

Calvary: An Irish priest threatened for another's crimes

Christine Schofelt
4 October 2014

Written and directed by John Michael McDonagh

Calvary, written and directed by John Michael McDonagh, stars Brendan Gleeson as Father James, an Irish Catholic priest. In the opening scene, James takes confession from an unseen man who evenly recounts being sexually abused by a priest as a child, and informs James that he is going to kill him “Sunday week.”

The priest who horribly abused the man is dead, and anyway, “What’s the good of killing a bad priest?” It is because Father James is good and decent, that the man is going to kill him. An eye for an eye, innocence for murdered innocence.

Father James moves through the week calmly, resignedly, and one has the impression at certain moments, with some relief at the thought of his apparent impending doom. The denizens of the small Irish town in which he lives seem to have little use for him—the atheist doctor, the Buddhist barkeep, the abused wife et al—and Father James himself seems at a loss in his role as representative of the Church.

James was once married, and entered the priesthood after the death of his wife. His adult daughter, Fiona (Kelly Reilly), visits him following her latest suicide attempt. Their relationship is tender—that they want to be closer is evident. Reilly portrays Fiona’s lingering sadness over the abandonment by her father realistically and compassionately.

One of the few individuals who does avidly seek out the priest is Michael Fitzgerald (Dylan Moran), an obnoxious, wealthy man seeking to buy his way into grace. The interactions between Moran’s Fitzgerald and Gleeson’s James are the high point of the film. They are the most pointed in a series of what seems at times to be meandering musings about the Church, its recent scandals and society at large.

As can happen with actors who spend a fair bit of time in comedic roles, Moran and Gleeson have a keen ability to find the vulnerabilities in their characters. The desperate actions of Fitzgerald, including urinating on a work of art to show how much he does not care about money (of which he has scads), are met with an impatient detachment by Father James. Their meetings take on an increasingly hostile tenor, Fitzgerald whipping out his checkbook and offering larger and larger amounts in exchange for absolution.

Fitzgerald is a man desperately trying to make what he considers—and admits—to be ill-gotten treasure count for something, yet is until fairly late in the game unable to express why. This confession comes just as Father James is about to keep his appointment with his unknown would-be killer, and in what subsequently seems a little cruel, the priest arranges to meet with Fitzgerald at a later time to hold an honest discussion.

Interestingly, Moran’s millionaire character is treated sympathetically. Why, among the numerous peculiar and genuinely intriguing characters, is this one singled out for so much screen time? For whatever reason, the rich man is presented as the only one truly desiring redemption. That he does not get it seems merely incidental, and there is a lot of ambiguity in the scene.

Writer-director McDonagh, in an interview with *fourthreefilm*, notes that he did not want to make a specifically anti-Church film, and he has not done so—but that, as an anarchist, he had made an anti-authoritarian film, an “anti-institutional” film.

That’s as it may be, but while the film pronounces on various issues, including the army, bankers, the priest sex-abuse scandal, there is a great deal of vacillation and even superficiality. Many things are raised and none of them fully explored—at times it seems as though the writer-director had made a list of things that

bothered him and which are meant to serve as a description in shorthand for what ails society. But just mentioning a problem or crisis should not be confused with addressing or adequately exploring said problem or crisis. Though filled with good intentions, this is a mistake *Calvary* makes.

Indeed, the struggles facing the residents of the village are largely treated as a joke—the young man whom Father James tried to talk out of joining the military is seen as a vaguely nerdish fool, presented for humorous effect; the atheist doctor is shown as a callous, near-predator. The horrifying story he tells the priest about the fate of a three-year-old in his care is let to drop. The abuse of a woman at the hands of her lover is taken up early on, but likewise slips from view.

The impotence of the priest to ameliorate any of the suffering he sees around him seems to be understood by Gleeson's Father James, and he has abandoned any fight. It is no wonder, then, that he seriously considers keeping the appointment with his assassin.



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