradition understands that God is infinite and that without sacraments, it would be difficult to have a functioning relationship with God. Sacraments are "regarded as unique but not the exclusive locus for communicating with God who is revealed in all life."³²

How does the Lutheran understanding of sacrament compare to the Catholic understanding? First, there are only two recognized sacraments—baptism and Eucharist. Lutherans believe that these sacraments are "inseparably connect with the works of Jesus" because he instituted them in the Bible.³³ Sacraments, from the Lutheran perspective, have significant eschatological (regarding the promise of eternal life after death) and pneumatological (emphasizing spiritual renewal) meaning. Notably, the two

²⁸ New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2nd ed, s. v. "sacramental theology," 467.

²⁹ New Catholic Encyclopedia, 471.

³⁰ New Catholic Encyclopedia, 473.

³¹ New Catholic Encyclopedia, 473.

³² New Catholic Encyclopedia, 473.

³³ The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church, s. v. "sacrament," 2091.

Lutheran sacraments focus on the community of Christians.³⁴ The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church defines sacrament as:

...acts of divine institution, by which, wherever they are properly performed by the prescribed use of the prescribed external elements in conjunction with the divine words of institution[;] God, being, in a manner peculiar to each Sacrament, present with the Word and the elements [offers everyone who partakes in them] forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.³⁵

How did Martin Luther's sacramental theology contribute to Lutheranism? As he understood it, sacrament was a word of promise accompanied by a sign instituted by God.³⁶ Luther acknowledged that in a Christian's relationship with God, there are realities and events in a Christian life (that are not officially deemed sacramental—such as prayer) that are attached to a promise from God (resulting in grace and the forgiveness of sins).³⁷ God's use of signs and symbols as instituted in the official sacrament is God's way of fulfilling these promises to us. Because God makes these promises to us through the language of the Bible, sacrament means nothing without the promise of the Word to motivate it. "The Word sanctifies everything," Luther wrote, "and is above the sacrament."³⁸ Luther also stressed that "the sacraments are physical acts, done *to* our bodies, and in which we *participate* through our bodies."³⁹ Whether we recognize it or

³⁴ While baptism welcomes a new Christian into the community of believers, Eucharist is a celebration of faith partaken with other believers.

³⁵ The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church, 2092.

³⁶ Althaus, Paul. The Theology of Martin Luther (trans. Robert C. Schultz; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 345.

³⁷ Althaus, 346.

³⁸ Luther, Martin. Luther's Works: Word & Sacrament II (vol. 36; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 244-45.

³⁹ Althaus, 347. (Emphasis added.)

not, God is active in every sacramental participation in our lives which results in God's gift of faith to us: "God's activity in the sacraments precedes faith, calls a [person] to faith, and establishes faith."⁴⁰ For example, when Lutheran parents baptize their infant child, it is safe to say that the infant really has no concept of faith or grace. However, through the baptism they receive the promise of God's grace and a welcome to the Christian community which will further the child's faith as they grow older. Through sacrament, God enables our faith to grow as Christians by enabling the Holy Spirit within us to take hold of our hearts and minds and push us into finding the Truth of God.

Clearly, there is little difference in defining sacrament between these two Christian factions. Both believe the sacraments are used by Christians to reach toward God, by God to establish and improve a relationship with Christians, and to renew the Holy Spirit in our lives and our community. It is simply the mode of sacrament (i.e. the seven Catholic sacraments as opposed to the Lutheran two) which differs between the two churches.

Symbol and Sacrament

In defining sacrament, the contemporary Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich suggests that they are, in effect, symbols: they point to (and participate in) something beyond themselves. It is necessary that we have sacraments to act as symbols for God, since we who are finite can never define God's true shape or mode of existence (since God is infinite). As Regis Duffy states, "a symbol in Christian experience and theology is the presence of God calling us to presence."⁴¹ Symbols for God can be found anywhere, in any context. It is important to remember, though, that symbols work two

⁴⁰ Althaus, 351. This applies to Catholicism as well.

⁴¹ Duffy, Regis. *Real Presence: Worship, Sacraments, and Commitment* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1982), 3.

ways: first, by themselves, they are significant to us as human beings, and second, they point to something beyond themselves that nothing else can explain. Tillich describes that "a symbol...opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us. All arts create a symbol for a level of reality which cannot be reached in any other way."⁴² It is important to remember that we must be careful not to allow symbols to become idols. We should not worship the symbols because they point to God, instead we should recognize that they point to God and are a mode for us in this world to understand God.

Through sacramental symbols, we recreate actions performed by Jesus Christ, such as baptism or Eucharist. By creating these sacraments and recreating the events of Jesus Christ's actions, we recognize the importance of the event for ourselves as individual believers and as a community of Christians. As individuals, the Holy Spirit moves us to inquire more deeply into faith. In our communities, the Holy Spirit motivates us to perform good works for the benefit of others, and subsequently, ourselves (this action is unselfishly motivated, however) As Duffy states, "all Christian symbols are expressions of and invitations to faith."⁴³ Experiencing sacramentality is not a spectator sport! We only receive full effectiveness of the sacrament and Holy Spirit when we participate in it.⁴⁴

Finally, participating in sacramental symbols creates a desire in us to further ourselves in sacramental participation and in a committed faith life.⁴⁵ We realize God's promise to us through sacrament, and our response is a stronger desire to be committed to

⁴² Tillich, 42.

⁴³ Duffy, 21.

⁴⁴ Duffy, 23.

⁴⁵ Duffy, 190.

a Christian life: "sacrament as symbol can help us to frame our experience in such a way as to call out from us more committed service to the Gospel."⁴⁶

Film as Sacrament or Symbol?

As sacrament is defined, can film be sacramental? One of the first requirements, according to both the Catholic and Lutheran churches, is that a sacrament is an action instituted by Jesus Christ in the Gospel. For example, Jesus Christ instituted the Eucharist with the Last Supper, requesting that the disciples and all believers "do this in remembrance of me." Second, there is often, but not always, action on the part of the participant (or believer) in hopes that God is reaching them and establishing a relationship with God as well. They understand that they will come away from the sacrament changed, either physically, emotionally or spiritually, by God. Given this definition, we can conclude that film does not fit the first criterion and may or may not fit the second and third, depending on the viewer. Yet, if we follow a much looser definition of sacrament⁴⁷, perhaps we can come to a conclusion on how film really is spiritually significant.

First, it is simple to understand that God motivates sacrament.⁴⁸ While baptism and Eucharist are among the better-recognized sacraments because they come from the Word of God (through the Bible), we cannot truly declare what certain sacraments are or are not, since true sacrament is attached to the gift of grace and empowering by the Holy Spirit from God. Yet, it is possible in every endeavor in life God might appear to us and fill us with the Holy Spirit. In a more general sense, we could say that much of what we

⁴⁶ Duffy, 26.

⁴⁷ Most sources I reviewed for this chapter included the traditional definition of sacrament, but also included a "more contemporary" definition, understanding that as times change, the modes of sacrament (and sacramental symbol) will alter as well.

⁴⁸ Also, God accommodates our human limitation with forms of sacrament that we can understand.

encounter every day is sacramental: "the sacraments in the specific sense are but concentrations of something very much more widespread, so that nothing could be in the special sense a sacrament unless everything were in a basic and general sense sacramental."⁴⁹ We also must realize that today's Christians are very different from the first century Christians. The world offers many other opportunities for God to appear to us (such as nature, music, family, and social justice, to name a few). As Fiedler and Garrison state, "sacraments and worship need to utilize objects, places, gestures, words, and actions that symbolize Christ's life, passion, and resurrection as events alive and operative and constituent of the present community."⁵⁰

While we can experience the traditional sacrament within the Church, perhaps it is also the Church's obligation to provide us with alternate means to connect with God: "if worship is the central meeting place of God, man, and community, the church is eternally faced with the responsibility of dealing with the symbols *of the day*."⁵¹ Perhaps the Church should teach that God does not only appear in the traditional sacraments but also in every minute detail of life, because God is everywhere. If God can inhabit the traditional sacraments we encounter in church, God can also prompt sacramentality in other aspects of our lives, including music, nature, family, vocation, even film. The only thing we must recognize is that it is possible for God to appear to us anywhere whenever God chooses. As Ross states,

The sacraments are, in a way, 'works of art' for the church—works that are at the same time ordinary and extraordinary, celebrating the

⁴⁹ Baillie, 42.

⁵⁰ Fiedler and Garrison, 126.

⁵¹ Fiedler and Garrison, 125 (author's emphasis).

transcendent within the immanent. Like music, the sacraments say in gesture, sound, rhythm, and word, that which cannot be said otherwise.⁵²

We can then argue that film, while it does not fit the definition of a true sacrament, can stand as a sacramental symbol—a symbol through which we encounter God and receive the Holy Spirit—through which we can be in the presence of God, even if only for moments at a time. As a symbol, it both can stand by itself as something significant in our culture and society, and it can point to something beyond itself, whether that is as simple as a story or as complex as God's participation in shaping our lives.

Therefore, it is quite possible to conceive that God, who many Christians would agree is present in nature and liturgy, would choose to show Godself through more contemporary forms of human communication. Just as God chose to reveal Godself through the language of the Bible, so today we may glimpse God through film. Just as we are not always aware of God's presence in our everyday lives, we may not always be aware of God's presence and reaching out to us through the medium of film. One form of communication that is shared by all cultures, all over the world, since the beginning of time, is storytelling. We tell stories to learn, to be entertained, and to pass on history so that future generations may know it. Just as the Egyptians used hieroglyphs, as the early Europeans wrote books, and as Christians have the Bible, so today we watch films in hopes of fulfillment, whether that is mental, emotional, or spiritual. It is just as possible to experience God through this medium as any other. In conclusion as, Baillie writes,

God works faith in our hearts. He bestows on us the gift of faith, by winning us, gaining our confidence, not forcing it. His graciousness

⁵² Ross, Susan A. Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology. (New York City: Continuum, 1998), 10.

overcomes our mistrust, His grace creates our faith, so that when we come to Him, it is really *our* faith, and we come willingly. In order to bring about this end He uses means—words, smiles, gestures, symbolic gifts, which we call sacraments...All such are ‘means of grace,’ methods employed by the graciousness of God to express and develop a gracious personal relationship between Him and us.⁵³

Chapter 3: Sacred Visions: Encountering God and Sacramentality Through Film

We have come to the understanding that while film is not sacramental according to the traditional definition as applied by the Christian church, it can stand as a sacramental symbol. Through film, we can establish a connection with God and even strengthen our relationships with God. Even if we do not realize it, God may reach out to us and fill us with the Holy Spirit, which sends us out of the cinema and into the world to help others and bring peace and love.

Identifying Sacramental Films

Naturally, it is difficult to say what films will function as sacramental symbols and for whom. For example, many modern Christians find they encounter God in a Biblically based work such as *The Passion of the Christ*, while non-Christians, atheists and agnostics might find the work to be offensive propaganda. Others see God in the movement of a story, such as in the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Still others find they encounter God in the films that portray seemingly normal people in extraordinary situations, like *Magnolia* or *American Beauty*. Therefore, it would be quite difficult for me to present three movies that I can say with certainty are sacramental. If

⁵³ Baillie, 54.

they are as such for me, they most certainly will not be for another. Likewise, what films may be sacred to the reader may have no spiritual effect on me whatsoever.

For that reason, I have chosen three films that carry themes of sacrament as observed by the Christian Church. These films feature themes of the sacraments themselves, which, when put into film, give the audience remarkable images and words that can be understood as a visual representation of specific sacrament.

Antonia's Line (1995, d. Marleen Gorris)

For Antonia and her extended family, nothing is so important as creating and maintaining a community that is open and comfortable to those that dwell within it. Returning to her home village in The Netherlands with her teenage daughter after the end of World War II, Antonia comes home to an insane—and soon dead—mother. With her hard-working daughter Danielle, Antonia works the family farm and teaches Danielle not only about country life but about village life as well. Things happen that everyone accepts (Mad Madonna, the Catholic, howls at the full moon because she cannot marry her love, the Protestant) and of which no one speaks (the mistreatment of DeeDee, a mentally retarded girl, by her father and older brothers). Antonia and her family are not obviously religious (they are never showing praying, confessing, or reading the Bible), although they attend church every week.

As the movie progresses, Danielle has a daughter of her own, Thérèse, who eventually has her own daughter, Sarah. Antonia takes in strangers as she is able to, including DeeDee, a dumb man called Looney Lips, a constantly-pregnant woman named Letta, the village's lapsed Priest, and Danielle's lover, Lara. Scenes of work are frequent, as well as scenes of the family dining in front of the large farmhouse surrounded by

playing children and various farm animals. There is a great deal of emphasis on the changing of the seasons and passing of time. Antonia shares words of wisdom, often about community or time. A theme runs deep through this film throughout the trials and triumphs of the family: time will pass, but one should do as much as one can to take care of one's neighbors. Antonia is not a selfish woman, but she considers her needs as equally as she does her family's. She shares what she has and provides an opportunity for every person she knows to succeed in this world. More than providing work and food for the needy, Antonia teaches the members of her extended family how to care for themselves and others when she is gone.

As Christians, we are members of the *community* of Christ. Whether it is weekly, monthly, or more, many Christians share in the Eucharist (*Communion*) with other Christians. We approach the Eucharist as sisters and brothers in Christ, and we leave renewed with the Holy Spirit, prepared to go out into the world to do God's work. As Christians, we are expected to care for other Christians and non-Christians, to foster and nourish the faith in others, and to spread the peace and love of God's message to all. We cannot do this on our own as individuals. We must rely on each other as Christians to help change the world. As Bryan Stone writes, "at the heart of Christian faith is the experience of the *community* and fellowship—a *communion* with those who share the same loyalties and allegiances."⁵⁴

Whether it is sharing the Eucharist, a dinner, the work of the harvest, or the Word of God, we rely on our communities—as both humans and Christians—to be places of support and encouragement. Church can be a place of support, but the world is such a large place that there are many possibilities for other places for Christians to find support.

⁵⁴ Stone, 156 (emphasis added).

Roger Ebert provides an interesting perspective to this thought in his review of *Antonia's Line*: "[Antonia and the others] are not religious in a conventional sense, but they're regular churchgoers, because the church provides a weekly gathering of the community - a spiritual version of their communal dinners."⁵⁵ The community of this extended family provides what Stone calls the "qualities of [an] authentic Christian community...confession and forgiveness, restoration and healing, joy and celebration."⁵⁶

Antonia's family is very untraditional, as far as conventional Church standards go: her daughter and granddaughter were raised without fathers, Antonia herself has a relationship with a widower ("You cannot have my hand," she tells him, "but you can have everything else"), her daughter and granddaughter are very talented and well-educated. This family shares in the qualities of love, trust, acceptance and faith in each other to the utmost, encouraging each other and praising the best in each person. *Antonia's Line* reflects a truth about human life: none of us—no matter how much we refuse to believe it—are perfect. We are, however, forgivable. God forgives us, others forgive us, and we forgive others and ourselves, in time. We accept our imperfection and the imperfections of others as human beings. As Christians and humans, the most important bonds we create on Earth are with each other, and caring for those relationships in a functional community is of the utmost importance.

***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975, d. Miloš Forman)**

Based on Ken Kesey's book of the same name, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a brilliant work of both comedy and tragedy, full of its triumphant moments and crushing defeats. Jack Nicholson portrays Randle P. McMurphy, a prison inmate who

⁵⁵ Ebert, Roger. "Antonia's Line," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 February 1996.

<http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1996/02/1020467.html> (21 March 2004).

⁵⁶ Stone, 160.

fakes mental instability to get away from prison into what he thinks is a luxurious mental ward of a state hospital. McMurphy soon discovers, however, that life on the ward is as unenjoyable as life in prison. The men are ruled by the schedule of daily life, which in turn is presided over by the notoriously passive-aggressive Nurse Ratched. Nurse Ratched is superficially kind to the men, but ultimately her attitude towards them is condescending and pitying. McMurphy realizes that while he is stuck on the ward for the time being, he may as well do what he can to help the men be treated fairly. He does not talk down to the men on the ward, and instead encourages them to think for themselves and even talk back to Nurse Ratched and ultimately deny her authority.

On multiple occasions, McMurphy insists Nurse Ratched treat the patients less like children and more like men. During one therapy meeting, McMurphy proposes the television be turned on so the men can watch the World Series. Nurse Ratched declares that will not happen; a break in the consistency of the ward's schedule will upset many of the patients. She agrees to McMurphy's proposed vote and while McMurphy desperately tries to get the catatonics and "chronics" to raise their hands, he loses the vote with a tie of 9-9. As soon as Nurse Ratched declares the vote closed, a deaf and dumb patient (the Chief) raises his hand, but it is too late. Nurse Ratched refuses to turn on the television. Instead, McMurphy begins to create the game in his head, announcing the play-by-play to the men on the ward, yelling and whooping, encouraging them to do the same.

After one night where McMurphy manages to slip in two women and lots of booze, Nurse Ratched—although McMurphy has stripped her of her dignity, literally throwing her nurse's cap to the ground—conquers the men on the ward, enforcing strict disciplinary action for the men's antics. The next we see of McMurphy is his

transformed body, catatonic and shuffling along after a lobotomy. The Chief comes to his bedside in the middle of the night, telling him, "I'm not going to let you down. I wouldn't leave you here this way. You're coming with me... Let's go." He smothers McMurphy's body under a pillow, but we realize McMurphy's soul is free. The Chief manages to escape as well, throwing a marble sink through a window. The last scene of the movie is the Chief's escape over the hill, away from the institution.

Though many writers focus on Forman's portrayal of McMurphy as a Christ figure,⁵⁷ there is also a theme of healing in this film. Focusing on the Catholic sacrament of healing the sick,⁵⁸ the viewer can learn from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* that healing does not simply mean fixing the problem with medicine, but with a whole healing that repairs body, mind, and spirit.

McMurphy arrives in a world dominated by one woman, the keeper of keys, pills, schedules, everything that rules the lives of the men on the ward (with the presumed goal of healing them). Of Nurse Ratched's position in the ward, Forman writes, "she believes deeply that what she is doing is right. And that is where the real drama begins... That's much more frightening than if you have an evil person who knows he's doing well."⁵⁹ McMurphy quickly realizes that Nurse Ratched's method of keeping the ward may be orderly, but it is draining the lifeblood from the men that reside there. McMurphy's way of changing things is not slow, but instead almost immediate, wild, unruly, and in abundance of "liberating laughter."⁶⁰ McMurphy wants to show the men how and what it

⁵⁷ Robert K. Johnston, Bryan P. Stone, and John R. May are a few I have encountered.

⁵⁸ Although healing the sick is a sacrament instituted by the Catholic tradition, it is something encouraged by most Christian traditions, including Lutheranism.

⁵⁹ Johnston, 143.

⁶⁰ May, John R. Nourishing Faith Through Fiction: Reflections of the Apostles' Creed in Literature and Film (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 71.

is to live, even in captivity. He dares to rebel against Nurse Ratched's authority, and, as Stone states, "creates an alternate reality for the men by convincing them that their situation need not merely be put up with...He sees them not as insane, but as victims of their own passive acceptance of life within institutional walls."⁶¹ Early in the film, we learn that many of the non-chronic patients (including The Chief) committed themselves into the hospital. McMurphy balks at this, saying to them, "What do you think you are, for Chrissake, crazy or somethin'? Well you're not! You're not! You're no crazier than the average asshole out walkin' around on the streets and that's it." In a way, McMurphy's refusal to acknowledge the men's sanity (or lack thereof) is not harmful but helpful. By treating them as he would any man he might meet on the street, he "liberates his fellow patients by steadily summoning them to freedom and dignity. [He] is an unlikely redeemer who calls the men to be fully human, to become subjects rather than objects of their own destinies."⁶² Even though McMurphy's body is defeated in the end (we see through The Chief's escape that his soul goes free), at least one man on the ward can regain his freedom. McMurphy's "defiance of the powers that be turns out to be a far more liberating form of therapy than any treatment they have received at the hospital."⁶³

This struggle for McMurphy to free the minds and spirits of the men, if not their bodies (although he is able to coerce The Chief into playing basketball instead of constantly pushing his broom around), is one that is rare in today's society. We tend to overmedicate persons we label "incurable," and spiritual counseling is rare for mental illness. How can we expect to make a person wholly "better," however, if we fix only one aspect of their brokenness? We learn from Nurse Ratched how *not* to treat the sick:

⁶¹ Stone, 105-6.

⁶² Stone, 105.

⁶³ Stone, 107.

medicate and condescend, without mental, physical or spiritual affirmation. We learn from McMurphy, however, how to free the spirit: embrace the mind, the body and the spirit. Sacramental theology emphasizes the unity between body and spirit through the action of sacrament, as well as the encounter between humans and God. If, as I have argued in my discussion of *Antonia's Line*, we need to keep our communion and community with each other as close and healthy as possible, we must embrace the sick and work towards restoring them as part of our community.

***Dead Man Walking* (1995, d. Tim Robbins)**

Dead Man Walking is based on the experiences of Sister Helen Prejean, a Louisiana nun who became a spiritual counselor and friend to death row inmates who needed someone to listen and understand them. The 1995 movie based on her experiences stars Susan Sarandon as Sister Helen and Sean Penn as Matthew Poncelet, a death row inmate guilty of the rape of a girl and the murder of both her and her boyfriend. The film is gritty, dark, shocking, and yet deep, compassionate and strengthening at the same time.

While Sister Helen is working in a poor, inner-city neighborhood in New Orleans teaching adult literacy, she receives a letter from Poncelet, already in prison, asking her to come visit. Upon her first visit to the prison, she is warned by the prison chaplain that all the men on death row are con men—they will do or say anything to get her on their side. Sister Helen is strong and stands up for herself against the chaplain; the viewer sees for the first time that she possesses a sort of quiet tenacity. She will not be mistaken for someone weak or incapable in any situation. While her first visits with Poncelet are shaky at best (he even tries to hit on her, but she quickly shoots him down), they both

learn he has a long way to go as a human and a Christian before his execution. Throughout the movie, Sister Helen struggles between her strengthening friendship with Poncelet and her relationships with the parents of the murdered teens. The parents cannot understand why Sister Helen is seemingly taking Poncelet's side. While they angrily accuse her of choosing the victimizer over the victim, calling Poncelet an animal, Sister Helen quietly responds, "I'm just trying to follow the example of Jesus who said that every person is worth more than their worst act." By this point, Sister Helen "is intent on finding the humanity in Matthew Poncelet, however distorted and hidden that might be."⁶⁴ Although Poncelet loses his clemency trial, Sister Helen is determined to remain with him until his death; she will not give up on his reconciliation with God. At one point, he looks at her and smugly states, "Me and God. We got everything squared away. I know Jesus died on the cross for me and I know he's going to be there to take care of me when I appear before God on the judgment day." There is a pause, and Sister Helen replies, "Matt, redemption isn't some kind of free admission ticket that you get because Jesus paid the price. You've got to participate in your own redemption. You've got some work to do." She works with him until the day of his execution, and in his final hours he understands the need for forgiveness from God, from society, from Sister Helen, and from within himself. As they walk together to the execution room,

...at one point, Poncelet can barely stand up...Sister Helen kneels next to him, telling him to look into her face as 'they do this thing,' so that the last face he sees is 'a face of love.' Sister Helen is for him the incarnation of strength, compassion, hope, and love. 'Christ is here,' she says.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Stone, 170

⁶⁵ Stone, 171.

Sister Helen Prejean is an exemplary model for guidance and forgiveness. Were we in her place, many of us would not have had the strength or perseverance to go forward with such love and hope for reconciliation. Today, many Christian denominations have turned the act of forgiveness and reconciliation with God into a mechanical act of faith: we receive God's forgiveness simply because we say we believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When we put this belief into the context of Poncelet's quote about being "squared away with God," we see how contrary this is to true faith. *Dead Man Walking* is not only a movie about asking for and giving forgiveness, it shows us that we must *experience* forgiveness in our relationship first with God, then with ourselves and others. As Poncelet eventually recognizes and takes responsibility for his wrongs, so we too must take responsibility for our actions, no matter how great or minor the violations are. Owning up to our sins is the first step in asking for forgiveness. As we are granted forgiveness by God, our communities, or our families, experiencing forgiveness not only involves hearing the words of forgiveness but it also affects and changes our souls, minds, and bodies.⁶⁶ As we are forgiven, we recognize that we must make a concerted effort improve ourselves and our world.

Through viewing *Dead Man Walking*, we can also experience the circumstance of ordinary people acting in extraordinary circumstances. However we believe they react to these events—on their own or with God's help—presents us with another example of how remarkable God's representatives can be on Earth.

The Possibilities of Sacramental Symbol in Film

Often we experience sacramental moments during a film without ever recognizing it. All the sacramental things we experience in our lives we see on a movie screen:

⁶⁶ Stone, 172-73.

loving relationships, extraordinary gifts and situations, beautiful places, even perhaps miracles. While watching a movie, we can take these things for granted in our lives and onscreen. Still, because God reaches to us through these sacramental symbols, we are changed. So many different movies can change us in so many different ways. I invite the reader to reflect on the sacramental films in your life.

Chapter Four: Out of the Cinema and into the World

We attend a movie because we want, basically, to hear and see a story. Ken Gire states that “movies are actually closer in form to dreams than they are anything else. These celluloid dreams can be a means of entertainment, a means of enlightenment, and, in some cases, a means of epiphany.”⁶⁷ At the very least, we want to be entertained. At the most, we want to be changed. We want to be transformed by the story, the characters, by God acting through the film to us.

One of my favorite films, *Little Women* (the 1994 version starring Susan Sarandon and Winona Ryder), illustrates something I find extraordinary about the cinematic experience. Although I adore the characters of the film (I always considered myself to have an aspect of each sister), the breathtaking cinematography and art direction, and the beautiful musical score, I am left after each viewing feeling like my soul is glowing. Why? I have come to realize that it is not the characters that affect me as much as the relationships between them. Those “ties that bind,” *those* are where *I* see something sacred. As movies are stories about people and how they interact with each other, I believe that is what “gets” to the core of most of our cinematic experiences.

We can never predict when God will appear to us, affect us, or alter our lives. It is not too much to ask that today’s Christians remain open to the possibility of

⁶⁷ Gire, 42.

experiencing God in new places, places that traditionally have been ignored or spurned by the Christian Church. Gire notes,

A movie theater is an unlikely place to hear God. Some might say the unlikeliest of places. But if it's true, what David says in Psalm 139, that there's nowhere we can flee from God's presence; if it's true that even if we make our bed in Sheol, He is there with us; if it's true that light and dark are alike to Him; then it follows that no matter how distant the heart or how dark the theater, even there God can find us, touch us, speak to us.⁶⁸

When Film Becomes a Substitute for Religion

When director/producer Mel Gibson released his film *The Passion of the Christ*, a movie claiming to accurately depict the final hours of Jesus Christ according to the Gospels, in March 2004, it sold the most pre-release tickets ever and has now become the highest-grossing independent film of all time. Some viewers attended out of curiosity as to how Gibson would portray Christ's crucifixion, but most viewers could be categorized as faithful Christians wanting to see how the last hours of Jesus Christ were lived (and how he died), as realistically as Gibson could portray them.

In a conversation with a Christian friend of hers, my roommate (also a Christian) was asked if she was interested in attending the film. She expressed mild interest, but did not feel an overwhelming urge to see it, as friends who had already viewed the film warned that the violence of the film nearly overshadowed the story. Her friend, appalled, replied, "but it is your Christian duty to see this film!" He implied that the viewing of the

⁶⁸ Gire. 11

movie would bring Christians back to the understanding of the importance of the death of Christ.

As Christians, we must also exercise care when regarding the importance of film. Although cinema can open us to new experiences and events, it "is a double-edged sword. It helps us see what we might not otherwise have seen, but it also shapes what and how we see."⁶⁹ There is a fine line between learning about a vision, or a certain viewpoint that one or more people might agree upon, and actually believing it is the truth. We must remember that sacrament is defined as such because it contains the promise in the Word of God that we will receive grace through the sacramental experience. Movies are *not* sacrament. They are, however, sacramental symbols. They can symbolize the presence of God and the grace of God's love and action in our lives.

Although director Martin Scorsese included a disclaimer at the beginning of his film *The Last Temptation of Christ* stating that the film is nothing more than his vision and version of the life of Christ, many Christians were outraged at the way at which Jesus Christ was portrayed in the film. They did not take into consideration the fact that *Last Temptation* is Scorsese's interpretation of the novel The Last Temptation of Christ, by Nikos Kazantzakis, itself a fictional interpretation of the life of Christ. While film can be a powerful medium that provides insight into and can help to strengthen our faith lives, there can be a point where we take film too seriously. We must remember as viewers and critics of film that *all* films are interpretations of stories, whether the stories are true or not. No film is completely representative of the event it depicts, because it is *not* the actual event. Film is merely a re-creation that makes us interested in and slightly more knowledgeable about a certain story or event.

⁶⁹ Stone, 6.

Although movies such as *Schindler's List* and *Fiddler on the Roof* stretch across very different genres, they both tell stories about Jewish life. However, is it fair for a Christian to state that all they know about Judaism they learned from watching these two movies? Absolutely not; just as it is inaccurate to watch *Patton*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Pearl Harbor* and claim to know all about World War II. These films can enlighten us to the events of the times, or to the ways of certain people, but one cannot know completely about an experience solely through film. In this way, it is nearly impossible for a Christian to "reconnect" with his or her faith solely by viewing *The Passion of the Christ*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, or *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Biblical study, prayer, worship with other Christians, participation in the Sacraments of the Church and leading a Christ-like life are all requirements for being an active Christian. In our society today we have the opportunity to include such media as music, social justice and film to support our faith lives.

Today's Film and Christian Ethics

What happens when we step out of the world of the cinema, where good guys win and the family is always reunited, into the real world? Can we simply forget the experience we've just had, or does it always stay with us, even if only in our subconscious? How do we take what we've learned or experienced in the cinema and apply it to our real world?

As Stone writes, "learning to live and think as Christians in our time requires learning to engage media and culture as Christians."⁷⁰ Today's Christians simply cannot shy away from movies that may be challenging to their faith (*Dogma*) or jarring (*2001: A*

⁷⁰ Stone. 7.

Space Odyssey). Part of living a Christian existence is being open to new insights with the faith that God is always with us, guiding us away from temptation to make the right decisions. That includes trying out parts of culture we may not be used to, such as certain films, art, or other cultural experiences. We need to practice theology actively in our lives, not just as a member of a denomination or through Biblical study. We cannot simply view a movie and think about how it does or does not reflect our faith lives.

Stone asserts that

...the relationship between film and theology cannot be solely a relationship in which theology merely uses film to illustrate or advance its own ideas. We must also become more responsible as Christians for engaging film theologically—for attending to its tacit faith claims and critiquing its implicit pretense of mirroring reality. The relationship between Christian theology and popular film is, in short, an interfaith dialogue.⁷¹

Through film, we can learn about what it means to be human, and even more, what it means to be a Christian, living and acting in today's world, questioning the perspectives given to us by the media (including film) and attempting to search for the truth. We "must...ask about the way in which Hollywood film conventions teach us to understand and relate to difference in society—the outsider, the foreigner, the gay or the minority."⁷² Above any other medium in popular culture today, we learn how to laugh and cry at our situations. We learn how fun it can be to be a criminal (*Ocean's Eleven*) or how disappointing perfection is (*Pleasantville*). Though we may never experience

⁷¹ Stone, 7.

⁷² Stone, 6-7.

racism, sexism, poverty, disability or devastating loss in our live, we can learn what it's like from the actors in the movies.

In his Reflections on the Movies, Ken Gire muses that

...whenever we all go to the movies, we go with the anticipation of losing ourselves in someone else's story. And in losing ourselves, there is the hope that we might in some way or another find ourselves. Find something of who we are. And something of who, by the grace of God, we might become. I think it is hope, even if it is a subconscious hope, that keeps us coming back to the movies.⁷³

This thought strikes a more personal note with me. When I go to a movie, I become fixated with the story. I am engulfed by the story so that I am a part of the story. I have a deep desire to learn more about what I value, what I despise, what scares me and what I rejoice in (as many other moviegoers often experience in the cinema as well).

Sacraments for Every Day and Every Way

The writer Andre Dubus speaks of sacraments in his essay of the same title. He states that "a sacrament is physical, and within it is God's love...[and it] is an outward sign of God's love."⁷⁴ Yet Dubus notes that there are many moments in his life that he considers sacramental; making his daughters' sandwiches is one. He finds sacraments everywhere, stating "it is limiting to believe that sacraments only occur in churches...I am receiving sacraments with each breath."⁷⁵ Whether we know it or not, we are breathing sacrament, we are walking upon it, we are speaking and eating it, we are

⁷³ Gire, Ken. Reflections on the Movies: Hearing God in the Unlikeliest of Places. (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2000), 42.

⁷⁴ Dubus, Andre. "Sacraments." Why I am Still a Catholic, K. and M. Ryan, eds. (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 79.

⁷⁵ Dubus, 79-80.

sharing it with our friends and family. When we experience some films, we are receiving sacramentality; it is an outward sign of God's love in that it is a gift from God meant to both entertain us and make us look at our lives and humanity as God does. God has given us—humankind—many ways of sharing stories with each other: through storytelling, novels, poetry, songs, plays, and film. Utilizing these gifts to communicate with each other is God's way of reaching us. When we see the sacredness in these relationships, we experience the unfailing sacrament of God's action in our lives.

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