

THEOLOGY OF THE BODY AT THE MOVIES

Includes bonus
reflections on
Inside Out and *Captain
America: Civil War* by
John Paul West

Essays by Christopher West
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INTRODUCTION

Everyone familiar with my courses, lectures, books, and blog posts knows that I'm a movie enthusiast. Next to music, they're my favorite art form. There is just no more powerful way to tell a story, it seems to me, than through the visual medium of a well-crafted, artfully produced film.

We are wired for stories. We *need* them, in fact, to understand who we are, where we come from, and where we're headed. And this is why even *secular* movies can become the occasion of a *sacred* experience. As Saint John Paul II wrote, "Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience."¹

Over the years I've written a great deal about how certain movies create this bridge. Now, for the first time, and in response to numerous requests, I've collected those writings in one place.

Pope Benedict XVI maintained that each one of us should take the time "to follow with our minds and our hearts a tale, a story in which to immerse ourselves, in a certain sense 'to lose ourselves' to find ourselves subsequently enriched." I pray that this little collection of writings on movies helps you enter into that enrichment.

— *Christopher West*

1 *Letter to Artists* 10.



CHRISTIAN MOVIEGOERS: PLEASE DON'T SETTLE FOR BAD ART!

I was deeply troubled by an email I recently received. A “faith-based” movie company was celebrating what makes their audience stand out from regular moviegoers as follows:

The faith-based moviegoer doesn't buy one ticket ... they buy multiple tickets and will likely see the movie more than once. Of the first 5 faith-based films of 2014, an average of 21.4% people saw it more than once. They also believe in the mission of faith-based films. While they aren't as concerned with the quality of the film, the talent hired, the story, etc., if the theme of the film aligns with their mission or beliefs, they will support it.

Whoa! Hold on! Is the fact that there's a whole population of people who don't give a darn about the quality of the movie, the skill of the actors, or the basics of good storytelling something to be celebrated!? “*Hey, isn't this great? Our target audience will support our movies and buy lots of tickets even if we make bad movies!!*”

No! This is not great! This is appalling!

I certainly respect Christians who are trying to make a difference in Hollywood. But honestly, I'd prefer a well-told human story in a “secular” movie any day over a poorly told story in a “Christian” movie. If I could put a word to what is lacking in the typical “faith-based” film, it's the one thing that, more than anything else, typically awakens the heart to the mysteries of faith: *beauty*. Faith-based movies are rarely beautiful.

I'D PREFER A WELL-TOLD HUMAN STORY IN A "SECULAR" MOVIE ANY DAY OVER A POORLY TOLD STORY IN A "CHRISTIAN" MOVIE.

An “essential function of genuine beauty,” as Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “is that it ... draws [man] out of himself, wrenches him away from ... being content with the humdrum – it even makes him suffer, piercing him like a dart, but in so doing it ‘reawakens’ him, opening afresh the eyes of his heart and mind, giving him wings, carrying him aloft” (Address, Nov. 21, 2009).

As Christians, we should never celebrate “being content with the humdrum.” We should, rather, celebrate true beauty (wherever it is found!) and allow it to carry us aloft.

(Originally posted on CorProject.com Blog, written April 30, 2015.)



THE TRUMAN SHOW: MAN IS A SEEKER OF THE TRUTH

Pope Benedict XVI writes that *eros* “is somehow rooted in man’s very nature; Adam is a seeker, who ‘abandons his mother and father’ in order to find woman.”¹ Have you ever seen the movie *The Truman Show*? It’s not only worth watching, it’s worth studying very closely. It offers an amazingly insightful look at “Adam’s” nature as a seeker – a seeker of truth, and the internal and external obstacles we all encounter on the journey. The main character (Tru-man) abandons everything in his search for the truth. Just as Benedict says, Truman “‘abandons his mother and father’ in order to find woman.” In this case, her name is Sylvia.

Truman, the first baby to be legally adopted by a corporation, is raised in an enormous movie studio, a false enclosed island called Seahaven. There is a fake town with a fake bay, fake weather, a fake sun and moon, etc.. Everyone in this false world is an actor, except Truman. Although, “Nothing is fake,” of course, as Truman’s “best friend” Marlon once insisted, “it’s merely controlled.” Five thousand cameras hidden throughout the town capture Truman’s every move, allowing the rest of the world to watch the ultimate “reality TV show” broadcast live twenty-four hours a day.

An interviewer once asked the creator of the show, a sly power-hungry anti-christ figure named Christof (Christ-off), why Truman has never realized the false nature of his world. Christof responded, “We accept the reality of the world with which we’re presented, it’s as simple as that.” But the “reality” with which Truman was presented didn’t

1 *God Is Love* 11.

always add up. In one of the opening scenes of the movie, Truman sees a stage light fall from the sky and crash on the street. Puzzled, he gets in his car and drives to work only to have the radio explain away his questions: “News flash just in...an aircraft in trouble began shedding parts as it flew over Seahaven.”

EROS, RIGHTLY DIRECTED, IS A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH. IT’S WHAT COMPELS A PERSON TO SEEK THE TRUTH, AND CHRISTOF KNEW IT.

Truman’s questions, hopes, dreams, and sense of adventure were always squashed. When, as a schoolboy, he excitedly expresses a desire to be an explorer, his teacher pulls down a map and responds, “You’re too late, there’s nothing left to explore.” As an adult, he longs to go to Fiji, but whenever his adventurous spirit presents itself, either his wife distracts him with an invitation to the bedroom or Marlon suddenly shows up with a six-pack. Here we see examples of what Peter Kreeft explains in his book *How to Win the Culture War*. Satan’s essential task, he says, “is not just to block the finding but to block the seeking.... Eventually seekers find. So it is a vastly more efficient expenditure of energy to attack the seeking” (HW, pp 69, 72). As Christof knows, numbing people with booze and sex is a great way to do it.

But the human being’s desire for truth is ultimately indomitable. Even Christof admits, “If his was more than just a vague ambition, if he was absolutely determined to discover the truth, there’s no way we could prevent him.” Truman’s yearning for truth, indeed, was more than just a vague ambition. And the thing that kept him searching was the college memory of a woman who loved him. Sylvia was an actor with a

script to follow like everyone else. Against Christof's wishes, she came to love Truman. Love, if it is true, speaks truth. Knowing Christof's troopers would immediately sweep her away, take her off the show, and out of Truman's life forever, she quickly tried to explain to Truman the false nature of his enclosed world and that the real world was watching him. Her stage "father" immediately shows up, pushes her into his car and tells Truman he'll never see her again. "We're moving to Fiji," he insists. Sylvia breaks through the commotion of his lies, locks eyes with Truman, and says, "Come and find me!"

THROUGHOUT TRUMAN'S LIFE CHRISTOF HAD TO SQUELCH AND/OR DISORIENT TRUMAN'S YEARNINGS (EROS) IN ORDER TO KEEP HIM ON THE FAKE ISLAND. CHRISTOF'S BIGGEST WEAPON WAS FEAR.

Eros, rightly directed, is a force to be reckoned with. It's what compels a person to seek the truth, and Christof knew it. As we've already seen, throughout Truman's life Christof had to squelch and/or disorient Truman's yearnings (*eros*) in order to keep him on the fake island. Christof's biggest weapon was fear. When Truman was a boy, Christof staged the death of his father, having Truman witness him drown in a mock sailing accident on the bay. Ever since, Truman experienced a crippling hydrophobia. As an adult, he knew the answers to his questions could only come by sailing headlong into his deepest fear. Somehow he knew he would discover "the truth" on the other side of the bay. So he courageously set sail. At one point we catch a glimpse of the name of the boat: "Santa Maria."

Christof sends a storm certain that he'll turn back in fear.

Truman, fighting to keep afloat, now realizes that some mysterious force is actively seeking to thwart him. He ties himself to the boat and, with his body cruciform, cries out, “*Is that the best you can do!? You’re gonna have to kill me!*” The message is clear: we must prefer death over ceasing our quest; we must set our hand to the plow and never look back (see Lk 9:62); only then are we capable of finding the truth.

Christof rages when he sees Truman’s determination. In a last-ditch, power-mad attempt to stop him, he sends the mother of all waves to capsize the boat. Truman symbolically dies. Then rises. The storm has ceased. The waters have calmed. The sun comes out from behind the clouds. The boat up-rights itself. Truman raises his tattered sail and sails on. Moments later, he crashes into the wall of the studio and stares the truth in the face.

WE MUST PREFER DEATH OVER CEASING OUR QUEST; WE MUST SET OUR HAND TO THE PLOW AND NEVER LOOK BACK (SEE LK 9:62); ONLY THEN ARE WE CAPABLE OF FINDING THE TRUTH.

In this poignant scene, Truman, overwhelmed with emotion, reaches out cautiously and curiously to touch the wall. Realizing *everything* behind him was a lie, realizing that his whole life had been a deception, he pounds the wall and collapses in tears. A few moments later he discovers a door marked “Exit” (“exodus” comes to mind) and pushes it open. Then Truman hears Christof’s booming voice over the loudspeaker:

Truman: Who are you?

Christof: I am the creator... of a television show....

Truman: Then who am I?

Christof: You're the star.

Truman: Was nothing real?

Christof: You were real.... Listen to me, Truman. There's no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you. The same lies, the same deceit – but in my world, you have nothing to fear. I know you better than you know yourself.

Truman: *You never had a camera in my head!*

Christof: You're afraid, that's why you can't leave. I've been watching you your whole life.... You can't leave, Truman.

Sylvia [watching on TV]: Please, God! You can do it....

Christof: You belong here with me.

Truman weighs his options. Everything behind him is false, to be sure, but it's familiar. It's the only world he's known. Everything through that door is real, to be sure, but it's totally unknown. Truman takes his final bow and walks through the door. Sylvia, who has been waiting in the wings, rejoices and runs to greet him.

Eros “is somehow rooted in man's very nature; Adam is a seeker...” “And I tell you,” Christ assures us, “seek, and you will find” (Lk 11:9). Strap yourself to the ship. Face your deepest fears. Follow *eros* to the depths. And you will discover the truth, “and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:32).

(Excerpted from The Love that Satisfies, Christopher West, Ascension Press, 2006.)



APOCALYPTO: VIOLENCE AND HOPE

Mel Gibson's graphically violent movie *Apocalypto* is generating a lot of criticism in the media. *USA Today* asks, "How can Gibson disgust us? Let us count the ways: There's a face chewed off by a panther, a spear impaling a man's skull, a chest ripped open by a blunt arrowhead and a head spurting blood as if a spigot has been turned on."

Having seen the movie for myself, I can tell you that's not the half of it. What could Mel possibly be trying to say? Is he merely a blood-crazed maniac as the media would have us believe? Before I share my thoughts, I need to put my immediate reaction to the film in context.

For the last month or so, with my wife caring for our newborn son, I've been managing both our busy home and my busy office. I've been dividing lots of 18-hour days between helping our older kids with their school work, laundry, grocery shopping, preparing meals, getting ready for a course I'll soon be teaching, and trying to meet my publisher's deadline for a new book I'm writing.

I try sincerely to practice what I preach about embracing the sacrifices that come with living a Catholic marriage. But I'm a fallen man. I entertain the same questions that everyone else does – especially at 4 a.m. when little Isaac can't seem to understand how desperate I am for sleep. That's when I wonder, *Are all these sacrifices really worth it?* And I'll pray, *Dear God, can this pleeeeeease be the last time we go through this new baby craziness?*

It was in this state of mind that I went with some friends to see what one reviewer dubbed "Mesoamerican Rambo." To be honest, I

was hoping a night out with the guys would offer a little “escape” from the pressures of life with a newborn. I came out of that theater not only renewed in confidence that every sacrifice I make for my wife and children is well worth it. I came out of that theater wanting to have another baby right away. *Bring it on!*

MEL, HIMSELF, SAYS THE MOVIE IS ABOUT “THE SPARK OF LIFE THAT EXISTS EVEN IN A CULTURE OF DEATH.” THAT’S PRECISELY WHAT I TOOK AWAY FROM IT.

Fertility, I think, is the interpretive key of the film. That’s what this small tribal village valued most. The sexual boast among the men was not how many women they’d bedded, but how many children they’d fathered. Of the numerous reviews I read, not a single one grasped this basic point. The common sentiment is bafflement and the common accusation, even from movie critics within the Church, is that if Gibson is trying to offer a message of hope in the midst of cultural decline, “that’s not at all clear.”

Maybe I was smokin’ something, but it was crystal clear to me. Mel, himself, says the movie is about “the spark of life that exists even in a culture of death.” That’s precisely what I took away from it. This movie – not despite its graphic violence, but in and through it – offers us a gripping visual allegory for understanding what spouses are up against if they are going to take God’s plan for marriage seriously.

I’m not gung-ho about seeing hearts ripped from people’s chests, heads cut off, or people eaten by jaguars. However, if Gibson, as an artist, was trying to depict what the spiritual battle might actually *look like*, one could argue that he may not have gone far enough. The devil is no red cartoon character with a pitchfork. He’s a hideous demon who

prowls around like a ravenous lion (or, shall we say jaguar?) looking for people to devour (see 1 Pt 5:8). He wants our heads, our hearts, and – perhaps most of all – *our fertility*. He’s after our children (see Rev 12).

From the beginning, the devil’s enmity has been aimed directly at *matri-mony*, which means, “the call to motherhood” (see Gen 3:15). This was the raging battle that Jaguar Paw, the main character of *Apocalypto*, found himself at the center of. With unflagging determination, he overcame insurmountable challenges in order to save his wife, his son, and their – by the end of the film – newborn baby from certain doom.

That baby was the *life* asserting itself in the face of so much *death*. That baby was the light shining in the darkness and, thanks to Jaguar Paw’s valor, the darkness did not overcome it (see Jn 1:5). *That’s* what I want to fight for in life. And *that’s* why I came out of the theater recharged to embrace the challenge of being a husband and father. Thanks, Mel. I needed that.

(Written for Christopher West’s Body Language syndicated column for Catholic press, Dec. 22, 2006.)



CHILDREN OF MEN: CONSEQUENCES OF STERILE SEX

Movies, like all forms of art, reveal something of the human soul. They can be a kind of confession. Our sins, our fears, our inner contradictions, our worst nightmares – all the kinds of things that people don’t talk about in “polite” conversation – often find an outlet, consciously or unconsciously, on the big screen.

A new movie called *Children of Men* seems to offer just such a “confession.” It taps into the inevitable psychological disturbance that stems from our culture’s widespread disregard for new life and the seemingly omnipresent preference for sterilized sex. *Having sex: nothing better – having babies: nothing worse*. Doesn’t this pretty much sum up the way the world thinks? The schizophrenia inherent in such a blatant bucking of reality is bound to cause major brain spasms. And these major brain spasms can turn into a major motion picture like this one.

“In twenty years, women are infertile. No children. No future. No hope. But all that can change in a heartbeat.” That’s the caption that appears above a small human life pictured in-utero on the promotional poster for *Children of Men*. The poster alone is an amazingly powerful pro-life message from the mainstream entertainment industry.

In a recent interview, Clive Owen, who plays the movie’s reluctant hero Theo, observed: “The film is looking at the way we’re heading and saying, ‘We should be careful.’” We should be careful to examine what children give the world and why so many people prefer to avoid them. We should be careful to examine what we value. We should be careful to consider what is at stake when we prefer sterilized sex to the God-given, family-oriented, baby-making kind. Could it be the future of civilization?

In one of the more chilling scenes of the film, Theo and another woman find themselves in a long-abandoned elementary school. The building is in shambles. The playground is overgrown. Only slowly does it dawn on the viewer – the school is falling apart because there are no children in school, and there are no children in school because *there are no children!* In the midst of this bleakness, the woman laments to Theo, “It’s very odd what happens in the world without children’s voices.”

MOVIES, LIKE ALL FORMS OF ART, REVEAL SOMETHING OF THE HUMAN SOUL. THEY CAN BE A KIND OF CONFESSION. OUR SINS, OUR FEARS, OUR INNER CONTRADICTIONS, OUR WORST NIGHTMARES ... OFTEN FIND AN OUTLET, CONSCIOUSLY OR UNCONSCIOUSLY, ON THE BIG SCREEN.

Odd – and horrific. The entire world has gone berserk. Governments have collapsed. Anarchy reigns. Terrorists rule. Humanity’s only hope is revealed when a young African woman named Kee is discovered to be pregnant. Having never seen a pregnant woman before, she had no reference for what was happening within her. But, as she says, she “just knew” there was new life inside.

When Michael Caine’s character meets Kee he proclaims, “Your baby is the miracle the whole world has been waiting for.” The messianic tones are unmistakable. (By the way, *Children of Men* was released in the big city markets on Christmas day. Coincidence?) In the midst of a dark and despairing picture, the birth of Kee’s child seemed to fill the theater with hope. One could almost sense a collective sigh of relief.

Still, one leaves the movie with a lot of unanswered questions. As director Alfonso Cuarón said, “I didn’t want to give any answers.

I wanted to force the audience to explore what they think is really happening [in our world] right now, bringing out not only the social responsibility but the individual's responsibility.... I wanted to explore the fading sense of hope in humanity today," Cuarón said. "The child serves as a message of hope and infertility shows the little respect we have for human life right now." Cuarón then concluded, "I believe that children are the only hope for humanity, their sense of innocence, their sense of faith...."

This message comes through beautifully when Kee's crying newborn stops the fighting in the streets. Hardened soldiers, many of whom would never have seen or heard a crying baby, fall to their knees in adoration and amazement. One of them blesses himself with the sign of the cross. History has changed "in a heartbeat." And Hollywood has given us something critically important to think about.

(Written for Body Language syndicated column, Jan. 27, 2007.)



SPIDER-MAN 2 AND AUTHENTIC FREEDOM

I had the typical idea of freedom as a teenager: freedom meant doing whatever *I* wanted to do without anyone telling me otherwise. So, I thought I was free when I tossed off the “oppressive shackles” of my Catholic upbringing in order to indulge my lusts. I’ll never forget when I realized how un-free I was. At one point, having been bothered by a conscience I couldn’t seem to suffocate, my high school girlfriend and I committed to giving up sex. I only lasted a few days. Freedom? No – that’s called bondage; that’s called addiction. I wasn’t able to say no. I was confusing freedom with license.

Speaking to audiences around the world, I like to ask women the following question, and I always invite the men to pay close attention to their answer. I ask the women to raise their hands if they would like to be in a relationship with a man who cannot say no to his hormones. Never has a hand gone up. Women intuit (more readily than men, it seems, which is why I can’t flip the question around to the men) that if we can’t say no to our desires, our yes means nothing. If we can’t say no, we’re not free, and if we’re not free, we’re not able to love. Sex in such a situation is merely akin to animals in heat.

Freedom, therefore, is not liberty to indulge one’s compulsions. That’s *license*. True freedom is liberation from the compulsion to indulge. Freedom is not liberty *to* sin. That’s *license*. True freedom is liberation *from* sin. Only to the degree that we are free from the domination of libido are we able truly to become a “gift” to another person, are we able truly to love. *That’s* why no woman wants to be in a relationship with a man who can’t control his hormones: she knows

such a man isn't free to love her. When it comes to sex, such a man can only behave like an animal, or worse, like a monster.

NO WOMAN WANTS TO BE IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH A MAN WHO CAN'T CONTROL HIS HORMONES: SHE KNOWS SUCH A MAN ISN'T FREE TO LOVE HER.

Doctor Octopus from *Spider-Man 2* comes to mind. In this fantastical morality tale, he is the picture of what happens when we abuse our freedom and lose control of our passions: all hell breaks loose. And the first to suffer when Dr. Octavius morphs into the monster “Doc Ock” is his wife. Earlier in the movie he had shared his heartfelt love for her with Peter Parker. Now, lured by the prospect of having “the power of the sun in the palm of his hand,” he has thrown caution to the wind during an experiment with nuclear fusion and the mechanical arms used in his experiment have taken control of him. Amidst the mayhem, his wife is the first to die.

Eventually, Doc Ock's unbridled passions send humanity hurling towards the precipice on a train with no breaks. Only Spider-Man – here sacrificing himself cruciform – can save the day. In the end, however, Doc Ock himself must regain control of his passions to prevent humanity from being destroyed. The noble Dr. Octavius returns when he demands from the mechanical arms that have enslaved him: “You listen to *me* now.” As he sacrifices himself to save others, his final words crown this story of self-mastery lost and self-mastery regained: “I will not die a monster.”

The lesson learned in *Spider-Man 2* – a powerful confirmation of Christian teaching – is that being dominated by our passions leads

to self-destruction and destruction of others. Only by gaining mastery of the powerful forces within us that vie for dominance can we discover the truth that sets us free to love.

(Excerpted from Fill These Hearts, Christopher West, Image Books, 2011.)



LESSONS FROM *SPIDER-MAN 3*

I took my two older boys to see *Spider-Man 3* this past weekend. Watching all that jam-packed action had the same effect on them as would a 2-liter bottle of Coke. After their “sugar-high” subsided and they could actually speak, we had some great father-son chats about the movie’s many moral lessons.

I’ve been milking the moral lessons from *Spider-Man 2* for almost three years now. Doc Ock, the eight-armed supervillain from that installment, was an image of the passions gone wild. When our passions are out of control, humanity – as the movie memorably demonstrated – is on a train bound for destruction. Only Spider-Man, here a Christ-figure sacrificing himself in cruciform, can save us.

Now with the release of Spidey 3, I’ve got lots of new material to draw from with my kids. It’s a multi-layered morality tale. One of the main questions this movie addresses is *what do we do with the hurt we feel when other people cause us pain?* “Revenge,” Aunt May tells Peter, “is like a poison. Before you know it, it can turn you into something ugly.” And it does. When the man who murdered Peter’s uncle escapes from prison, Peter chooses revenge and Spidey’s alter ego emerges, overtaken by black-alien-parasitic goo. These nasty symbiotes, Peter learns from his college professor, bind to their host, and “when they bind, they can be hard to unbind.” Uh-huh.

It is very rare to see lust portrayed as something evil in a Hollywood movie. But here, Peter Parker’s lusty prance down main street is a clear indication that he is no longer “your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man.” His respect for women has gone out the window. Peter only

wises up when he sees how he has wounded his beloved Mary Jane. “I hurt her, Aunt May. I don’t know what to do.” “You start by doing the hardest thing,” she says. “You forgive yourself.”

Peter, in a fit of merciless rage, had already told a fellow photographer who had cheated him out of a job at the *Daily Bugle*, “You want forgiveness? Get religion.” It was a sign of things to come. Where does Peter go to do battle with that diabolic goop that had overtaken him? To a church – a Catholic church. The cross atop the spire offers Spidey – and the audience – hope. In a grand image of what battling with sin often feels like, Parker breaks free from his oppression with the help of the victorious tones of the church bell. In the next scene, we see Peter washed clean in a (baptismal) shower.

**ONE OF THE MAIN QUESTIONS THIS MOVIE ADDRESSES IS
WHAT DO WE DO WITH THE HURT WE FEEL WHEN OTHER
PEOPLE CAUSE US PAIN?**

From then on, Peter learns how to forgive himself – and others. For three movies now we’ve been feeling Peter’s rage toward his uncle’s murderer. [If you don’t want to hear the ending of the movie, stop reading now]. At the end of this installment, having tried unsuccessfully to avenge his uncle’s death earlier in the movie, Peter faces his uncle’s killer. The killer tries to excuse himself, “I had no choice,” he insists. Peter calmly replies, “We always have a choice.” Then, as the murderer confesses what happened that fateful night, Peter shows compassion and utters those liberating words, “I forgive you.”

The movie ends with this bit of wisdom: “Whatever comes our way, whatever battle, we always have a choice. It’s our choices

that make us who we are, and we can always choose what's right." When others have hurt us, we can always choose forgiveness. As the *Catechism* teaches, "It is not in our power not to feel or to forget on offense; but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession" (CCC 2843).

In its own way, this is the message of *Spider-Man 3*: hurt can be transformed into something positive. Forgiveness is the only path that brings true resolution to our pain. The alternative is to be possessed by the black-parasitic goo of bitterness and revenge. It's our choice.

(Written for Body Language syndicated column, May 11, 2007.)



I SEE YOU: FROM AUGUSTINE TO AVATAR

When *Avatar* recently became the top-grossing movie of all time, I thought I should see what all the hype was about. Reluctantly, I went. And I was pleasantly surprised.

Yes, I agree with much of what has been said about its unoriginal plot (*Dances with Wolves* in space). And there's certainly plenty to criticize from a theological point of view (besides the overt eco-religion it espouses, the plot itself rests on a dangerous body-soul dualism that imagines one's "consciousness" can be transferred to another body).

Still, I think there is much to like about this film. Beyond its breathtaking visuals and awe-inspiring special effects (it's as much a game-changer as *Star Wars* was in its day), I was especially taken in by the three simple words with which the Na'vi people greet one another: *I see you*. As the movie explains, it means more than seeing the other physically with your eyes. It means seeing *into* the other, understanding the other, embracing the other. It means seeing the other person's heart, the other person's person.

And here James Cameron, the movie's writer and director, may well be drawing directly from St. Augustine (in the film, Sigourney Weaver's character is named Grace Augustine – hmmm). It was the Catholic "Doctor of Grace" who said that the deepest desire of the human heart is to *see* another and *be seen* by that other's loving look (see *Sermon* 69, c. 2, 3).

This yearning to see and be seen, like the beauty of the distant planet Pandora itself, harkens back to Eden, to the original way of "seeing" upon which John Paul II reflected in his *Theology of the Body*

(for more on how *Avatar* points to Eden, see Bill Donaghy's excellent article on *catholicexchange.com*). As the late pope expressed it, the first man and the woman “*see each other more fully and clearly* than through the sense of sight itself.” They see each other with an “interior gaze” (see TOB 13:1) – a gaze that sees “into” the other, creating a profound bond of peace and intimacy (or shall we say “in-to-me-see”?).

An “interior gaze” is precisely what the Na’vi express when they say, “I see you.” And *that*, I believe, is one of the appeals of *Avatar*: it calls us to a different way of seeing one another, and the world around us. Unfortunately, *Avatar*’s green agenda pushes the limits of honoring creation over the edge into a kind of nature worship, as if creation itself were a goddess. But isn’t this error simply the twisting of a truth? What is the truth that “nature worship” distorts?

ONE OF THE APPEALS OF AVATAR (IS) IT CALLS US TO A DIFFERENT WAY OF SEEING ONE ANOTHER, AND THE WORLD AROUND US.

As I was pondering this question, I was reminded of a remarkable statement of St. Louis de Montfort in *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*. There he writes of how St. Denis was so taken by the “wondrous charms” and “incomparable beauty” of the Blessed Virgin that “he would have taken her for a goddess . . . had not his well-grounded faith taught him otherwise.”¹

I’m speculating here, but I wonder if it just might be that some of the goddess worship of various cultures throughout history is a universal sense of the mystery of Mary, or even a kind of Marian encounter –

1 *True Devotion* 49.

but they mistake her “incomparable beauty” for a goddess because they don’t know the true faith. And perhaps rather than dismissing such goddess worshipers as “pagans” we should show such people the same compassion that St. Paul showed the Athenians with their famous altar “To an Unknown God.” Instead of dismissing them, Paul yearned to tell them who this unknown God really was (see Acts 17:22-23).

In this same spirit, shouldn’t we say to all the “earth-goddess” worshipers of history: “Let me tell you the name of this mysterious and beautiful feminine presence you feel. She is *not* divine, she is one of us. But she is so beautiful, and we are indeed tempted to mistake her for a goddess, because she has been *divinized* by God. And this is a testimony of what the true God wants to do with each and every one of us (see *Catechism* 460). Do not worship her! But *do* let her beauty awaken the hope in you of participating in the divine life which is the source of her beauty.”

In this way, rather than condemning those misguided by nature worship and eco-religion, we would be lovingly leading them to true worship. And at the same time, we’d be saying, “I see you.”

(Written for Body Language syndicated column, Feb. 26, 2010.)



THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION: THE PRICE OF HOPE

“Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free.” It’s the tagline for one of my favorite movies of all time – *The Shawshank Redemption*.

I first saw it in the theater in 1994. I remember telling all my friends they *had* to see it, and dragging some of them with me for my second, third, fourth, and fifth viewings. All these years later, I think I’ve seen it over twenty times. As entertainment, no one wants to sit through a prison movie replete with brutal beatings, sickening injustices, and not so subtle hints at gang rape. But, as an allegory that unfolds the power of hope to keep a man alive through the worst that life can dish out, it’s brilliant.

Three characters – Andy, Red, and Brooks – represent different approaches to the shackles, burdens, and injustices of life. While Andy has been sentenced to two life-terms at Shawshank State Prison for a double murder he didn’t commit, he never lets the corrupt system crush his hope of freedom. Brooks, on the other hand, has lost even the desire for freedom. Having been incarcerated for fifty years, he’s become “institutionalized” – so accustomed to prison walls that “life on the outside” is a threat. Red is the teetering character. He sees something in Andy’s optimism that intrigues and attracts him, but he also leans in Brooks’ direction.

“These walls are funny,” Red reflects. “First you hate them. Then you get used to them. Enough time passes, and you get so you depend on them ... They send you here for life and that’s exactly what they take. The part that counts anyway.”

Brooks had become so institutionalized that, after having served his sentence, he ended up hanging himself in his halfway house. In this way, Brooks shows us that one can remain imprisoned even when he's free, while Andy shows us that one can remain free even while imprisoned. What will Red's fate be?

One of my favorite scenes – not only in this movie, but in any film ever – is when Andy, knowing full well it will cost him time in solitary confinement, locks himself in the warden's office and plays Mozart over the PA system, for everyone in the prison to hear. Hardened criminals stop in their tracks, pierced by beauty. Andy reclines in bliss at the warden's desk. And Red observes that, touched by beauty, “for the briefest of moments ... every last man in Shawshank felt free.”

AS AN ALLEGORY THAT UNFOLDS THE POWER OF HOPE TO KEEP A MAN ALIVE THROUGH THE WORST THAT LIFE CAN DISH OUT, *THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION* IS BRILLIANT.

Enraged, the warden yells at Andy through the glass door to turn it off. Andy motions as if to follow the order, then pauses briefly to weigh a decision. Knowing full well he'll get even more time in the hole for what he's about to do, he looks the warden straight in the eye ... and turns up the volume.

I *love* that holy defiance and his willingness to suffer greatly for the sake of beauty!

When Andy returns to the dining hall after doing his time, one of his buddies asks if his little stunt was worth two weeks in the hole. Andy says that the memory of Mozart kept him company the whole time. “That's the beauty of music,” he says, “they can't get *that* from you.”

But his buddies don't understand. "Haven't you ever felt that way about music?" he asks. Red responds that he played a mean harmonica when he was younger, but it didn't make sense to keep it up when he came to prison. Andy insists: "Here's where it makes the *most* sense. You need it so you don't forget."

Red: Forget?

Andy: Forget that, that there are places in the world that aren't made out of stone ... that there's somethin' inside that they can't get to, that they can't touch, it's yours ...

Red: What are you talkin-bout?

Andy: (Pausing and peering in Red's eyes) Hope ...

Red: (Befuddled) Hope? Let me tell you somethin' my friend – hope is a *dangerous* thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It's got no use on the inside. You better get used to that idea.

Andy: Like Brooks did?

[Spoiler alert: you're about to learn how the movie ends.] Later in the story, Andy acquires a gift for Red, something to help him "remember," something to restore his hope and lead him to freedom: a harmonica. This is analogous to the gift Red had acquired for Andy years earlier, something that gave him hope and led him to freedom: a small rock hammer. Andy used it to carve chess pieces ... and, little by little, over twenty years – unbeknownst to Red or anyone else – a hole through his cell wall that led to a sewage pipe, through which he escaped.

Inspired by his friend's liberation, Red remarks that Andy

“crawled through a river of shit and came out clean on the other side...” – a fitting image indeed for what we must go through to find the freedom for which we yearn ... if we still yearn for it, that is ... if we haven’t become institutionalized and forgotten.

Andy had once told Red about a beautiful place in Mexico and how, one day, Red could find him there. After forty years in prison, Red is released on parole and sent to the same halfway house where Brooks hung himself. Haunted by that fate, he follows Andy’s invitation and boards a bus bound for the Mexican border. The final words of the movie are Red saying “I hope.” The harmonica had done its job.

What is your “harmonica”? I hope you make room in your life to play it. Often.

(This is an expanded version of what Christopher West wrote in 2011 for Fill These Hearts, Image Books, 2011.)



BABETTE'S FEAST: "I'M FEARFUL OF MY JOY"

The interior battle we experience with our desires is pointedly captured in the Academy Award-winning film *Babette's Feast*. I encourage you not only to watch this movie, but study it. It's sympathetic to the human struggle, both to the temptation we face to squelch desire in the name of "virtue," and to indulge desire in the name of "happiness." But in the end, it gently reveals the way of conversion both from "the starvation diet" and the "fast food," to "the banquet." It shows us that it is possible to overcome our fears and our addictions and enter the feast rejoicing.

Set in a desolate corner of Denmark in the late 1800s, two elderly sisters named Martina and Philippa keep the memory of their "well respected and perhaps a little feared" father alive among the aging congregants of a strict religious sect he had founded. Babette first appears in the film as the congregation sings: "Never would you give a stone to the child who begs for bread," presaging her role as the one who would help them exchange their piously chosen stones for the heavenly banquet. And the presence of this rather elegant French woman among such austere Danes can be explained, the narrator tells us, "only through the hidden regions of the heart." Ah, that's the key! Access to the heavenly feast comes only through the hidden regions of the heart.

The story then takes us back nearly fifty years to a time when Martina's and Philippa's beauty was likened "to flowering fruit trees." They were never seen at local balls or parties, so young men went to church to see them. Among their father's flock, however, "earthly love and marriage were considered to be of scant worth, and merely empty illusion." Not

surprisingly, these two young beauties upset “the peace of heart and the destinies” of two men, both of whom came from “the great world outside.”

Lorens, the visiting nephew of a devotee of the pastor, upon meeting Martina had “a mighty vision of a higher and purer life” than the one he was living as a rogue officer in the Swedish Cavalry. He tried to win her heart while attending church meetings, but couldn’t break through her austere shell. He gives up despondently and devotes himself to a life of military ambition and worldly indulgence.

BABETTE’S FEAST GENTLY REVEALS THE WAY OF CONVERSION BOTH FROM “THE STARVATION DIET” AND THE “FAST FOOD,” TO “THE BANQUET.” IT SHOWS US THAT IT IS POSSIBLE TO OVERCOME OUR FEARS AND OUR ADDICTIONS AND ENTER THE FEAST REJOICING.

Philippa was pursued by a famous French opera singer named Papin. Mesmerized by Philippa’s voice, he was convinced that if she followed his training her singing would “surely save souls” and “comfort the poor.” At one point, as her sister and father listen disapprovingly from another room, Philippa and Papin sing a duet from Mozart’s famous opera *Don Giovanni*. As the lover passionately pursues his beloved, it becomes clear that Papin is not merely acting the part. He has fallen for Philippa, and through the song he expresses his desire to make her his wife. Trembling, yet listening, Philippa sings:

I’m fearful of my joy

Desire, love, and doubting are battling in my heart.

By the end of the song, Philippa has allowed herself to be wooed and is daring to *feel* her desire, daring to hope in love’s fulfillment. But alas, just when we’re rooting for Philippa to break out of her prison and

follow Papin's passion and her own to the altar, the next scene reveals her chosen spouse: she has wed herself to fear and sends Papin away.

We often do the same with God, don't we? Like Papin, Christ sings of his passionate desire for us, his heart bleeding with a divine Eros. And, like Philippa, we tremble, yet listen. We yearn, but we're afraid of allowing our eros to open up to Eros. Christ wants to set us on *fire*, but we're afraid to burn. Heavenly bliss is our most ardent desire. But we're fearful of our own joy. Desire, love, and doubting are battling in our hearts.

Perhaps we're afraid of how ardent is our own *need* for joy, and, perhaps more so, we're afraid it will never be fulfilled (filled-full). What a wild thing is that desire that incessantly aggravates the core of our being. It can scare the heck out of us. In those moments when we sense how deep the hunger goes, when we sense how needy we are and how utter our poverty – and, thus, how completely dependent we are on something outside ourselves to meet it – we freak out. We cope either by trying to shut desire down, or we seek to fill it up on our own terms with things that never can.

Philippa felt her eros rising up, and she almost was ready to say yes to it, to give joy a chance to flourish. But, in the end, fear took over. Some would probably argue that she was right to “shut it down,” or, at least, she was right to want to keep her desires under control, since our desires are so often out of order. This is true. Let me say it again very clearly: this side of original sin, our desires *are* very often disordered, and that means we can't simply “go with them” without some measure of caution and discernment. But “control” of our desires is not our ultimate goal.

As Father Simon Tugwell observes: “Our appetites need to be controlled because they are out of tune, out of harmony with our need for God. But control is only a temporary measure. The ideal is for us not to control our appetites at all, but to allow them full rein in the

wake of an uncontrolled appetite for God.”¹ G.K. Chesterton puts it this way: “And the more I considered Christianity, the more I found that while it had established a rule and order, the chief aim of that order was to give room for good things to run wild.”²

Vertical Wildness

Letting good things run wild is what I call “vertical wildness.” We have wild desires in us because we’re made to “go wild” with God, in God. The saints speak of this as a kind of “divine madness” or “holy intoxication.” Take this desire to “go wild” horizontally (that is, to the things of this world), and you end up at a frat party. But aim it heavenward (easier said than done), and you end up launching into Infinity.

Do you remember that old Steppenwolf song “Born to Be Wild”? Yes, yes we were. We are created, as the song goes, to “*take the world in a love embrace*” and to “*fire all of our guns at once and explode into space.*” And here, Steppenwolf, like so many other rock bands, show themselves to be what I call “twisted mystics.” They’re looking in their gut and expressing in song, in unedited fashion, what they really feel going on inside them. And, sure, it may be twisted up. Most rock music is (because most of what goes on inside us is). But untwist it, and you catch a glimpse of something mystical: we *are* born to be wild, we *are* born to give ourselves whole and entire to something, surrendering all control to the wild abyss that is God.

The Jansenists would have us believe that our nature is so corrupted by sin that every human desire is suspect and thus, our only

1 *The Beatitudes: Soundings in Christian Traditions* (Templegate Publishers, 1980), p. 78.

2 *Orthodoxy* (Ignatius Press, 1995), p. 102.

dutiful response to desire is to apply the brakes. But if this is our approach to desire – always to say “no” to it – there is the danger that we will not know how to say “yes” to what God wants to lavish upon us. Quoting Father Tugwell once again, “Though we may, from time to time, have to brake firmly to stop ourselves rushing headlong into silly satisfactions ... we must not make braking a whole way of life. It is more important, eventually, to know how to say ‘Yes’ to a desire, than to know how to say ‘No.’ At the end we shall have to surrender ourselves utterly and recklessly and without any inhibition to the overwhelming attractiveness of God.”³

IF OUR APPROACH TO DESIRE IS ALWAYS TO SAY “NO” TO IT, THERE IS THE DANGER THAT WE WILL NOT KNOW HOW TO SAY “YES” TO WHAT GOD WANTS TO LAVISH UPON US.

The Lord calls us to “open wide” our mouths so he can fill them (see Ps 81:10). For he has “prepared a banquet” for us (see Ps 23:4) and he yearns ardently for us to “taste and see” that he is good (see Ps 34:8). But, like the rigid congregation in *Babette’s Feast*, fear and “propriety” often cause us to numb our tongues. We can even confuse the good things of God for something evil, as they do in the movie.

As if We Never Had a Sense of Taste

Martina and Philippa never marry. Now elderly, the elegant Babette enters their life as a refugee from the war in France. She presents the sisters with a letter from Papin who asks if they would take her in as their housekeeper. Papin’s letter also laments the fate

3 *The Beatitudes: Soundings in Christian Traditions*, p. 78, p. 80.

that kept Philippa's voice from filling the Grand Opera House in Paris. He expresses a heartfelt hope, however, that in paradise, he will hear her voice again: "There you will forever be the great artist that God intended you to be. Oh how you will enchant the angels." Then Papin's letter shifts abruptly: "Babette can cook ..." But we know not how *exquisitely* until later in the story.

After several years of preparing plain, stark meals for the sisters, Babette has won a large sum of money in the French lottery and offers to provide "a real French dinner" at an upcoming celebration in honor of their long deceased father. They initially refuse, but Babette insists: "Do you hear my prayer today? It comes from my heart."

When multiple crates of exotic ingredients arrive, the sisters are plagued by their worst fears. Martina warns the congregation that Babette's feast may actually be a "satanic Sabbath" that could expose them to "evil powers." They all agree to fall silent at the table and numb their tongues: "It will be just as if we never had a sense of taste," they say.

They didn't realize, however, that Martina's long-lost suitor, Lorens, would be present at the celebration. As the feast unfolds, he offers an exuberant commentary on each course. It reminds him of the time he dined at a famous restaurant in Paris, the head chef of which was a woman who "was considered the greatest culinary genius." She had the reputation for being able to "transform a dinner into a kind of love affair," he said. "Yes, a love affair that made no distinction between bodily and spiritual appetites."

Ah! There is that essential Christian principle of *incarnation*. We encounter spiritual mysteries not by rejecting the pleasures of the physical world, but by entering into these pleasures *in the right way*. Christian fasting is *not* rooted in suspicion towards the physical world,

the human body, or the pleasures of food. Christian fasting is meant to teach us how to feast in the right way. Only those who know how to *fast* properly know how to *feast* properly. As we learn the proper rhythm of fasting and feasting, the joys of the senses become not an occasion of sin, but an occasion of grace!

**AS THEY OPEN THEMSELVES TO THIS OCCASION OF GRACE,
THE LORD WORKS WONDERS IN THEIR *SPIRITS* THROUGH
THE DELIGHT OF THEIR *SENSES*.**

This is what happens through Babette's exotic feast. With Loren leading the way, slowly, but surely, a taste of redemption makes its way around the table. As they open themselves to this occasion of grace, the Lord works wonders in their *spirits* through the delight of their *senses*. Old wrongs are confessed. Old grievances are forgiven. Old loves are rekindled. And they realize that this was not an "evil power" at work, but a divine one.

Later, the sisters learn that Babette had spent all of her winnings on the feast. To ease their concern, Babette confesses that she didn't spend all she had only for them: "Papin used to say, 'Throughout the world sounds one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give me the chance to do my very best.'" At this, Philippa seems to realize that, like the fearful servant in the Gospel parable, she had buried her talent. But through Babette's great gift, Philippa's heart was awakened and filled with hope in God's mercy. The movie then ends with Philippa embracing Babette in gratitude and repeating Papin's words: "In paradise, you will be the truly great artist that our merciful Lord meant you to be. Oh, how you will delight all of the angels!"

The Way to Heaven Is Through Desire

At the start of this chapter we contrasted the life of the *stoic*, the *addict*, and the *mystic*. In *Babette's Feast*, Martina and Philippa (as well as the whole congregation started by their father) represent the life of the stoic. Lorens, on the other hand, represents the life of the addict. In the end, both are changed by the extravagant artistry of Babette, who, along with Papin, represents the life of the mystic.

Such a change of heart, however, does not come easily. Sometimes, in fact, as the movie rightly portrays, it can take a lifetime. But if we let life's difficult lessons have their way with us, "There comes a time," as Lorens reflects, "when our eyes are opened. Focus and colors change and show the way to heaven."

What is this way to heaven? "The access to heaven is through desire," as we read in the famous mystical work *The Cloud of Unknowing*.⁴ If we wish to enter the banquet that God has prepared for us, we must have the courage to open our desires and follow them *the whole way* to the other side of their truncated distortions, in order to rediscover their original, wild cry for God. Along the way of this journey, we must "pass through purifying fire," releasing all the things we cling to that are not God (our idols), so that we can live from within the passion of an unadulterated eros, surrendering wildly, freely, and completely to the Eros-Agape Love that shot us and the universe into being – and, at long last, feasting on the True Bread of Heaven, Life Divine ...

4 This highly acclaimed mystical treatise was written by an anonymous English author in the 14th century. He has been described as the English Saint John of the Cross.

*Forever in the heart there springs
 A hunger never touched by things
 And if unmet this inward need
 Goes prowling as incessant greed:
 We reach and reach for more and more
 While with each gain we still seem poor.
 We work to earn what can't be bought;
 Through prayer and faith it must be sought*

*True Bread of Heaven, Life Divine,
 Eternal Manna, Holy Sign,
 Our need of you incites our quest,
 Your presence brings our search to rest;
 The hollow, hungry heart is filled
 And all its grasping motions stilled,
 Our quenchless thirst is satisfied,
 And every need and want supplied.*

*Let Christ be praised forevermore,
 Who makes us rich when we are poor,
 Who sees the tattered, begging soul
 Beneath the cloak of class and role,
 Who hears the heart's unspoken groan
 And meets our need as if his own,
 To whom all thirst and hunger yield,
 The bread whose taste is truth revealed.⁵*

(Excerpted from Fill These Hearts, Christopher West, Image Books, 2011.)

5 Untitled Hymn, cited in *Magnificat*, Dec. 14, 2010.



TOY STORY 3: WE WANT TO BE LOVED, NOT TOYED WITH

Don't we long to be loved *as we are*, for *who we really are*, and not just for that which may "please" someone else? Don't we know deep in our hearts that we are never meant to be compared to another, measured by another, or replaced by someone else? Don't we long deep in our hearts to be loved in such a way that we are honored and recognized as indispensable, irreplaceable, and unrepeatable? And doesn't it pain our hearts grievously when others treat us merely as objects that can be disposed of and replaced, when others toy with us?

These universal "truths of the heart" were portrayed with remarkable and surprising insight in, of all films, *Toy Story 3*. Little Andy from the previous films isn't so little anymore. In fact, he's headed off to college and he hasn't played with his toys for years. When the toys steal Andy's cell phone to get their old friend just to open the toy chest so they can be seen, you can feel their yearning for love. Andy lifts Rex the dinosaur (voiced by the "in-con-schhievable" Wallace Shawn) in order to retrieve his phone and, once the coast is clear, Rex exclaims with unbridled elation: "He touched me! He touched me!" There it is – the cry of the heart to be loved, to be touched ... God bless him! Rex was starved for affection (listen to me, I think these characters are real people ... well, because in a sense they are: they're images of us). I knew then this movie had more to offer than mere entertainment.

New to the series is Lotso the bear, the self-appointed tyrant leader of all the toys at Sunnyside Daycare. In the course of the movie, we learn the tragic backstory. Lotso had been Daisy's most beloved

toy. But then she lost him, and her parents got her another bear *just like him*. When Lotso found out he had been replaced, he “snapped,” becoming a “monster inside.”

Part of Lotso’s revenge for having been cast off and replaced is that – if *he* can’t be loved, he won’t let anybody else be loved either; if he’s replaceable, then everybody else is too. At one point Lotso confronts Andy’s favorite toy, Woody: “You think you’re special, Cowboy? You’re a piece of plastic. You were made to be thrown away.” And then when the Ken doll is afraid he’s going to lose Barbie, Lotso says: “She’s a Barbie doll, Ken. There’s a hundred million just like her!” Ken insists: “Not to me there’s not” – and Barbie sighs knowing that Ken loves *her*; knowing that Ken sees her as unrepeatable, irreplaceable.

THE WHOLE THEME OF *TOY STORY 3* IS THAT BEING REPLACED AND “THROWN AWAY” IS THE OPPOSITE OF LOVE.

In the story, these toys aren’t toys at all. They feel what we feel; they desire what we desire: love. That’s why they’re so relatable. The whole theme of *Toy Story 3* is that being replaced and “thrown away” is the opposite of love. We all know that in our hearts, but sometimes we’re acting out our own “revenge” on others for past hurts, like Lotso. When Lotso seems to be having his way and Woody and his pals are doomed for the incinerator, salvation arrives “from above.” In the end, Lotso pays the price for his madness, while love triumphs in the lives of the other toys. Deep stuff for a “kid’s movie.”

(Excerpted from Fill These Hearts, Christopher West, Image Books, 2011.)



***I AM LEGEND:* PLAYING GOD BITES BACK**

There are ways of serving the human organism with medical technology that respect God as God. But there are also medical and technological interventions that put man in the place of God. And whenever man “makes himself like God,” negative consequences inevitably follow.

The theme of how an apparently good breakthrough in medical technology can backfire is dramatically portrayed in the movie *I Am Legend*. Once again, Hollywood projects some of our deepest and most unsettling fears onto the big screen, asking the question: *Where are we headed? What does the future hold?*

WHENEVER MAN “MAKES HIMSELF LIKE GOD,” NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES INEVITABLY FOLLOW.

In this apocalyptic tale, based on the 1954 science fiction novel by Richard Matheson, Dr. Alice Krippin’s “once hailed miracle cure for cancer” turns out to be a virus that very quickly wipes out 90 percent of mankind. Only 1 percent was immune. The other 9 percent morphed into the so-called “Darkseekers” – rabid, violent, hungry human animals who emerge at night (light kills them) to hunt down and eat the remaining, healthy 1 percent.

Will Smith’s character, Dr. Robert Neville, is part of that 1 percent. He’s also a virologist who, spurred on by memories of his wife Zoe and daughter Marley – both of whom died tragically – has devoted

himself to finding a cure for KV (Krippin Virus) and saving the human race from extinction. At a point when Neville has lost hope and is about to be eaten by the Darkseekers, a woman named Anna and a boy named Ethan, also part of the 1 percent, mysteriously appear and save his life.

When Anna sees a picture of Marley, Neville tells her about her namesake.

Neville: Yea, we named her after Bob Marley.

Anna: Who?

Neville: Ah, the singer.

Anna: Damian?

Neville: Ah, his father. (singing) "I shot the sheriff, but I did not shoot the deputy."

(Anna gestures that she doesn't recognize the song or know who Bob Marley is.)

Neville: Oh, that is unacceptable. (He then walks to his stereo and plays "Stir it Up.") You don't recognize that?

Anna: Um-mm.

Neville: Wow! (wanting to fill Anna in) He had this idea, it was kind of a virologist's idea. He believed that you could cure racism and hate – literally, cure it – by injecting music and love into people's lives. When he was scheduled to perform at a peace rally, a gunman came to his house and shot him down. Two days later, he walked out on that stage and sang. Somebody asked him why. He said, "The people who are trying to make this world worse are not takin' a day off. How can I? Light up the darkness!"

Soon thereafter, Anna tries to convince Neville to come with her and Ethan to the survivor's colony in the mountains of Vermont. Neville insists there is no such place while Anna maintains she "just knows" there is.

Neville: How do you know? How *could* you know?

Anna: God told me. He has a plan.

Neville: God told you?

Anna: Yes.

Neville: *The* God?

Anna: Yes. I know how this sounds.

Neville: Sounds crazy.

Anna: But something told me to ... come here ... And I got here just in time to save your life. Do you think that's a coincidence?

Neville: Stop it. Just stop it.

Anna: He must have sent me here for a reason. Neville, the world is quieter now. You just have to listen. If you listen, you can hear God's plan.

Neville: God's plan? All right, let me tell you 'bout your God's plan. There were six billion people on earth when the infection hit. KV had a 90 percent kill rate, that's 5.4 billion people dead – crashed and bled out: *dead*. Less than 1 percent immunity left 12 million healthy people like you, me, and Ethan. The other 588 *million* turned into your Darkseekers. And then they got hungry and they *killed* and *fed* on *everybody*. *Everybody! Every single person that you or I have ever known is DEEEEEAAAD!! DEAD!* There *is* no God. There *is* no God!

(Spoiler alert: you're about to learn how the movie ends.) At the climax of the film, while taking refuge from the Darkseekers in Neville's basement lab, Neville and Anna discover that the antidote he had been testing has proven successful in a sedated female test-patient. Just then several Darkseekers burst through the basement door and Neville locks himself, Anna, and Ethan behind a reinforced plexiglass wall. As the leader of these Darkseekers violently tries to break through the glass, Neville shouts: "Stop! Stop! Look, look, I can save you! I can help you! You are sick and I can help you! I can fix this! I can save everybody ... I can save you! Let me save you!"

THEY'VE BECOME SO WARPED BY SICKNESS THEY DON'T EVEN WANT TO BE HEALED.

But they've become so deranged, so enflamed with bloodlust, they will have none of it. They've become so warped by sickness they don't even want to be healed.

At that moment Neville has a memory of Marley making a butterfly with her hands just before her death. He hears her voice: "Daddy, look it's a butterfly." He looks and sees a butterfly appear in the shape of the cracked glass; he turns and sees a butterfly tattoo on Anna's neck. Inspired, he knows now what he must do. He quickly extracts a vial of blood from the test-patient, and says to Anna: "The cure is in her blood." Ordering Anna and Ethan into a coal chute, he hands the vial to Anna.

Neville: I think this is why you're here.

Anna: What are you doing!?

Neville: (resigned and humbled) I'm listening.

Anna: Neville, there's room in here, come!

Neville: They're not gonna stop. They're not gonna stop. Stay until dawn.

He closes the coal chute and, opening a drawer, smiles at the sight of a picture of Zoe and Marley. He retrieves a hand grenade from the back of the drawer, pulls the pin, and rushes headlong through the glass sacrificing himself in order to wipe out the Darkseekers and save Anna, Ethan, and the cure.

The movie ends with Anna and Ethan arriving at the survivor's colony and handing the cure to the authorities. We then hear Anna's voice: "In 2009 a deadly virus burned through our civilization pushing humankind to the edge of extinction. Dr. Robert Neville dedicated his life to discovering a cure and the restoration of humanity. On December 9, 2012, at approximately 8:49 p.m., he discovered that cure. And at 8:52, he gave his life to defend it. We are his legacy. This is his legend. Light up the darkness."

As the movie credits roll, we hear Bob Marley singing "Redemption Song":

*Won't you help to sing
These songs of freedom?
'Cause all I ever have
Redemption songs
Redemption songs*

Sexual Lust and Blood Lust

The ominous picture of our future painted by *I Am Legend* is obviously science fiction. But, allegorically speaking, it offers much food for thought. Perhaps in the not too distant future the evening news will be speaking openly about the “once hailed miracle Pill” that promised a “liberated” society based on unfettered sex, but has led instead to the destruction and deconstruction of marriage and family life and, in turn, society itself.

THE IDEA OF “DARKSEEKERS” FEEDING ON THE FLESH OF OTHER HUMAN BEINGS IS NOT THAT FAR OFF FROM THE MANY HORRID FORMS OF VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ABUSE THAT ARE SWEEPING THROUGH OUR PORNIFIED CULTURE LIKE A VIRUS.

We live today in what John Paul II grimly, but aptly, described as a “culture of death” – a culture in which we abuse one another rather than love one another; a culture in which we are willing to kill in order to indulge our lusts. The idea of “Darkseekers” feeding on the flesh of other human beings is not that far off from the many horrid forms of violence and sexual abuse that are sweeping through our pornified culture like a virus. We are hemorrhaging as a people. We are profoundly sick. Just a cursory knowledge of what’s happening today with sex trafficking and Internet porn leads a person to conclude, as Dr. Neville does in the movie, that “social de-evolution appears complete; typical human behavior is now entirely absent.”

The late Father Paul Quay observed that

there is a relation between sexual sin and death that human beings have known for long generations. As we can see as far back as the epic poetry of Ugarit 4,000 years ago, in the plays of Euripides 2,400 years ago, in the gladiator shows of ancient Rome 1,800 years ago, and in countless other cases, deviated sexual lust becomes blood lust; frustration of the life-instincts begets the death instinct. Separating the power to give life from those actions intended for the giving of life is a sort of killing, and ultimately symbolizes a putting to death.¹

Take a look at some of the video covers displayed on Netflix. One of the most common themes is the sometimes subtle and sometimes blatant combination of sex, violence, and death. But if human beings have known of the connection between sexual lust and blood lust for “long generations,” it seems the modern world isn’t willing to admit it. Is anyone in the mainstream media, the government, or our educational institutions even willing to admit the connection between sexual lust and the violence we see on the evening news and in our own neighborhoods?

I live just a few miles from the former one-room schoolhouse into which, in 2006, a sexually deranged man entered with the intent of violently molesting several innocent Amish girls before ending it all in a blood bath. Everyone at the time, of course, was asking what would

1 *The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality* (Ignatius Press, 1985), pp. 81-82.

lead a human being to do such a horrid thing, but few people seem willing to connect the dots between such violence and our culture's incessant promotion of lust. We don't want the violence, but we *do* want the lust. We can't have it both ways. It's not possible. As John Paul II wrote, "It is an illusion to think we can build a true culture of human life if we do not ... accept and experience sexuality and love and the whole of life according to their true meaning and their close inter-connection."²

Light up the Darkness

I don't believe the sexual revolution was all bad. In a puritanical environment in which silence and fear were the norm when it came to sexual matters, it at least "got the conversation going." But it is time to take an honest look at whether the basic promise of the sexual revolution has come to pass. Separating sex from babies and committed love through sterilized sex was supposed to have brought human flourishing: happier individuals, happier relationships, more stable marriages, stronger families. Has it?

Social re-engineers do not like this fact, but when we let the data speak, it's clear: the survival of civilization depends on the survival of the family – that is, on the committed sexual relationship of a man and a woman and their naturally resulting offspring. Let's try to bring this into sharper focus: civilization depends on the *civilize-ation* of eros. The sexual urge is the natural root of human life and of human culture. It's also one of the most potent forces on the planet. When properly oriented, it builds up and edifies. When disoriented, it tears down and

2 *The Gospel of Life* 97.

destroys. In short, when this natural *root* (the sexual urge) is “civilized,” the *fruit* is “civilization” – well-ordered human relationships working together for the common good. But when this root is *not* properly civilized, well ... I’m hearing an old R.E.M. song in my head: *It’s the end of the world as we know it ...*

AS A CULTURE, WE ARE DESPERATELY IN NEED OF RECOVERING WHAT SHOULD BE AN OBVIOUS AND CELEBRATED TRUTH: SEX LEADS TO BABIES.

What does it mean to “civilize” the sexual urge? Among other definitions of the word, the dictionary says that one is civil who shows “high-minded and self-sacrificing behavior.” One is civil who shows “courteous attentiveness, especially to women.” And – I’m not making this up – one is civil who observes “the forms required by good breeding.”³ So, in the midst of today’s sexual chaos, we must ask ourselves: *What form of human relationship most civil-izes the sexual urge?* In other words, what kind of sexually active relationships show “high-minded and self-sacrificing behavior”? What kind of sexually active relationships show “courteous attentiveness, especially to women”? What kind of sexually active relationships observe “the forms required by good breeding”?

Throughout the ages, in virtually every culture known to man, the relationship that results from the proper civilize-ation of the sexual urge has been called *marriage*. Insert contraception into the sexual-societal equation, however, and the basic goal of sex becomes pleasure rather than the establishment of those relationships that bind families

3 Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (11th edition).

and civilization together. Sexual pleasure is a divine gift when received as part of the joy of self-giving love. But when vast swaths of humanity buy into the idea that pleasure itself is the main (and often sole) goal of sex, society becomes utilitarian. You are valued if you are useful. And, in this case, you are “useful” if you are sexually stimulating. If you are not, or if you get in the way of my pleasure, you will be ignored, discarded, maybe even exterminated.

When pleasure is the main goal of sex, people (mostly women) become the means and babies become the obstacle. So we take our pleasure and we exterminate our offspring. This is not some dire prediction of a bleak future. *This is the world we live in now.*

As a culture, we are desperately in need of recovering what should be an obvious and celebrated truth: *sex leads to babies*. Who, then, should be having sex? Wise men and women throughout history – not just Christians – have concluded that only those who have committed themselves to embracing and raising the most natural fruit of the sexual act should be having sex. That commitment is called ... *marriage*.

It is a very real problem that large numbers of people are having sex who are in no place (and have no desire) to be having children. In the early 1960s, Dr. Carl Djerassi and his colleagues gave the world an apparent solution to this problem: the Pill. In *I Am Legend*, Dr. Alice Krippin gave the world an apparent cure for cancer. Imagine the scorn and derision that would have been aimed at anyone who tried to warn the world that Alice Krippin’s “cure” was actually a virus that would lead to the collapse of civilization. That’s similar to what Pope Paul VI endured when he published *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. Few even bothered to read it, but it has proven prophetic. Google *Humanae Vitae* and give

it a read. Then (if you have the stomach for a movie with blood-thirsty Darkseekers) watch *I Am Legend* ... and light up the darkness.

(Written in 2011 for Fill These Hearts but deleted from the final version.)

**LES MISERABLES:****I. WE WILL LIVE AGAIN IN FREEDOM**

Perhaps you're one of the sixty million people who has seen the musical *Les Miserables* (now a major motion picture). Or, perhaps like me, you've seen it more times than you can remember. Like no other theatrical production I've ever seen, this story both awakens my yearning for heaven and gives me hope in its fulfillment. Translated "the miserable ones," *Les Miserables* is a bitter prayer of agony that ends in an everlasting prayer of ecstasy. The final, climactic scene provides a fitting image with which to conclude our reflections.

Jean Valjean is dying after a long and very difficult life. Years earlier, he had promised a young mother, Fantine, as she lay dying, that he would raise her daughter Cosette. Now, on the same day she wed her beloved Marius, Cosette struggles to say goodbye to the man she called her father. When Fantine appears from the life beyond to bid Valjean to join her, the nearness of Valjean's heavenly reward is palpable, and one's heart can't help but swell with joy and anticipation.

LIKE NO OTHER THEATRICAL PRODUCTION I'VE EVER SEEN, THIS STORY BOTH AWAKENS MY YEARNING FOR HEAVEN AND GIVES ME HOPE IN ITS FULFILLMENT.

As Valjean is reunited with Fantine amidst the chorus of saints in heaven, Marius and Cosette, still dressed for their wedding, stand in the space between heaven and the audience: a bridegroom and his beautiful bride painting an iconic picture for us of the life to come –

the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb. Together, the communion of saints in heaven and the communion of man and woman on earth sing of our glorious destiny when, at long last, we will “*live again in freedom in the garden of the Lord,*” when “*the chain will be broken and all men will have their reward.*”¹

Every time I’ve seen the show there has been a kind of euphoria throughout the theater at this climactic moment, and few dry eyes. What has just happened? Why are hearts so deeply moved? They’ve been given hope: hope that all they yearn for is not in vain; hope that the suffering they’ve endured in life serves some important, larger purpose; hope that the fairytale of living happily ever after is not just a fairytale; hope that there truly is an unending bliss, an unending love, a wedding feast that lasts forever.

(Excerpted from Fill These Hearts, Christopher West, Image Books, 2011.)

II. DO YOU HEAR THE PEOPLE SING?

The movie version of the musical *Les Misérables* will be released on Christmas day. I’m taking that as a sign, not to mention a grand Christmas gift.

I don’t think I’ve been this excited for a movie to come out since *Return of the Jedi* in 1983. And I only had to wait a few years for that. Along with other *Les Mis* fans, I’ve been waiting for this movie for over two decades. Judging from the rave reviews it’s received, it promises to have been well worth it.

Based on Victor Hugo’s famous novel of the same title,

1 “Do You Hear the People Sing” (reprise/finale), music by Claude-Michel Shonberg, English lyrics adapted by Herbert Kretzmer.

Les Misérables – translated “the poor” or “the miserable ones” – has become, by many accounts, the most beloved musical of all time. It’s been translated into twenty-one languages and seen by over sixty million people.

I must admit: I wasn’t always a fan of musicals as a genre. I used to wonder what the point was. In fact, the first time I saw *Les Mis* in 1987, I didn’t get it, at all. *Can’t you just tell the story instead of singing it? People just don’t break into song like that in real life.* What a naïf! Of course, I was only 18. Time and life have since changed my tune. Hugo himself, long before his novel became a musical, said it best: “Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and on which it is impossible to remain silent.”

WE’RE OFTEN DEAF TO THE COLLECTIVE CRY OF HUMANITY BECAUSE, WELL, WE’RE OFTEN DEAF TO WHAT REALLY GOES ON IN OUR OWN HEARTS.

What is it that simply *had* to be expressed in this musical, and could only be fully expressed in song? The deepest longings, sorrows, and sufferings of humanity – the unrelenting cry of the human heart for love, for mercy, for redemption, for everlasting justice and happiness. When we allow ourselves to give voice to these deepest cries of our hearts, speech is not enough. They spontaneously well up as song.

“*Do you hear the people sing?*” – the musical poignantly asks. Sadly, we’re often deaf to the collective cry of humanity because, well, we’re often deaf to what really goes on in our own hearts. Fear is usually the culprit. We’re afraid to *feel* because we don’t want to suffer. We’re afraid to *yearn* because we don’t want to be disappointed. We’re afraid of our own *joy* because it’s “safer” not to be so vulnerable.

Jesus called this kind of fear “hardness of heart” and lamented: “We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn” (Mt 11:17).

Les Mis is an invitation to dance to the flute and mourn to the dirge. It’s an invitation to *feel* with humanity all that humanity *feels*: all the agony, sorrow, and injustice, and – more importantly – it’s an invitation to give ourselves permission in this vale of tears to *hope* ... to hope that, despite the coldness we encounter and the darkness through which we must pass, “*there is a flame that never dies / even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise.*”

Les Mis sings gloriously of the hope of the Gospel itself. And that’s one of the things I simply love about this musical: it’s a thoroughly sacred work of art that has been whole-heartedly embraced by the secular world. For the “miserable ones” of this story, redemption is *real*, heaven is *real*, and “*to love another person is to see the face of God...*” You “have to tell this story from the point of view that God exists,” says Tom Hooper, the film’s director. It simply doesn’t work otherwise.

So, how did a musical which portrays Catholic bishops as beacons of love, presents Christian virtue as lighting the way to heaven, and weaves divine mercy throughout ever come to be celebrated by the moguls of London, New York, and now Hollywood? Maybe because *Les Mis* is *good art* that simply unfolds a human story without an agenda. Honest, artful storytelling moves, challenges, and transforms the heart in its own way, and in its own time: overt altar calls aren’t needed; nor desired. For when the deepest cries of the human heart are given voice and given hope, everyone with ears to “*hear the people sing*” listens and responds.

(Originally posted on CorProject.com Blog December 2012.)



OLD YELLER AND LIFE'S HARD LESSONS

I first saw *Old Yeller*, Disney's classic boy-coming-of-age story, when I myself was a boy in the mid 1970s. I watched it again last night with my youngest three children.

There's something about a boy and his dog. I won't spoil it for those who haven't seen it. I'll only say that Travis comes of age through a very difficult situation with the dog he loves. His cowboy father in classic Texan drawl describes to his son what happened to him as follows:

YES, LIFE DISHES OUT SOME HARD LESSONS. BUT WE CAN PRESS THROUGH AND DISCOVER LIFE AS SOMETHING MIGHTY FINE.

"Now and then for no good reason a man can figure out, life will just haul off and knock him flat – slam him again' the ground so hard it seem like all his insides is busted. But it's not all like that. A lot of it's mighty fine. And you can't afford to waste the good part frettin' about the bad. That makes it all bad."

It's a worthy lesson to pass on to a son. Yes, life dishes out some hard lessons. But we can press through and discover life as something mighty fine.

If you're looking for a good old-fashioned family movie, try *Old Yeller*. And if you have a suggestion for another family movie, please leave it in the comments below. I'm always looking for good ones.

(Originally posted on CorProject.com Blog, written Jan. 15, 2015.)



***INTO THE WOODS:* WHICH WAY TO HAPPILY EVER AFTER?**

My wife and I recently saw *Into the Woods*, Disney's take on Stephen Sondheim's musical weaving various Grimm's fairy tales together in a whimsical morality tale. My point here is not to offer a full review, but only to share a few reflections.

How many fairy tales end with the prince and princess getting married and living "happily ever after"? In their own fairy-tale-ish way, these stories express our hope for eternal happiness, which is, of course, a very worthy thing to express. However, they usually confuse our heavenly hope with our earthly existence, setting us up for lots of disappointments in the here and now. If we were to inject some realism into these fairy tales, they might end by saying, "After a lifetime of ups and downs, painful trials and purifications, and a multitude of joys and sorrows, they died and lived happily ever after."

THE REASON THIS LIFE IS *NEVER* "HAPPILY EVER AFTER" IS BECAUSE WE ARE NEVER IMMUNE FROM THE POSSIBILITY OF MAKING POOR CHOICES.

This is what I liked about *Into the Woods*. Right at the moment when you're expecting the typical "happily ever after moment," reality strikes: the earth quakes and people's worlds start to collide. The reason this life is *never* "happily ever after" is because we are never immune from the possibility of making poor choices. We suffer both from our own poor choices and from the poor choices of others. Among other

things, this movie explores the consequences of:

greed
crime
gluttony
lust
pride
sloth
betrayal
selfishness
adultery
vanity
casting blame
fatherly abandonment, and
generational patterns of sin.

Amidst the various moral conundrums, there are nods to moral relativism, but there is also the overriding message that self-centered behavior comes at a high price. More than that, there is hope of forgiveness, hope of redemption, and the clear message that we don't have to repeat the patterns of sin and selfishness that were handed on to us. I found that impressive.

(Originally posted on CorProject.com Blog, written Jan. 19, 2015.)



THE GIVER: HOLLYWOOD INDICTS THE CULTURE OF DEATH

My wife and I recently watched *The Giver*. I'm surprised I hadn't heard anything about this movie last summer when it was in theaters. Its indictment of the culture of death was so blatant that it actually made me squirm a bit for those who seek to justify the killing of innocent life and all the deceptions behind such killings.

The Giver is a story about a future utopia called "The Community" where pain, war, and disease have been eradicated, as have individuality and free will. That's the trade-off: if we want a pain-free, war-free world, freedom, individuality, and human longing must be erased. A feat accomplished by a mandatory dose of daily medication.

"Sameness" is the key to harmony in The Community. No one knows his or her real father and mother. Everything in day-to-day life – from family relationships to jobs – is assigned and arranged by "the elders." And "precision of language," while strictly enforced, amounts to exactly the opposite. When Jonah's (assigned) father calls a stuffed elephant a hippo, we begin to realize that things are not called by their proper names.

Haunted by a dream he had as a child that awakened "the stirrings," Jonah finds a covert way of skipping his person-numbing injection, and his "stirrings" begin to return. When he steals away to follow those stirrings and kisses Fiona, he pleads with her to believe him: "Fiona, there's more, so much more!"

Later, when Jonah's baby brother is returned to "the nurturing center" and "released to elsewhere" because he didn't pass his "test

**I FOUND MYSELF WONDERING HOW SUCH A POWERFUL
INDICTMENT OF TODAY’S CULTURE HAD SLIPPED THROUGH
THE POLITICALLY CORRECT FILTERS OF HOLLYWOOD.**

of maturity,” Jonah realizes with true precision of language that this means his brother had been killed. “I hadn’t been wrong,” Jonah tells us in a voice over. “This was wrong. They hadn’t eliminated murder. They’d brought it home. They just called it by a different name.” Then, placing the stuffed elephant (which he had learned is *not* a hippo) with his sister in bed, Jonah says, “Father, he didn’t know any better. I did.” And, at much risk to himself, he sets out on a journey to liberate The Community from the deception engulfing them.

With A-list stars like Meryl Streep and Jeff Bridges, I found myself wondering how such a powerful indictment of today’s culture had slipped through the politically correct filters of Hollywood. It even ends with a clear nod to Christmas as the source of hope for humanity’s future.

This is a movie that’s not only worth watching. It’s worth studying very closely.

(Originally posted on CorProject.com Blog, written Feb. 20, 2015.)



20TH ANNIVERSARY OF *BRAVEHEART*: A STUDY OF THE FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP AND THE IDENTITIES CARVED THEREFROM

Stunned. Overwhelmed. Speechless. As the credits rolled, so did the tears. My fiancée and I were the last to leave the theater and didn't do so until we were practically kicked out. It's hard to believe it's been twenty years since the release of *Braveheart* – arguably the greatest guy-movie of all time – but my twentieth wedding anniversary later this year should prove it to me.

Around the world, when I reference scenes from *Braveheart* in my lectures, there's an immediate spike of testosterone in the room and an instant bond among the men. Guys love to brag about how many times they've seen it (uhem, twenty-three for me). They quote lines in regular conversation: the serious (“*You're heart is free, have the courage to follow it...*”); the humorous (“*It's my island!*”); and the famous (“*Freeeeedooooom!!*”). And they watch it with their sons as a right of passage.

Men love *Braveheart* because it gives us something noble to aspire to as men. We don't just admire William Wallace. We want to *be* William Wallace. We want to be the kind of man who's courageous enough to fight, to lay it all down, to endure the most gruesome, bloody death for the sake of ... *of what?*

Why did Wallace fight and die as he did? When I ask my audiences this question, inevitably someone shouts out the famous line quoted above. But the real answer comes from Hamish, Wallace's big red-headed warrior-brother, when he insists, “*It's not about freedom*

William, it's about Murron. You're doin' this because ya think she sees ya...."

Murron was William's wife, and the English garrison had killed her to get to him. He spent his life fighting the "Anglish" against all odds and eventually died his torturous death to defend her honor. In this way Wallace is a Christ figure – a man who loves his wife "as Christ loves the Church" (Eph 5:25). As William is being cut open, bled out, and killed (cruciform, I might add), whom does he see walking through the crowd to welcome him into the next life? Murron, bearing the most affirming countenance of gratitude and appreciation.

EVERY MAN WANTS TO BE WILLIAM WALLACE, BUT, IF WE'RE HONEST WITH OURSELVES, WE'RE MORE LIKE ROBERT THE BRUCE. WE FALTER. WE FALL.

I'm not trying to canonize Wallace. There are clearly some disturbing aspects of his character, some gangly weeds among the wheat. But the wheat is undeniable and nourishes a deep hunger in a man's heart.

So few men in today's world have had fathers who radiated the courage of authentic manhood, who modeled to their sons that there are causes worth dying for. William's father, Malcolm, was such a man and it set the whole course of young William's life. In turn, what Malcolm – and, after his death, Uncle Argyle – passed on to William, William passed on to others: namely, a sense of authentic, masculine identity. When William calmly asserts "*I know who my father was*" in response to a challenge to his manhood, he's showing unflinching confidence in his own identity as a man.

In fact, the whole movie is a study of the father-son relationship

and the identities carved therefrom. The next time you watch it, pay close attention to the different fathers and how they influence their sons. Hamish also had a strong father. Remember Campbell's dying words to Hamish? Wounded from battle, having fought side by side as father and son, Campbell dies happily saying, "*I've lived long enough to see you become the man you are.*" Priceless. But look at Longshanks and the effect of his brutal tyranny on his son. And look at Robert the Bruce – his father's leprous flesh the symbol of his interior corruption.

Every man wants to be William Wallace, but, if we're honest with ourselves, we're more like Robert the Bruce. We falter. We fall.

Oh! – that gripping scene when the Bruce is wrestling with his own moral failure before his father who had convinced him to betray Wallace....

These men who bled the ground red at Falkirk, they fought for William Wallace and he fights for something that I've never had. And I took it from him when I betrayed him and I SAW it on his face on the battlefield and it's TEARING me apart!

His father, astonished, says, "*Well all men betray. All lose heart....*" – "*I DON'T WANT TO LOSE HEART!*" shouts Robert. "*I want to BELIEVE. As he does. I will never be on the wrong side again.*"

And here, I think, is why this film gives men who haven't been properly fathered such hope: it holds out the possibility of second chances, of redemption after failure, in a word, of being re-fathered. Wallace, even after the Bruce's bitter betrayal, forgives him and never loses faith in him.

All along, Wallace had been fathering the Bruce. He saw his weakness, but he could also say with utter conviction: “*There’s strength in you, I see it!*” Every man needs to hear that from a man he trusts. And remember how dumbfounded Robert the Bruce was when William spoke these words to him (or, rather, *into* him):

Your title gives you claim to the throne of our country. But men don’t follow titles. They follow courage. ... And if you would just have the courage to LEAD the people to freedom, they’d follow you. And so would I.

This movie is as much about Robert the Bruce acquiring a brave heart through William as it is about William’s brave heart. By naming the Bruce’s strength – and by refusing to believe that his faults defined him – William also called his strength out: “*You’ve bled with Wallace. Now bleed with me!*” went the Bruce’s battle-cry in the final scene of the film.

In the “making of” footage of *Braveheart*, Mel Gibson said, “I hope [those who see this movie] can’t talk at the end of it. I hope that they’re so moved and so inspired by it that ... they’ve found something in themselves.” You did it, Mel. Thank you. From the bottom of my aspiring to be brave heart, I thank you.

(Posted on CorProject.com Blog, written May 18, 2015. Originally appeared on Father Robert Barron’s Word on Fire blog on May 22 in anticipation of 20th anniversary of the release of the film Braveheart on May 24.)



LUKE SKYWALKER AND ROCKY BALBOA ARE BACK – AND I’M THRILLED!

I was 7 and a half years old in the summer of 1977 when *Star Wars* was released – the perfect age to have my imagination swept away by George Lucas’s space mythology. By the time its first run in theaters was over, I had seen it 15 times.

I was a fanatic. I not only had all the toys and action figures, I had *Star Wars* everything: lunchbox, socks, shirts, sheets, Halloween costumes, cups, plates, collector’s cards. But what made me stand out in the neighborhood was my bedroom. Lots of kids in the late 70s had *Star Wars* posters covering their walls, but I was the only one who had *Star Wars* wallpaper.

The boy inside me is quite excited to have the three stars of the original trilogy back all these years later for the seventh installment of the series. But I feel doubly blessed with the coming holiday movie season because, after *Star Wars*, I was a huge *Rocky* fan. Later this month, the Italian Stallion will be back in a movie called *Creed*, this time as the trainer of the son of his original opponent Apollo Creed. I’m thrilled!

Why am I sharing this bit of movie nostalgia and excitement? The joy we take in certain movies could seem trivial, but take a closer look and we discover a window into the depths of the human spirit. As a kid, the *Star Wars* and *Rocky* sagas just seemed like exciting entertainment. As an adult, I’ve realized that these myths got in my blood because I was looking for something in them – I was looking for the truth about myself, about the world, about human life and existence.

Some may treat myths as mere escapism, and there's nothing wrong per se with modest doses of mindless entertainment. But that's not the real purpose of myths. Myths take us to other worlds in order to bring us back with feet more solidly planted in our own.

MYTHS TAKE US TO OTHER WORLDS IN ORDER TO BRING US BACK WITH FEET MORE SOLIDLY PLANTED IN OUR OWN.

C.S. Lewis said it quite well in a review of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*: "The value of the myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by 'the veil of familiarity.'" By entering into the world of a good myth, he concluded, "we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it. As long as the story lingers in our mind, the real things are more themselves."

This is why, as Pope Benedict XVI recommended, each one of us should take the time "to follow with our minds and our hearts a tale, a story in which to immerse ourselves, in a certain sense 'to lose ourselves' to find ourselves subsequently enriched."¹

This holiday movie season, I plan to "lose myself" both in a galaxy far, far away and in the Rocky-verse of South Philly. If both movies pan out to be as good as the trailers lead me to believe, I'm sure I'll be enriched.

(Originally posted on CorProject.com Blog, written Nov. 2, 2015.)



“I’M NOT A MISTAKE”: THE KEY LINE OF THE MOVIE *CREED*

I recently took all my boys (ages 18, 16, and 9) to see *Creed*, the latest film in the Rocky saga. Rocky was a huge part of my boyhood and I’ve really enjoyed passing the story on to my sons.

(Spoiler alerts) I want to zoom in on what struck me as the key line of the whole movie. Rocky trains Adonis Creed, who, we learn, is the offspring of an affair Apollo Creed had had just before he died fighting Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV*. Because of his last name and the draw of Rocky in his corner, Adonis is offered a chance at a championship fight. Creed is getting clobbered and, haunted by his failure to throw in the towel in the fight that killed his father, Rocky tells Adonis he’s got nothing left to prove and he’s going to end the fight.

Adonis won’t let him. He’s convinced he *does* have something left to prove. Incredulous, Rocky asks what it is. Adonis replies, “That I’m not a mistake....”

Boom! There it is – the need of every human being to know that his (or her) existence *means* something. And right there – in Adonis’s need to prove to himself that he’s not a mistake – is one of the most powerful apologetics for the Church’s teaching that sex belongs in marriage: more precisely, that sex is meant to be an expression of marital love, of wedding vows. The dignity of each person involved (man, woman, and potential offspring) demands it.

The modern world is desperately in need of recovering what should be an obvious and celebrated fact: sex leads to babies. When we recognize this truth and receive it as the tremendous *good* that it is without alteration, the answer to the next question becomes very clear.

Who, then, should be having sex?

Logical answer: only those people who are committed to receiving that child as a *gift* and caring for that child as a *gift*. That commitment is called – you guessed it – *marriage*. It is the utterly committed love of a husband and wife (to each other, and to their offspring) that gives their offspring the proper foundation from which to realize and experience the truth: *I am loved; my life is worth something; my life is valuable; my life has meaning*. In other words: *I'm not a mistake*.

BOOM! THERE IT IS – THE NEED OF EVERY HUMAN BEING TO KNOW THAT HIS (OR HER) EXISTENCE MEANS SOMETHING.

All these truths are “contained” in Adonis’s *need* to keep fighting. Rocky gets it in a flash. And, with Rocky’s fathering in that moment, Creed goes back for another round in a fight for his life.

Powerful stuff. That’s why I’ve always been drawn to the *Rocky* saga: it’s jam-packed with powerful stuff.

(Originally posted on CorProject.com Blog, written Dec. 10, 2015.)



FATHER WOUNDS IN *STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS*

Spoiler alert! Spoiler alert! If you're one of the few who haven't already seen the movie or heard what happens, I'm going to be talking about some plot lines in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

I have wounds here. In the summer of 1980, I was sent to summer camp before I could see *The Empire Strikes Back* and a kid blurted out: "Did you hear Darth Vader is Luke's father!?" To avoid all possibility of story leaks with *Return of the Jedi*, I went to the noon showing on release day only to overhear the person waiting in line in front of me (who had already been to the midnight showing) say that Leia was Luke's sister. Arghh!

Thanks be to God I made it to the theater last Friday without hearing any leaks!

THERE ARE WEEDS TO BE AWARE OF IN STAR WARS MYTHOLOGY, BUT THERE IS ALSO PLENTY OF WHEAT WORTH REJOICING IN.

I could say a great deal about episode VII, but I'm going to limit my comments to one thing that leaped out at me. It was especially striking because I just wrote about it in my review of installment VII of the *Rocky* series. It's the father wound. By showing the fallout in the lives of sons whose fathers were absent/distant, both movies point to the critical importance of the father-son relationship.

Kylo Ren – son of Han and Leia and grandson of Anakin Skywalker (aka: Darth Vader) – has turned to the dark side of the force.

Why? The movie serves up more than enough evidence that it had to do with his broken relationship with Han.

When Rey, the female lead in this film, bonds with Han Solo, Ren wonders if she's looking to him as a father figure and cynically insists: "He'll disappoint you." That disappointment went so deep in Ren that (super spoiler alert!) it turned murderous.

I was left in a bit of emotional turmoil by that plot twist. Just as we're getting reacquainted with Han (after a 30-plus year absence), he's wiped out. Will he be back in holographic form from the beyond (like Obi-wan was)? Or did Harrison Ford refuse to return for further episodes thus demanding that Han be written out of the story? The Internet is rife with theories.

I must say, not seeing Han and Luke back together again was an emotional letdown. As was less than 30 seconds of screen time for Luke (I wonder how many millions Mark Hamill got for that brief appearance!). But the sense of communion I shared with my kids and with over a hundred other people in the theater last Friday night, complete with exuberant cheers when familiar characters appeared on screen and loud applause when it all came to an end, speaks of how deep in the psyche a story can go.

There are weeds to be aware of in Star Wars mythology, but there is also plenty of wheat worth rejoicing in. I, for one, am thankful for these characters who lived a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

(Originally posted on CorProject.com Blog, written Dec. 18, 2015.)



DEADPOOL:

I. DEADPOOL AND THE MAINSTREAMING OF EXTREME SEXUAL PERVERSION

Comic books characters and family fun at the movies go together like peanut butter and jelly, right? Well, with the debut of *Deadpool*, Marvel Comics and 20th Century Fox forced me last weekend to have a conversation with my two oldest sons about a level of sexual perversion that I'd prefer not to know about.

You may prefer not to know about it, too, so let me forewarn you: In this blog I'm going to talk about a level of sexual perversion you may prefer not to know about. Feel free to opt out if you haven't the stomach.

Why address it at all? The fact that a film that depicts this level of perversity has become a smash hit (it broke a long list of box office records last weekend with a \$300 million worldwide debut) is more than a little concerning, and people of faith – especially parents – serve no one by keeping their heads in the sand. We simply *must* learn how to have open, honest conversations with our kids about what they're being exposed to, and Saint John Paul II's Theology of the Body offers both a compelling understanding of how we got in this mess and, more importantly, how to get out.

First, let me acknowledge that I'm getting my information about this movie from online reviews. I haven't seen it. Also, *Deadpool* is known for satire, so it's possible that the perversion in question is depicted in order to expose and critique contemporary culture. If so,

I'm in full agreement that it needs to be critiqued.

The word “perverse” comes from the Latin *perversus* which means “turned around.” The word couldn’t be any more fitting to describe the behavior depicted in an extended sex scene in *Deadpool*. The roles of male and female in the sexual act literally get *turned around*: with the help of a “device,” the woman mocks the male role and the man mocks the female role. The culture at large has taken to calling this “pegging” and – not surprisingly – the actors who portrayed this, so I read, took to downing shots of tequila in preparation for filming.

SAINT JOHN PAUL II'S THEOLOGY OF THE BODY OFFERS BOTH A COMPELLING UNDERSTANDING OF HOW WE GOT IN THIS MESS AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, HOW TO GET OUT.

Scott Mendelson, writing for *Forbes.com*, calls any satirical intent of the filmmakers into question with his nonchalant observation that “seeing a super-macho, hypermasculine leading man like Ryan Reynolds end up on the receiving end of a strap-on dildo will hopefully demonstrate to audiences that it’s fun and totally okay to experiment with power dynamics during sex, as long as both partners are willing and consenting adults.”

There’s nothing new under the sun, of course. It’s not like 21st century human beings are the first to pervert the natural order of the sexual act in this way. But to celebrate it in mainstream entertainment on a worldwide scale ... that’s unprecedented.

How did we get here? Well, hasn’t radical feminist culture been claiming for several decades that men and women are interchangeable? “Women can do anything men can do,” it’s been claimed. The natural

corollary, of course, is that men can do anything women can do. Isn't this behavior just taking that claim to its logical conclusions?

But, alas, it's right here that the claim breaks down. The roles of male and female in the sexual act simply cannot be re-versed, only per-versed.

Women can certainly do *most* of the things men can do. Men can certainly do *most* of the things women can do. But, lest we forget, there is something only men can do (because they're men) and only women can do (because they're women) and they must do it together in order to be able to do it at all. Only a man can be a father and only a woman can be a mother. While it has been just and necessary to challenge certain societal roles conventionally limited to one or the other gender, the roles of male and female in the sexual act (in the act designed to make a man a father and a woman a mother) are not interchangeable, and they are absolutely essential for the survival of society.

AS SOON AS WE EMBRACE AN IDEOLOGY THAT SEVERS GENITAL ACTIVITY FROM GENERATION, IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THE VERY NOTION OF "GENDER" LOSES ALL MEANING AND THE FUNDAMENTAL ORDER OF THINGS GETS TOTALLY *TURNED AROUND*.

Because of the wholesale embrace of the contraceptive mentality, the modern world has forgotten that the most basic, the most fundamental role of gender is to generate the next generation. The root "gen" – from which we get words like generous, generate, genesis, genetics, genealogy, progeny, gender, and genitals – means to produce

or give birth to. A person's *gen*-der is based on the manner in which that person is designed to *gen*-erate new life. But as soon as we embrace an ideology that severs genital activity from generation, it's only a matter of time before the very notion of "gender" loses all meaning and the fundamental order of things gets totally *turned around*.

Just like Big Tobacco after years and years of denial finally had to face the overwhelming mountain of evidence and admit that cigarettes cause cancer, so too will the entertainment industry, the medical establishment, governments, and educational centers (in short, the whole modern edifice) one day be compelled to admit that separating genitals from generation has lead to a de-gendered and, as a result, de-generate world.

Dead-pool ... it's a fitting description of a world that continues to celebrate this de-gendering: it seems we're sinking in a pool of death. Truth and mercy are the only things that can save us. And the Catholic Church continues to offer both to the whole world. Are we willing to accept her offer?

(Originally posted on CorProject.com Blog, written Feb. 18, 2016.)

II. A GLIMMER OF LIGHT SHINES AMIDST ITS CRASS PORNIFICATION

My (last blog) on the movie *Deadpool* sparked some great discussion on my Facebook page. I was upfront about the fact that I hadn't seen the movie. The point of my blog was not to comment on the overall story, which I had no ability to do. Rather, my commentary focused on the fact that a comic book movie depicted an act that demonstrates how things once limited to the sexual perversity of a dark underground are

now writ large in mainstream entertainment.

Amidst a stream of comments from parents thanking me for the warning and others who had seen the movie affirming what I said, more than a few people challenged me not to comment on a movie I hadn't seen. Fair enough. So, after a good deal of back and forth, I went to see it.

I'm glad I did. Not because I think it's a great movie, but because it gave me an important look into the state of the culture I'm trying to reach with St. John Paul II's Theology of the Body.

What did St. Paul do before presenting the Gospel to the Athenians? He "looked carefully" at all their idols. The idolatry Paul encountered in Athens was probably not much different than the idolatry of today. Statues and monuments of a pornographic nature were prevalent in Greek culture at the time (imagine if they had had photography and the ability to make movies). This may explain why Paul was "deeply distressed" upon seeing their idols (see Acts 17:16).

Still, he did not overreact; he did not go from one imbalance to the other. Rather, having examined the situation "carefully" (Acts 17:23), he very creatively used their idolatry as a meeting place to lead the Athenians to Christ (see Acts 17:16-32). In fact, their idols lead him to the conclusion that they were a "very religious" people (Acts 17:23). As Paul knew well, behind every idol is the human desire for the true God gone awry. And so we can see that St. Paul offers an olive branch, an affirmation of that element of truth that he sees even in their deeply distressing distortions.

There is no doubt in my mind that the entire ethos of the *Deadpool* movie is derived from a culture immersed in a pornified view of the body and sexuality. Several times I hung my head with a pit in my stomach. The mockery of the sacred gift of sex was relentless. Still, I can affirm that there is

some good wheat amidst this field of gangly weeds. It takes strong custody of the eyes and the grace of resisting the constant pull into distortion to find it, so I'm not offering any general recommendation that people see this film. However, if we are to evangelize the culture, it is an important – indeed necessary – skill to learn how to affirm the good present even amidst gross distortion, to tease it out, as St. Paul did with the Athenians.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, *DEADPOOL* IS A SELF-PROFESSED LOVE STORY. IN FACT, ITS MAIN ARC FOCUSES ON A VERY IMPORTANT QUESTION: ARE WE LOVABLE BEHIND OUR MASKS?

Believe it or not, *Deadpool* is a self-professed love story. In fact, its main arc focuses on a very important question: Are we lovable behind our masks? When all our wounds, scars, blemishes, and “ugliness” are on display, will we be abandoned by the people who claim to love us? In other words, is love only skin deep?

After becoming terribly disfigured, Wade Wilson is on an obsessively violent quest to restore his previous looks so that his very attractive girlfriend will still love him. Sensing his obsession, a blind character asserts that looks aren't everything. “Looks *are* everything,” retorts Wade. “I gotta be hot again,” he insists, “so I can get my hot girl back.” Who's the real blind person here?

In the end, Wade learns that the love of his life still loves him even with his scars. And in one of the final lines of the movie he declares, “You don't need to be a superhero to get the girl.” That's a glimmer of real light amidst some very dark distortions.

(Originally posted on CorProject.com Blog, written Feb. 23, 2016.)



TEN YEARS OF *NACHO LIBRE*'S HILARIOUS TAKE ON “SALVATION AND STUFF”

I have found that there are four kinds of Catholics: those who love the movie *Nacho Libre*, those who despise it, those who just don't get it, and, by far the vast majority, those who've never heard of it.

I fall into the first category. So it's with a certain amount of delight that I recently realized this month (June 16) marks the 10th anniversary of this stupidly wonderful movie's release. It's become a classic in my family. It's a rare day when someone in my home has not quoted a line from the extensive library of Nacho ridiculousness. Not only does Jack Black's character, Ignacio – a Franciscan friar who secretly becomes pro-wrestler “Nacho Libre” – make me laugh uproariously, I

THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON IGNACIO LEARNS COMES STRAIGHT OUT OF THE GOSPEL: “IF I GLORIFY MYSELF,” SAYS JESUS, “MY GLORY IS WORTH NOTHING; BUT IT IS MY FATHER WHO GLORIFIES ME” (JN 8:54).

honestly believe there is some mystical nectar to be savored amidst the absolute absurdity of it all.

The most important lesson Ignacio learns comes straight out of the Gospel: “If I glorify myself,” says Jesus, “my glory is worth nothing; but it is my Father who glorifies me” (Jn 8:54). Ignacio is tired of being a nobody among the other friars at the monastery (“The brothers think I don't know a butt load-o-crap about the Gospel, but I

dooooooooo...”) and he covets from afar the vainglories of the famous luchadores (Mexican wrestlers) who “get all the fancy ladies, and the clothes, and the free creams and lotions.” At one point, trying to recruit Steven as his wrestling partner, he exclaims, “Don’t you wanna little taste-o-the-glory, see what it tastes like?!”

One thing is clear – Ignacio does: “I am the gatekeeper of my own destiny, and I will have my glory-day in the hot sun.”

But Nacho’s road to glory is paved with disappointments and humiliations because, well, he’s trying to glorify himself. It’s all about him. Despite all his desperate attempts to acquire “nutrients” and “eagle powers” so he can prove his prowess in the ring, he keeps losing. He even baptizes Steven with a surprise face-dunk before squaring off against “Satan’s Cavemen” in hopes of securing the victory (and because, as he explains, “I’m a little concerned right now, about your salvation and stuff...”).

BUT NACHO’S ROAD TO GLORY IS PAVED WITH DISAPPOINTMENTS AND HUMILIATIONS BECAUSE, WELL, HE’S TRYING TO GLORIFY HIMSELF. IT’S ALL ABOUT HIM.

Sister Encarnación tries to warn Ignacio: “You are a man of the cloth ... These men fight for vanity, for money, for false pride.” Ignacio, always wanting to agree with this lovely nun (his wrestling with his feelings for her is another humorously and insightfully, if somewhat irreverently, handled theme of the movie), responds: “Yes, it’s terrible, terrible. But is it always a sin to fight?” “No,” responds the comely nun. “If you fight for something noble, or for someone who needs your help, only then will God bless you in battle.”

Ignacio's turning point comes when he prays kneeling before the altar: "Precious Father, why have you given me this desire to wrestle and then made me such a stinky warrior? Have I focused too much on my boots, and on fame, and on my stretchy pants?" Then, in a moment of astonished illumination, he says to God, "Wait a second... maybe you want me to fight and give everything I win to the little ones who have nothing, so they can have better foods and a better life." In that moment a candle drops to the floor and sets his Franciscan robes aflame, a comedic indication that the Spirit has descended on Ignacio.

AT LAST HE "GETS A LITTLE TASTE-O-THE-GLORY," BUT THIS TIME, HE HASN'T GRASPED AT IT; IT'S A GIFT BESTOWED FROM ABOVE.

With his robes charred away, the other brothers see his "stretchy pants" underneath and he confesses that he is, in fact, "Nachoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!" the luchador. "Tonight," he says, "I will fight the seven strongest men in town, maybe the world. And I will win because our heavenly Father will be in the ring with me. And he and I will win 10,000 pesos." Then, choking on tears, he announces, "And with it, I will buy the orphans a big bus to go on field trips to parks and places like that." Finally, perusing the incredulous expressions of his brothers, he shouts, "I'm serious!"

Before the final championship bout, Steven – who, up to this point "only believed in science" – prays for Nacho: "Dear Lord, please bless Nacho with nutrients and strength," and Nacho says with him "Amen!" In the final minutes of battle, the long-desired eagle powers descend upon him, and Nacho becomes the new champion. At last he

“gets a little taste-o-the-glory,” but this time, he hasn’t grasped at it; it’s a gift bestowed from above. And, of course, he keeps the glory not for himself, but shares it with the orphans. Another lesson from above: “I have given them the glory you gave me” (Jn 17:22). Pretty deep for a stupid comedy.

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“HERE’S TO THE HEARTS THAT ACHE...” SOME THOUGHTS ON *LA LA LAND*

The hit musical *La La Land* recently tied 1997 blockbuster *Titanic* for the most Academy Award nominations ever (14). It’s certainly a movie worth checking out if you haven’t seen it, even if you, like me, haven’t always been a fan of musicals.

I grew up watching lots of musicals in my family and never quite “got it.” I mean, people don’t normally just break into song like that. As I have aged and come to appreciate the interior life more, I’ve also come to appreciate previously unappreciated genres of art, including musicals. As an artistic device, having people break into song and dance is a creative way of giving the viewer a glimpse into the interior life of the characters.

AS AN ARTISTIC DEVICE, HAVING PEOPLE BREAK INTO SONG AND DANCE IS A CREATIVE WAY OF GIVING THE VIEWER A GLIMPSE INTO THE INTERIOR LIFE OF THE CHARACTERS.

La La Land is a touching love story. It focuses on two struggling artists, musician Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) and Mia (Emma Stone), whose paths cross at a time of desperation in both of their careers. At first, they seem complete opposites. Sebastian struggles with the emptiness of Los Angeles (“L.A. is a town where people worship everything and value nothing,” he says in one of the film’s best lines). He yearns to open a jazz club that remains pure to jazz’s wild and adventurous core.

Meanwhile, Mia is ready to pack in her underachieving acting career after several years of humbling audition failures. She secretly desires to write and produce a one-woman play, but her confidence is too shaken to pursue that dream. Opposites attract and they soon find they lift each other, filling in each other's cracks. A passionate romance ensues.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE PERSON YOU LOVE HAS DREAMS AND HOPES THAT MAY NOT CORRESPOND WITH YOUR DREAMS AND HOPES?

At the end, *La La Land* takes you for a ride you didn't quite expect. Director Damien Chazelle explores themes of the dreams and hopes we all have for our lives — love certainly being one of the biggest — and the “cost” to attain them. What happens when the person you love has dreams and hopes that may not correspond with your dreams and hopes? Are you able to help that other person pursue them? And what role does love play in all of that?

My favorite scene in the movie is when Mia is auditioning for what seems like one final shot at a movie role. At the audition, Mia learns that the movie has no script yet, so the casting directors ask her just to tell them a story. Caught off guard, she ponders nervously what to do. Then, in a flash of inspiration, she begins to tell a very personal story about how a favorite aunt inspired her. Very creatively, as the story turns to song, we are taken into Mia's interior experience. The lights dim and the cameras zoom in on her as if no one else is there, but we, the viewers are right there with her, almost “in” her heart.

Until this point, Mia had sung mostly in a tempered falsetto. But during this moment, she begins to unleash her voice with powerful

abandon, belting out my favorite line of the movie: “Here’s to the hearts that ache / Here’s to the mess we make.”

THIS IS ONE OF THE GREAT GIFTS OF GOOD ART: IT UNEARTHS THE DEEP AND HIDDEN PLACES OF OUR OWN HEARTS, GIVING US PERMISSION TO FEEL WHAT’S IN THERE.

We’re often afraid to feel that deep “ache” of our hearts because we intuit that to feel it is to lose control of our nice, orderly lives. Yes, that is correct. In Christian terms, it’s called surrender or abandonment to God. Those who have the courage to feel the abyss of longing in their souls and in their bodies and open it up in complete abandonment to the One who put it there will, indeed, have “messy” lives ... but messy in a beautifully hopeful way.

This is one of the great gifts of good art: it unearths the deep and hidden places of our own hearts, giving us permission to feel what’s in there.

Here’s to the hearts that ache!

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CONCLUSION

FIVE TIPS FOR “ENTERING IN” TO MUSIC AND MOVIES

Eros, properly understood, is our deep, inner desire for the true, the good, and the beautiful, for what philosophers call “the transcendentals.” Tragically, in the modern world, the true and the good have been relativized: “That might be true (or good) for *you*, but that’s not true (or good) for *me*,” people say. And that’s why appealing to the true and the good typically doesn’t get us very far today as evangelists.

Not so with beauty. Beauty has retained its appeal. The encounter with authentic beauty, in turn, can “wake us up” also to truth and goodness, as Pope Francis helps us understand in his outstanding letter *The Joy of the Gospel*.

THE VALUES EXPRESSED IN CONTEMPORARY ART ARE OFTEN FAR (QUITE FAR) FROM THOSE OF THE GOSPEL. STILL, THERE ARE GEMS TO BE FOUND. AND I CONSIDER IT A DUTY AS AN EVANGELIST TO FIND THEM.

What are your favorite encounters with beauty? Where do you seek it out? What are your favorite songs or stories? What movies speak to your heart? What glories of nature awaken you? It’s important that we make time to encounter beauty and to lead others to do the same.

In my latest book, *Pope Francis to Go: Bite-Sized Morsels from the Joy of the Gospel*, I devote a chapter to Pope Francis’s teaching on the “way of beauty”: “Every form of catechesis,” he says, “would do well to

attend to the ‘way of beauty.’ Proclaiming Christ means showing that to believe in and to follow him is . . . something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendor and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties. Every expression of true beauty can thus be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus” (*Joy of the Gospel* 167).

How can we attend to the “way of beauty” in sharing Christ with others? Here’s an important suggestion from Pope Francis:

Each particular Church should encourage the use of the arts in evangelization, building on the treasures of the past but also drawing upon the wide variety of contemporary expressions so as to transmit the faith in a new “language of parables.” We must be bold enough to discover new signs and new symbols, new flesh to embody and communicate the word, and different forms of beauty which are valued in different cultural settings, including those unconventional modes of beauty which may mean little to the evangelizers, yet prove particularly attractive for others. (*Joy of the Gospel* 167)

The values expressed in contemporary art are often far (quite far) from those of the gospel. Still, there are gems to be found. And I consider it a duty as an evangelist to find them.

Anyone who’s attended one of my talks or courses knows that I often make use of popular songs and movies to communicate certain points of the gospel. I find it to be an especially powerful teaching tool and point of connection for my students. They will often ask me how

I mine so much out of movies and music – saying they’ve seen the same movie or heard the same song many times but hadn’t caught the meaning until I unfolded it for them.

Here are a few tips on how to “enter in” to the underlying meaning of popular songs and movies.

1. **Don’t just watch or listen for the sake of entertainment.**

Watch and listen knowing that the art is *saying* something. It comes from somewhere in the human heart. What aspect of the human heart (for good or ill) is being expressed (literally: pressed-out)? What is the artist wanting to say?

2. **In music, pay attention not only to the lyrics, but to the mood of the melody and instrumentation.** These are an integral part of the story being told. Pay attention also to your own emotional reactions to the lyrics, melody, and instrumentation. They also are a window into the song.

3. **In movies, pay attention not only to the characters but to everything on screen.** *Everything* is put there to tell part of the story. Nothing in the background (signs, paintings on the wall, settings, landscapes) is arbitrary. It’s all telling part of the story. Pay attention to all of it (use the pause button liberally to catch these additional and often important elements of the storytelling).

4. **In movies, watch for the recurring use of symbols.** For example, in *I Am Legend* (one of the most Christian secular

movies I've ever seen), the symbol of the butterfly plays a recurring, critical role in the storytelling. What is it?

5. **Look for the allegory.** Most of my favorite movies wouldn't be of much interest if watched as literal storytelling, but when seen as allegory, the deep meaning opens up. Again, for the sake of example, *I Am Legend* is not a "zombie movie." It's an allegory. What do the zombies represent? Who does Dr. Neville represent? Similarly, *Shawshank Redemption* is not a prison movie. It's an allegory. Who does Andy Dufresne represent? What does the prison represent?

Making use of the beauty to be found in contemporary movies and music "has nothing to do with . . . downplay[ing] the inseparable bond between truth, goodness and beauty," says Pope Francis. Rather, it shows "a renewed esteem for beauty as a means of touching the human heart and enabling the truth and goodness of the Risen Christ to radiate within it" (*Joy of the Gospel* 167).

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BONUS REFLECTION #1

***INSIDE OUT* AND THE ACHE**

Good stories have always helped me get in touch with the ache in my heart – that burning, yearning, empty feeling we all have inside which is meant to point us to the infinite. Knowing that Pixar has a gift for creating beautiful art, I was anticipating *Inside Out* for months. But I wasn't anticipating just how insightful this movie would be. Not only had Pixar created a film that put me in touch with the ache, they had created a film that was actually about the ache ... and what to do with it. (Warning: spoilers follow.)

Inside Out is the story of an 11-year-old girl named Riley. Five personified emotions – Joy, Anger, Disgust, Fear and Sadness – live inside Riley's head and direct her life from the console in "Headquarters". When an emotion touches the console it lights up in its own specific color (red for Anger, blue for Sadness, etc.) and they can control what Riley does.

The story is narrated by Joy, an expectedly cheerful and enthusiastic emotion who just wants Riley to be happy. Joy, however, still appreciates the other emotions – except for Sadness. After all, how does being sad help Riley?

Unfortunately, Riley is adjusting painfully to her family's move from Minnesota to San Francisco. Reeling from the loss of all that was familiar and struggling to hold on to her identity, Riley turns to her parents for support. But her father, busy with the move, casually dismisses her, leaving Riley wondering if he still loves her. Seeing

Riley's pain, Sadness reaches for the console... but Joy stops her. Joy quickly pulls up good thoughts and memories in Riley's head, all the time trying to repress and ignore the pain Riley's feeling. In so doing, Joy is simultaneously buying into both the "starvation diet gospel" and the "fast food gospel," as my dad likes to call these beliefs about life. She is hoping that she can either repress the ache or satiate it with finite things. Of course, neither approach works. Finite pleasures can't fill our aching heart and trying to ignore it is futile, as events soon show.

Due to Joy's meddling, both Joy and Sadness are ejected from Headquarters and land in Riley's long-term memory, leaving Riley with only Anger, Fear, and Disgust to guide her. Joy and Sadness immediately set out on a journey through the landscape of Riley's mind, trying to get back to Headquarters so that Riley can be happy again. Pay careful attention to the symbols in their journey – there are such rich and moving insights to unfold here, but I want to focus on the lessons we learn about Sadness in her adventure back to Headquarters.

Sadness, not surprisingly, can be a real downer. She's often depressed and impossible to motivate. But she reveals her true character in her determination to get Joy back to Headquarters so that Riley can be happy again. Like Joy, Sadness cares immensely about Riley's well being. She also, interestingly enough, is the one who best understands the twisting maze of Riley's memories, dreams, and subconscious. She knows the deep places of Riley's heart and how scary these places can be. Basically, Sadness is the one best equipped to feel Riley's *ache*.

We learn more about Sadness when Joy decides to look through some of Riley's old memories. She comes across one of the happiest moments of Riley's life, when her ice hockey team lifted Riley up on their shoulders after a game while Riley's parents stood by cheering.

Joy loves this happy memory. Joy had forgotten, however, that this was actually a very sad day. Riley's hockey team had lost a big playoff game because Riley had missed the winning shot, leaving Riley depressed. Seeing how sad she was, Riley's team and family came and lifted her high anyway, celebrating her even in her moment of failure. It was, as Joy remembered, one of the happiest moments of Riley's life.

Seeing this, Joy realizes that Riley wouldn't have felt so loved if she hadn't felt her ache first. Finally, Joy knows what to do. With help from an imaginary friend which symbolizes Riley's childhood innocence, a song-powered rocket ship which symbolizes her desire for infinity, and an island which symbolizes the love of Riley's family, Joy and Sadness are finally able to get back to Headquarters.

IF WE ALLOW OURSELVES TO FEEL OUR ACHE WHILE HOLDING THE HANDS OF LOVE AND MERCY, WE WILL FIND TRUE JOY.

Unfortunately, things have gotten much worse since they left.

Without Joy or Sadness, Riley became disgusted with her pain, angry at everything that had to do with it, and afraid that it would never go away. Anger figured that all this pain was caused by moving to San Francisco, so, with Fear and Disgust's support, Anger made Riley run away from home. Unfortunately, in choosing to run away, Riley was also choosing to ignore her pain. But in order to do that, you can't allow yourself to feel anything. The emotions get completely locked out of the console, unable to help Riley and unable to remove the idea of running away. By the time Joy and Sadness get back, Riley has become depressed and apathetic.

Seeing this, all the emotions turn to Joy, asking her to fix everything. To their surprise, Joy brings Sadness to the console. Sadness looks to Joy for affirmation and then gently but firmly grasps the idea of running away and *pulls* it out of the console. Suddenly, the console lights up again and Riley jumps up, shocked. She can feel again! Her ache has broken through and she immediately heads back home.

When she arrives her parents rush up to her, wondering where she'd been. While the other emotions watch, Sadness touches the console, causing it to light up blue. Finally in touch with her ache, Riley opens up her heart to her parents, telling them how all of her happy memories have become painful now that they seem so far away. Her parents affirm that it's okay to hurt inside. In fact, they miss Minnesota too, especially those parts that made Riley happy. As she breaks down in tears and her parents embrace her, Sadness places Joy's hand next to her own on the console. Joy's yellow suddenly blossoms in the center of Sadness's blue. Riley smiles.

Even as I'm writing this, I'm tearing up a little. In this scene, we're all Riley and our parents are Mary and Jesus. If we allow ourselves to feel our ache while holding the hands of Love and Mercy, we will find true joy. Notice, however, that the sadness didn't go away for Riley. This is important, because God doesn't promise to take away our pain and sorrow. Rather, He promises that in the very act of feeling our ache, we will open ourselves to the greatest joy possible: the happiness of being loved in our broken humanity. It can be hard to believe sometimes, but it's true. The poor in spirit, those who feel their emptiness and ache, really are blessed and truly happy, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven and the heart of God.

(Written by John Paul West. Originally posted on CorProject.com Blog July 23, 2015.)



BONUS REFLECTION #2

CAPTAIN AMERICA, THEOLOGY OF THE BODY AND THE MARVEL UNIVERSE

My brother and I had been anticipating *Captain America: Civil War* for quite some time, all the more so since the very clever social media campaign successfully built the hype up to amazing levels (I was #teamcap all the way). This movie did not disappoint! In fact, it exceeded my expectations.

While managing to juggle over a dozen complicated and interesting characters, the movie delivered a story that perfectly satisfied both my inner geek and my “TOB sensibilities” (that’s Theology of the Body for those who need reminding). It was full of themes that speak truth to the modern world. In one particularly memorable scene, Captain America’s love interest proclaims (literally from a pulpit): “Compromise where you can. Where you can’t, don’t. Even if everyone is telling you that something wrong is something right; even if the whole world is telling you to move, it is your duty to plant yourself like a tree, look them in the eye, and say ‘No, YOU move.’” Preach it, sister!

While we must always reach out to the world with love and respect, we must also prepare for the time where we will have to plant ourselves firmly as Captain America did (or, as my dad likes to point out, as Pope Paul VI did in “Gandalf style” when he issued *Humanae Vitae*) and say to the world, “No, you move!”

This scene was perhaps the most overt recognition of truth present in *Civil War* (or, for that matter, in any Hollywood movie in

recent years). Other gems that we can extract are a bit more ... subtle. They require the viewer to step back and recognize that, at its core, *Civil War* is a movie that doesn't make sense by itself.

WHILE WE MUST ALWAYS REACH OUT TO THE WORLD WITH LOVE AND RESPECT, WE MUST ALSO PREPARE FOR THE TIME WHERE WE WILL HAVE TO PLANT OURSELVES FIRMLY AS CAPTAIN AMERICA DID . . . AND SAY TO THE WORLD, "NO, YOU MOVE!"

[Spoilers ahead!] Take the epic fight scene at the center of the film. Team Cap needs to reach a Quinjet and head to a secret mountain base, while Team Iron Man is convinced that this is a fool's errand. To the shock of all characters present, both sides refuse to compromise or back down. The fight that ensues is epic in proportion and almost gleeful in its ability to make the audience laugh, squeal with joy, and gape with mouths open at the fight's sheer awesomeness. And yet, out of context, it is a near ridiculous fight. Almost none of the characters fight at full strength. Instead, they try *not* to hurt each other. When War Machine actually gets injured (and by accident!) everyone stops fighting and rushes to help him. And, yet everyone who's seen the movie *loves* this scene. Why? Because this is not a cliché fight from a cheap, money-making action flick. Rather, it is a fight that draws its tension from the grand, overarching story that Marvel and Disney have been telling through the past 12 (count them!) Marvel films.

Why is this kind of story (seen in Marvel, DC, and *Star Wars* to name a few) so popular? I would argue that it's because we, like each of these movies, don't make sense by ourselves. We inherently desire to

be part of something bigger than ourselves, a grand story that we fit into and that gives context to every moment of our lives. The search for meaning at the center of the human heart could be translated as a search for story. The modern culture recognizes this desire in the human heart and responds with stories of grand scope and epic nature. It is to be praised for doing so, especially when these stories awaken hearts to desire.

WE INHERENTLY DESIRE TO BE PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER THAN OURSELVES, A GRAND STORY THAT WE FIT INTO AND THAT GIVES CONTEXT TO EVERY MOMENT OF OUR LIVES.

However, the culture is not the only one with a grand story to tell. Pope Saint John Paul II, through the teachings of Vatican II and his own Theology of the Body, has reminded the world that one of the Church's greatest treasures is that it possesses the grandest story ever told. This story illuminates the life of every person and places us in the middle of a dramatic struggle in which God Himself comes down to raise us up and fulfill our every desire. And the best part of this story is — none of it is fiction or fantasy.

This story is so powerful that echoes of it can be seen in stories everywhere. These echoes can be seen even in a superhero action flick like *Captain America*. At the end of the movie, the Avengers — the team at the center of the Marvel Universe — is shattered. Though this group of heroes and friends has stood together against the forces of darkness and won many times, they were ultimately divided and defeated by a conniving deceiver bent on vengeance (remind anyone of a certain father of lies and divider of peoples?). As the light goes out of Iron Man's

suit, Cap abandons his iconic shield (after an epic, yet tragic, fight with his former friend), and the rest of our heroes find themselves either injured or in chains. The viewer realizes that the Avengers have truly died. For the first time, evil has won the day.

Or has it?

It is, perhaps, a bit of a stretch to relate the final events of the film directly to the resurrection of Christ. However, there is no denying the sheer “epicness” of the final scene before credits role. In it Sam Wilson (Cap’s best friend and also the Avenger “Falcon”), hearing signs of chaos outside his prison cell, looks up and smiles as he sees Captain America, the iconic hero, step out of the shadows. Cap has come to rescue his friends, and, in a very real way, the Avengers have come back from the dead.

Almost everyone who walks out of the theater at the end of this film will be filled with a sense of awe at a grand story that is filled with complicated, human characters that are trying to do what is right and truly noble. If that awakens a noble desire in people’s hearts and inspires them with a little extra courage to stand against evil, it will have done its job well.

(Written by John Paul West. Originally posted on CorProject.com Blog May 17, 2016.)

ABOUT CHRISTOPHER WEST

Christopher West is a proud husband and father of five. His global lecturing, best-selling books, and multiple audio and video programs have also made him the world's most recognized teacher of Saint John Paul II's "Theology of the Body," a bold, biblical vision of love and sexuality that takes us to the "cor" of what it means to be human. As founder and president of The Cor Project, he leads an international outreach



devoted to spreading this liberating teaching and empowering others to live and share it. His work has been featured in *The New York Times*, on ABC News, Fox News, MSNBC, and countless Catholic and Evangelical media outlets.

Beyond his work as a popularizer of the Theology of the Body, Christopher has been teaching graduate and undergraduate courses on the subject since the late 1990s, having served on the faculties of Saint John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver, the Institute of Priestly Formation in Omaha, and as a visiting professor of the John Paul II Institute in Melbourne, Australia. In 2004, he co-founded the Theology of the Body Institute near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and his week-long courses there continue to draw students from around the world.

The background of the advertisement is a faded image of a man and a woman smiling while looking at a laptop. Overlaid on this are several red, distressed-text elements. In the top left, the words "THE COR PROJECT" are written in large, bold, red capital letters on a piece of torn, aged paper. A red heart icon is positioned to the right of the word "COR". On the right side, the word "MEMBERSHIP" is written vertically in large, bold, red capital letters. At the bottom, the website "CORPROJECT.COM" is written in large, bold, red capital letters. A faint, large red heart is also visible in the background behind the text.

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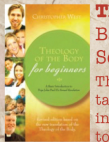
Good News About Sex and Marriage: Answers to Your Honest Questions About Catholic Teaching

Learn the “whys” behind the “whats” of Church teaching as Christopher West uses Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body to answer 115 of the most common questions, objections, and misunderstandings. Chapters on divorce and annulments, premarital sex, marital sex, contraception, infertility and reproductive technologies, homosexuality, and Christian celibacy allow Christopher to address virtually every conceivable topic. If your education in sexual morality amounted to “Thou shalt not,” you will be blown away by the beauty and splendor of the “good news” that West unfolds in this book!



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If you want to “go the distance” in understanding Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body, this is the book for you. A guided tour of the late pope’s teaching from start to finish, West’s 650-page “magnum opus” leaves no stone unturned. First published in 2005, it has served as a standard reference text in universities, seminaries, and private study ever since. There has never been a more thorough guide to the Theology of the Body.



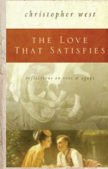
Theology of the Body for Beginners: A Basic Introduction to Pope John Paul II’s Sexual Revolution

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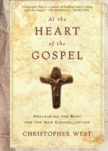
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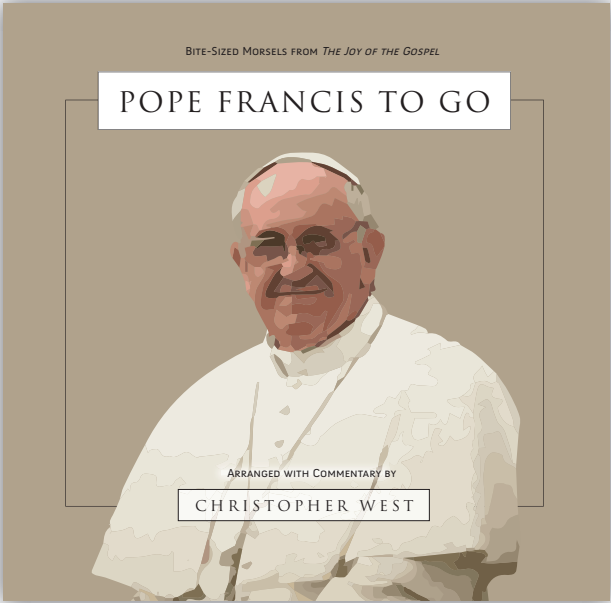
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