



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

*from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study*

#38 - February 2014

## A Best Practice: Movies at the Parish

A growing practice in many parishes is the opportunity to view and discuss current popular movies, relating them to everyday life, the life of our faith.

The January 25, 2013 issue of *The New York Times* contains an article/interview with Sr. Rose Pacatte, SFP, well-known for her movie reviews and practical ideas for engaging with today's media.

In discussing one of Sundance's foreign-language selections, *There Will Come a Day*, Sr. Rose addresses the question of which came first for the writer/director, Giorgio Diritti: the religious theme or the narrative line. "He doesn't start with the idea of writing a religious story. He starts with the idea that many people suffer. ... This is the quandary Christian filmmakers have. They feel so committed to the lesson that they struggle to have the story come out. That's why you wind up with what I call these 'Sunday school movies.' I'm interested in movies for the rest of the week."

As we explore "movie times" in various parishes (in this issue) we'll discover the vast variety of movies used:

- deeply and well-made "Sunday school movies" and
- "movies for the rest of the week"

... all of which have the potential to touch our spirituality, to connect our faith with our everyday life.



Jeanne C. Branch, Director of Adult Faith Formation at St. John the Evangelist Parish, Waynesboro, VA, describes a summer offering in this parish of about 800 families.

*Mass & a Movie* is offered on alternating Saturday evenings, with a potluck supper after the 5 PM parish liturgy; the parish providing drinks, a themed dessert if appropriate to the movie, and all the popcorn you can eat.

The movies vary from

- animated ones such as *The Book of Kells* and *Wall-E* to
- foreign films such as *Departures* and *Letters to Fr. Jacob* and
- classics such as *Babette's Feast* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*

There is a general theme to each summer's films, such as "The Power of Faith" which featured:

- *The Way*
- *Letters to Fr. Jacob*
- *Rango*
- *Shall We Dance*
- *Babette's Feast*

Each summer the schedule includes some family films, some adult films, at least one well-known film, a documentary, and some lesser known films.

The film is viewed after the meal and fellowship. There is usually a host for each evening, and though Jeanne provides training for them, she acknowledges that some are more successful in facilitating discussions than others. Jeanne remarked: "I have tried focused discussion questions, and also more of the 'break open the movie' type questions. The range of discussions has varied from almost none to people needing encouragement to wrap things up.

Even when there has not been much deep discussion, people comment that they keep thinking during the week. I find that it makes it easier for people to connect their faith and beliefs to the surrounding culture when we view a familiar movie from a faith perspective.

The families with children generally want to leave right away, so I frequently have a take-home or car ride question for them to consider."

Jeanne also reflected upon attendance: "Some movies have a turn-out of 30-40; other times, it's only 18-20, but the neat thing is that it attracts some

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

people who have not participated in anything else and helps them to start feeling connected to the parish. One of the things people comment on is that this gives singles a chance to come to something and get to know some people in the parish. The communal aspect of movie viewing is also liked.

We are a parish known for great food which is also usually noted! When we did *Babette's Feast*, a parishioner who owns a restaurant, was the host and many of us had our first taste of caviar, since she had several people trying to imitate the food in the movie. Luckily, no one was successful in finding a turtle for turtle soup! I'm glad that Pope Francis lists it as his favorite movie. That evening led to a deep discussion of Eucharist and meal and sacrifice."

The publicity that is done for *Mass & a Movie* is very helpful for parishioners, since it gives a synopsis, an enticement and age appropriateness, such as:

- "Letters to Father Jacob (2009, not rated) - A lean and focused Finnish movie on grace, forgiveness, the dark night of the soul, and redemption. Fr. Jacob, an elderly blind priest, depends on his newly pardoned housekeeper to read him the letters requesting his ministry of intercessory prayer. Suitable for middle school through adults."
- "Babette's Feast (G, 1987, a classic) – A literate and lovely-to-look-at film that compels us to meditate upon the needs of the flesh and the gifts of the spirit. Foodies love its celebration of food! Although rated G, children may be bored, but viewers gave it a 93% like rating on "[Rotten Tomatoes](#)" movie viewers' website!"

Jeanne also notes two important realities:

- "No matter what we pick, someone will comment that we 'should have shown....' During late April and May, we ask for suggestions from parishioners and for hosts. The movie suggestions are accommodated as much as possible.
- We have a church video license to show these movies....thou shalt not break copyright laws!"



Val Keller, Pastoral Assistant for Faith Formation, St. Benedict Parish, Seattle, WA, tells us that three years ago their pastor at the time (Fr. Steve Sallis) had an idea for one film on a summer evening which blossomed into a series for that July as well as subsequent Julys.

The 2011 films were: *Vision*; *A Man for All Seasons*; *Bakhita: From Slave to Saint*; and *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*.

Since some of the 2012 films for *Thursdays with Movies* were challenging and heavy (*Of Gods and Men*; *Edith Stein: The Seventh Chapter*; *Roses in December* and *Franz Jägerstätter: A Man of Conscience*, for 2013 they looked at some uplifting films which still portray struggle and life decisions of faith: *Water*; *Babette's Feast*; *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *Romero*.

All the movies had a discussion guide that came with the film or one available online from a resource associated with the film or written for discussion with a class or group. When there were other articles, letters, writings, prayers associated with the person or film, copies of those were available as well as books and pictures/icons about the person(s).

The 7:00 – 9:30 pm schedule allowed time for treats and refreshments (sign-up sheet) after the film, followed by about 30 minutes of discussion.

Val shared that

- Many people said they appreciated the films; they gave them a broader perspective on a person or groups' lives than just reading a paragraph about the person or saint.
- Given many of the stories, people commented that they didn't know if they would have had the strength to do what some of the people did or endured.
- Some participants had the experience of looking at the artistic and symbolic images in movies that they never would have thought of or seen if they had watched on their own.
- Our religious signs and symbols took on new significance in many people's lives through the eyes and mind of the film viewers.

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED



Deacon Norb Wethington shares another type of experience that was hosted by St. Joseph Parish, Fremont, Ohio.

They offered a six-week series entitled: *Jesus According to Hollywood*. A different presenter for each of the evenings took two events from Scriptural accounts of the life of Jesus and illustrated how Hollywood portrayed these events.

For instance:

- The martyrdom of John the Baptist from *Jesus of Nazareth* and the trial of Jesus from *The Passion of the Christ*
- The Nativity from the opening credits of *Ben Hur*
- Family scenes with the young Jesus from *Jesus of Nazareth*
- The Temptation in the Desert from *The Last Temptation of Christ*
- The Cleansing of the Temple from *Jesus Christ Superstar*
- The Resurrection from *Jesus Christ Superstar* with scenes from *Godspell*

It has been said that any good love song  
reveals God's love for us,  
any good music is incarnational,  
and the best stories reveal the resurrection.

At first glance, these four films  
might seem to have nothing in common.  
And yet, with eyes of faith,  
the ordinary becomes extraordinary,  
the common uncommon, and the scarred sacred.

- from the advertising  
flyer for *Thursdays with Movies* at St. Benedict Parish,  
Seattle, WA



Maureen Normann (parishioner) and Kimberly Peaks (Parish Administrative Manager) tell of diverse ways movie times have been used at Holy Comforter-Saint Cyprian Parish in Washington, DC.

They have hosted movie nights for couples and/or families which usually have shown Christian-based movies that include discussion kits. Many of the movies come from Provident Films, Sherwood Films, Christian Movies.com, Family Christian Book Stores and a number of other internet sites that feature movie licenses and study guides for the movies.

They plan movie nights for adults with a separate movie for the youth under a certain age in another location in the building. These are usually scheduled for Saturday nights at 7 pm with free popcorn, drinks, candy and other snacks. After the movie, a 45-minute discussion using the study guide is led by one of the clergy or facilitator.

These movie nights are usually planned with a specific theme, for example:

- For Father's Day: *Courageous*
- For the marriage preparation group: *Fireproof*
- For teens: *October Baby* during respect life month

Recently the Young Adult Ministry sponsored a movie time specifically for young adults: *The Grace Card*. This took place after the Sunday 11:00 am Mass, including lunch and time for discussion.

Kimberly reminds us of a couple points to consider:

- "When you purchase a movie license for the movies they usually include the movie kit with posters, tickets, planning and study guides. Some movies such as *Fireproof* have a bible study that can be used throughout the year."
- "We had non-parishioners attend because they saw the advertisement (which is a plus!). We have received comments that we should have more movie nights. With the selection of quality Christian movies, it is an easy way to evangelize and attract prospective parishioners while teaching the faith. The movies have

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

interesting, relevant plots and always some sort of lesson or teaching moment.”



Helen Moon, St. Kateri Tekakwitha Parish, Schenectady, NY, reminds us of another reality that provides a help for movies and discussions: “DVD's are great in that you can stop them at a certain point and then start at that point when you go to begin again.”

The usual method at St. Kateri Tekakwitha Parish has been to show only parts of a long movie. The facilitator, of course, needs to preview the entire movie and share a brief summary with the participants. (Often the brief summary is provided also as a hand-out.)

- With the movie, *Scarlett and the Black*, the last 40 minutes, a powerful ending, was shown.
- For *Gandhi* the ending, in which Gandhi offers a way of redemption to a Hindu man who comes to him when he is fasting for peace among the Hindus and Muslims, was used.

In designing the movie evenings, Helen has always begun and ended them with prayer, a prayer relating to the theme of the movie.



Holy Spirit Parish in Highland, MI began hosting *Parish Movie Nights* in the summer of 2012 as an alternative to Vacation Bible School. Two of the resources they used, which contain plans for everything needed for a movie night (including decorations, food ideas and recipes, etc.), are:

- *More Than a Movie*. Group Publishing, Inc., 2005
- *G-Rated: Dinner and a Movie*. Group Publishing, 2008

Instead of a full meal, Jillian Peck, Director of Religious Education, relates that they began by offering snacks that were appropriate to the movie. “The more movies we offered, we realized that plain old popcorn was preferred (although clean-up takes a bit longer). Our Women’s Club

had a popcorn cart; we order the popcorn kits, including oil and seasoning, online.”

All parishioners were invited to the evenings free of charge. Upon entry into the social hall, everyone placed their name on a “movie ticket.” At intermission, a name was drawn and that person takes the movie home at the end of the evening. (Most of the movies are purchased through Amazon, usually used, but occasionally new.)

One movie that was used, *Evan Almighty*, was not included in either book (*mentioned in the last column*), so Jillian designed the evening. After watching the first half of the movie, the intermission featured a discussion and activity:

There is a scene in the movie where Evan and God talk about changing the world. Evan says, “But I wouldn’t even know where to begin!” God replies, “Well, I hear that a lot. People want to change the world – don’t know how to begin. You want to know how to change the world, son? One act of random kindness at a time.”

ARK = Acts of Random Kindness

What did Jesus say about acts of kindness? The Gospel from Matthew 25: 31-40 was read and discussed.

Each family/household made simple Acts of Random Kindness arks with construction paper and stickers (purchased from [Oriental Trading Company](http://OrientalTradingCompany.com)).



A retired priest from a suburban Chicago parish relates his experience: “I meet with a committee of two and propose to them a theme and list of movies we can see together. I give a brief description of our theme to our group and then give them handouts on each movie.

We are constricted by time since many recent movies we viewed have run over two hours. That has left us with little time for discussion. In the handouts I pass out I always include reviews by a variety of reviewers. I

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

have always included a review by the late Roger Ebert and one from the *NY Times*. I also look for Catholic reviews in *America* and *Commonweal* magazines.

Then I make up a list of questions for thought and consideration. I first of all ask "Do you feel this movie was worth seeing or not? Why or Why not." Our recent overall theme was coming through hardships and suffering into rising to new life and hope (a paschal theme). We applied this question to recent movies that had been nominated for Oscars for Best Movie.

Practically everyone appreciated the movies - even *Zero Dark Thirty* - which I previously had found parts difficult to watch (the torture scenes). I warned them ahead of time, but after seeing it no one said it was too hard to watch, which surprised me. I may be wrong, but I now believe that watching a tough movie together with trusted companions gives viewers a certain "security." I think even "tough movies" remain "movies" when they touch the bone of real life.

I try not to enforce my interpretations of the movies and apply them to our group's lives. I make some suggestions but I feel they are the ones to do that for themselves. I want them to feel free to say what they feel and think.

I believe the reviews I hand out help them understand better what the movie-makers are about and what they are trying to do. I sometimes remind our group it is up to them to decide whether the movie was good for them or not. Of course we are members of a faith community, and faith enters into the discussions. I want them to have a respect for the movie-makers, but also for their own reactions and evaluations. Movies are about life and the meaning of life. And their views are as important as the movie-makers. But we should all have respect for the ingenuity and courage of responsible movie makers who put their views into movies.

I think it sometimes helps to pass out popcorn and chocolate bars, but that seems to help all life."



Dick Russell shares the more-than-ten-year *Movies for a Sunday Afternoon* at St. Joseph Parish, Garden City, NY.

Three or four movies are shown each year; this past year they featured *Of Gods and Men*; *The Fourth Wise Man*; *The Cardinal* and *October Baby*. Movies from past years have included *The Way*; *The Fugitive* (the 1947 film based on Graham Greene's novel); *Babette's Feast*; *The Rite*; *Romero*; *Life is Beautiful*; *Dead Man Walking*; *A Man for All Seasons*; *Bella*; *Juno*; *East of Eden*; *Doubt*; *Luther* and *The Jeweler's Shop*.

Light refreshments (juice, water, munchies) are served and a brief discussion follows the movie. The discussion attempts to focus on the religious, spiritual and moral issues raised or messages sought to be conveyed by the film. Over the years, the people who attend (especially the "regulars") have become more comfortable sharing their views and insights.

Participation varies; there have been times over the years when it didn't seem fruitful to continue the program, but then there was a positive response which engendered new enthusiasm.

Dick reflects that, even though in many instances people could see the movie on TV or a DVD in the comfort of their living room, they have a desire to see a good movie in a communal setting.



Joan Vlaun, OP from St. John the Evangelist, Albany, NY offers a *Summer Film Festival*, usually for seven weeks, one day each week at 1:00 and 7:00 PM. Summer 2013 showed: *John XXIII: Pope of Peace*; *Monsieur Vincent*; *The Cross and the Switchblade*; *Padre Pio*; *The Staircase* and *God's Doorkeeper: St. Andre of Montreal*.

A *First Thursday* program (also at 1:00 and 7:00 PM) is offered during the year, from October through May. This program alternates books and films. One year a Biblical theme used Jacob, the story of Ruth, King David and Jeremiah. Often films produced for the History Channel which deal with the Bible or different religions have been used.

Joan shares her experience of showing *John XXIII: Pope of Peace*. "Since it was 200 minutes I used the natural break in the film to show it on two consecutive Tuesdays. This was the largest attendance ever.

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

People were very moved, many in tears at the end. We had a lively discussion and many were amazed at his life prior to his election as pope.

They found it outstanding, beautifully filmed and were in awe at the acting. The day before the second half of the movie was June 3rd, the anniversary of Pope John XXIII's death.

Some have already asked to borrow it to see it again with spouses or family who were not able to be there. One woman who had been blessed by him in Rome asked for the address to order a copy for herself and shared what her experience had been."



*Peter and Paul.*

Sacred Heart Parish in Dearborn, MI hosts **Parish Movie Nights**, usually about twice a year. The movies usually focus on family so that families can attend together. A few of the movies that have been used are *The Ultimate Gift*; *Mighty Macs*; *The Nativity Story* and

*Peter and Paul*.

Julie Wieleba-Milkie comments on the discussion questions: "Some of the movies we've used are Fox Family Movies; they have on their website questions to use. The *Peter and Paul* movie set had discussion questions included. The discussion questions are usually ones that families can talk about together and, depending on how long the movie is, some are answered together as a group, with the rest used as take-home."

## Why are "Movie Times" within parish settings effective?

Several people – participants and leaders/facilitators - have shared some of their thoughts:

- I am able to see movies that are not shown in a regular theater.
- Because of the choice of films, I have been moved by the courage and steadfastness to the faith by the lives of these people depicted.
- Light bulbs went off; I realized things I had never thought about before.
- Films that I saw as pure entertainment, I now see how they're connected to faith and life.

- Movies have a universal appeal. People who usually don't come to a more structured learning opportunity feel very comfortable at "movie times."
- It's easy, fun, relaxing; no pressure for those attending.
- Feed them and they will come.

**Some movies to consider using** (in addition to those already mentioned by the various parishes):

- *Agnes of God*
- *As it is in Heaven*
- *Beauty and the Beast*
- *Big Fish*
- *Billy Elliott*
- *The Blind Side*
- *Bruce Almighty*
- *The Butler*
- *Chariots of Fire*
- *Chocolat*
- *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe; Prince Caspian; The Voyage of the Dawn Treader; The Silver Chair*
- *Click*
- *Courageous*
- *Dead Poets Society*
- *Departures*
- *Despicable Me*
- *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*
- *The End of the Affair*
- *Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story*
- *The Family Man*
- *Flatliners*
- *Freedom Writers*
- *Gifted Hands*
- *Gravity*
- *Harry Potter Series*

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

- *The Help*
- *Hotel Rwanda*
- *The Hurricane*
- *Invictus*
- *It's a Wonderful Life*
- *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*
- *Jesus of Montreal*
- *The Kite Runner*
- *The Last Days*
- *Les Miserables*
- *The Life of Pi*
- *Life is Beautiful*
- *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*
- *Matrix*
- *Millions*
- *The Mission*
- *Molokai: The Story of Father Damien*
- *Monsieur Lazhar*
- *Mr. Holland's Opus*
- *Mystic River*
- *On the Waterfront*
- *Pay It Forward*
- *The Princess Caribou*
- *Reconciliation*
- *Remember the Titans*
- *Restless Heart*
- *Saving Grace*
- *Saving Private Ryan*
- *Schindler's List*
- *Seven Days in Utopia*
- *Seven Pounds*
- *Silver Linings Playbook*
- *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*
- *Sophie's Choice*
- *Soul Surfer*

- *Spitfire Grill*
- *Therese*
- *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- *Tuesdays with Morrie*
- *Turtles Can Fly*
- *The Visitor*
- *We Were Soldiers*
- *Whale Rider*
- *What Masie Knew*
- *Where God Left His Shoes*
- *12 Years a Slave*
- 42

## Some Resources for More Movies:

- [Secular Movies with Spirituality](#)
- [Vatican's List of Best Films](#)
- [Favorite Movies](#)
  - Olivia and Allan Morris, from St. Leo Parish, Etobicoke, Ontario, Canada, have this section on the parish website which continually updates information and clips from various films.

They share their approach: “We keep a lookout for Christian, family-friendly movies. YouTube subscriptions to Hallmark, Faith Flix, Christian Cinema, etc. keep us up to date. We look more for movies with Christian values rather than doctrine. There are several movies dealing with ethical issues which would be interesting for group discussions: some of Clint Eastwood's films (*Million Dollar Baby*; *Gran Torino*) or *My Sister's Keeper*. With some audiences it might be good to watch movies that deal with other Christian or world religions (e.g. *Luther*; *Gandhi*; *In God's Name*). Knowledge of our neighbor leads to understanding and community.”

## Some Resources for Movie Reviews:

Many movies have their own websites which provide background and overviews. Major newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, carry helpful movie reviews. In addition, it is very easy to find other sites, many of them

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

written from a Christian and value-oriented vision, which offer information and discussion questions that could be used in adult sessions or family discussions.

- [Catholic News Service Movie Reviews](#)
- [Top 100 Catholic Movies](#)
- [Decent Films Guide](#)
  
- [America Magazine Film Reviews](#)
- [Reel Faith: Movie Reviews through a Catholic Lens](#)
- [Movie Reviews from American Catholic](#)
  
- [Reel Faith - 100 Words and Discussion Starters](#)
- [Good News Stepping Stones: Movie Reviews](#)
- [Reel Faith: The Message in the Movie](#)
  
- [Spiritual Popcorn](#)
- [Hollywood Jesus: Pop Culture from a Spiritual Point of View](#)
- [Spirituality & Practice: Films Homepage](#)
  
- [Sister Rose at the Movies](#)
- [My Movies \(Sr. Rose Pacatte\)](#)
- [Sister Rose Goes To The Movies](#)
- [Sr. Rose Pacatte in the NCR](#)

## A few books which are resources for exploring movies

- *Movies that Matter: Reading Film through the Lens of Faith* by Richard Leonard, SJ (Loyola Press, 2006)
  
- [Chick Flicks \(1 and 2\)](#) (Group Publishing)
  
- *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith* by Catherine M. Barzotti and Robert K. Johnston (Baker Books, 2004)
  
- *Lights, Camera, Faith: A Movie Lover's Guide to Scripture – A Movie Lectionary* (Cycles A, B, and C) by Peter Malone and Sr. Rose Pacatte (Pauline Media, 2010)

- *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies* by Roy M. Anker (Wm. B. Eerdmann's Publishing, 2004)
  
- *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* by William D. Romanowski (Brazos Press, 2007)
  
- *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* by Robert K. Johnston (Baker Academic, 2006)
  
- *Faith and Film: A Guidebook for Leaders* by Edward N. McNulty (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010)
  
- *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by Craig Detweiler (Baker Academic, 2008)
  
- *Praying the Movies (I and II): Daily Meditations from Classic Films* by Edward N. McNulty (Geneva Press, 2001 and 2004)



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Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found at:

- <http://www.ecatechist.com> Click on e-books for: *40 Tips: Getting Started in Adult Faith Formation.*
  
- [www.pastoralplanning.com](http://www.pastoralplanning.com) Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation.*