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In the Easter Vigil reading from Romans, Paul writes:

"Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life" (Rom 6:3-11).

Ever since Pope Benedict XVI declared this Pauline Year (June 2008-June 2009), I have immersed myself in learning about the man who is arguably the most influential disciple of Jesus, or apostle as he liked to call himself, of all time. Paul is also the patron saint of my religious community, the Daughters of St. Paul. All of a sudden, I cannot get enough of him. And now at Easter, the person of Paul is even more interesting, as a man full of fire, love, hope and faith.

I began my study of Paul by listening to Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr's lectures on CD: *The Great Themes of Paul: Life as Participation* (www.catalog.americancatholic.org). For Rohr, Paul was the great "integrator"; he continually sought to bring authentic faith and real life into unity for himself and for those with whom he shared faith. Paul's vision of the human person in relation to God is seamless and whole.

Because of my ministry as a film reviewer, as the Pauline year unfolded I began to receive requests from catechists and clergy for lists of films that reflected Pauline themes. I quickly posted something to my blog because I believe that Paul is all over the movies (<http://sisterrose.wordpress.com/>).

This article amplifies and deepens those initial ideas by proposing to correlate some of the themes of St. Paul's life, ministry and letters with contemporary film in the context of the Easter season.

Film stories create a space, a table around which we can gather to share faith and create community that extends an invitation to transformation and even mysticism — especially in the Easter season.

Amid dark economic times, news commentators have noted that one of the industries that survived the Great Depression in healthy shape was "Hollywood." From the Shirley Temple tap-dancing franchise of the 1930s to Irving Pichel's 1950 comedy "The Great Rupert," whose subtext urged people to take their money from their mattresses and trust the banks again, movies have provided entertainment, comfort and even a safe place for the weary soul to encounter the face of God.

With the threat of industry strikes, some insiders are worried that film will not be as meaningful now as it was then. Perhaps bloated budgets and salaries will need to be downsized, lifestyles adjusted so that a new creativity can flourish. But story, in word, image and sound, is so deeply a part of the human experience that the movies may help save us once again.

Among several key theological themes of Paul that Rohr identifies, four stood out for me: the experience of God, transformation, life as participation, and Christ as the new creation through his death and resurrection. They overlap and share characteristics with other themes that Rohr explores: sin, death, grace, justification, law, the folly of the cross, and spirit as one's true self. All of these elements considered alone or in combination coupled with opposing ideas, and given life through people, can form the basis of a really good story.

Holy moments, Incarnation and the face of God

In Richard Linklater's 2001 animated film "Waking Life," a young man goes on an existential journey in a dream-like state. He visits a theater and witnesses an interview between a journalist and the film director Caveh Zahedi. Zahedi talks about the narrativity of film and how cinema's many layers can bring us to a "holy moment.". Though Zahedi's theology is somewhat confused, his explanation of the Incarnation and cinema is awesome:

"And you know, [Andre] Bazin [1918-1958, a famous French film critic who was a Catholic] is a Christian. ... So what film is actually capturing is like God incarnate, creating... And this very moment, God is manifesting as this. And what the film would capture if it was filming us right now would be like God as this table, and God as you, and God as me, and God looking the way we look right now, and saying and thinking what we're thinking right now, because we are all God manifest in that sense. So film is actually like a record of God, or the face of God, or the ever changing face of God."

Pauline theological themes and film

To consider cinema and Pauline themes from Paul's letters in the Easter season is a challenge because after Easter Sunday, the first and second readings of the Sunday liturgies are from other New Testament writings. Saul doesn't show up in the Acts of the Apostles until the Fifth Sunday, Cycle B (Acts 9:26).

Although the apostles were afraid of him, Barnabas spoke for him, telling how Paul had seen the Lord — the most important Pauline theme of all, because all else surges from this moment. The subsequent themes of transformation, participation and the Christ in whom we, and the cosmos, are a new creation, lead us to savor how Paul helps us live fully in Christ.

Paul's experience of God, that is, his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, his mystical experiences and his understanding of incarnation and redemption.

For Paul, everything in his life, every decision and action, every relationship, was rooted in that life-changing Damascus experience, the ultimate, human "holy moment" when Paul beheld the face of God, and God looked into his.

Many films, either fictional or based on real events, deal explicitly with God's intervention in human affairs and the human response:

- "Millions" is a 2005 British film directed by Danny Boyle about a little boy who has a unique relationship with the saints as he tries to find a way to use some unexpected cash, "a gift from God," to do good to others.
- In "The Third Miracle" (1999), Ed Harris plays a Chicago priest in the midst of a crisis of faith as he investigates miracles attributed to a local woman.
- Brideshead Revisited is British author Evelyn Waugh's tale of a wealthy but dysfunctional Catholic family in the 1930s told through the eyes of an unbeliever. Faith and grace quietly triumph in both the 1981 BBC miniseries and the 2008 feature film directed by Julian Jarrold.
- Others: "The Mission" (1982), "The Song of Bernadette" (1943) and "Therese" (1986).

Transformation

In his letters Paul does not speak of his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus as a conversion from sin or from being Jewish to becoming a Christian,

but as a total transformation, an "extreme makeover" to be one with Christ.

Again, Rohr explains in his lecture series (op. cit.) that Paul did not need a moral conversion because Paul was already an observant Jew; he obeyed all the laws. Thus his transformation by Christ was a fundamental change in his worldview, in his way of being in the believing community and the world. Paul's gaze was no longer confined to self but lifted to embrace the cosmos. After all, where do we go in our relationship with God once we have obeyed all the rules?

This encounter with Christ opened the way for Paul to enter into a mystical relationship with God.

Some films that focus on the theme of transformation by Christ or God's action through the art of cinematic storytelling with moments that are indeed mystical and transcendent are:

- "Ratatouille" (2007): An Academy Award-winning animated gem in which the memory of his mother's love expressed through her preparation of the dish ratatouille transforms the heart of an unhappy, grumpy food critic.
- "The Lives of Others" (Das Leben der Anderen, 2006): This Oscar-winner tells of a Stasi agent who is transformed by art when he overhears the man he is spying on say to his girlfriend Christa-Marie, "How can anyone who has heard this music ["Sonata for a Good Man"], I mean really heard it, be a bad person?" Grace that transforming experience of God, can come through art. The word may not be present, but the reality is.
- "Babette's Feast" (1987): A French chef finds political refuge with two elderly sisters on a remote Danish isle. She transforms the inflexible Christian community when she sacrifices every penny she has to prepare a splendid meal for them.

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Participation in the body of Christ.

It is no small thing that moviegoing is a communal affair. Even if one goes to the theater alone, there is almost always someone else there, and for more or less two hours we form a community that laughs, cries or screams in fear together, applauds or complains together, and sometimes, all of the above. The movie ticket becomes

our I.D. card for the moment, a pass into a dark place where we participate in a story with our moral, Catholic imaginations, where we can have an authentic encounter with God. There is a ritual to finding a seat, eating, watching, listening, participating.

My favorite films about the theme of participation in the body of Christ, which can lead to action, to a blessed altruism that embraces all (as well as transformation and encountering the divine), are metaphors for the Eucharist, "food movies." They all show that joy comes only when the characters turn from selfishness and sin and begin anew for the sake of the other; food transforms us.

- "Mostly Martha" (2001; the 2007 U.S. version "No Reservations" does not work as well) tells of a chef who is obsessed with the perfection of the food she prepares and must make room in her life for her orphaned niece and an annoying bloke named Mario (the connection between "Martha" and "Mary" of the Gospels is to be noted).
- "Big Night" (1996) recalls the immigrant experience, how food connects with our very identity, our culture, family, community and faith. It is about two Italian brothers who try desperately to belong, to fit into the restaurant business in late 1940s America and still be true to the art of the cuisine of their homeland. "Good food is like God," says the older brother, Primo.
- "Pieces of April" (2003) is an image of the Mass: a family, broken and yearning, travels to the elder daughter's apartment for the Thanksgiving meal. There is reluctance, resistance and, ultimately, reconciliation in the sharing of self, love and food — excluding no one.
- "Enchanted April" (1992): In the 1920s four British women who are strangers rent an Italian villa together for a month, each for her own reasons. Isolated in the villa by space, time and language, they are each transformed by choosing love of others over selfishness, so they rejoin their families and society.
- Others: "Eat, Drink, Man, Woman" (1994); "What's Cooking?" (1997); "Soul Food" (2000); "Simply Irresistible" (1999).

In Christ we are a new creation

Those who allow for a theology of communication would agree that the spontaneous, joyful impulse that comes from Easter, to spread the Good News, to be the Good News, is "... to communicate the significance of creation, the richness of revelation, and the tremendous reality of the Incarnation" (Archbishop John P. Foley, 1998.) The

brief reading from Paul's Letter to the Colossians on Easter Sunday (3:1-4) tells us to seek the things that are above, "where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." If Christ, the revealed, incarnate Son of God, is Lord of all creation, what does that mean for us, in practical terms?

Vice President Al Gore said that care for the earth is not only a moral problem, but a spiritual one because people's lives depend on it. We cannot separate God, people and creation; we are one body. Some films that address this theme:

- "The Burning Season" — (1994) A made-for-TV film based on the life of Chico Mendes, who led a rubber-tapper's union in the Brazilian rain forest. He was murdered when he resisted the destruction of the forest that his people depended on, which was being threatened so that roads and cattle ranches could be built.
- "Contact" (1997): This film has a mystical and transcendent sensibility to it that leads us to contemplate the vast wonder of the universe and our place in it. Based on the novel by Carl Sagan, it sheds a positive light on the compatibility of faith and science, "sincerity and truth" (see the alternative second reading for Easter Sunday, 1 Cor 5:6b-8), when a young woman searches for the possibility of life beyond the earth and travels through space and time to find her deceased father.
- "Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who!" (2008): Horton, the awesome pachyderm, says that every creature has value, no matter how small. Filled with themes about the environment that sustains life, community and the common good.
- "WALL-E" (2008): 700 years into the future a lone robot cleans up the earth while the humans relax in a luxury spaceship waiting for life to reappear so they can return. This clever if somewhat dark film looks at the causes and material and spiritual consequences of consumer pollution on the earth.
- Others: "Erin Brockovich" (2000); "A Civil Action" (1998); "Men with Guns" (John Sayles, 1997); "Blood Diamond" (2006).

Conclusion

"Chocolat" (2000) is the quintessential film for the Easter season because it addresses all the great themes of Paul, from sin to grace, to transformation to our responsibility to all the members of the body of Christ, the church. The Easter homily in the film is that privileged "holy moment" that reflects on the parish's Lenten journey.

Then the film goes a step further. It ends with the Easter festival in a small community, for us the beginning of that period of hope and freedom-filled mystagogy after the rites of Christian initiation have been celebrated.

One has the sense that life is just beginning for the people because they have renewed their baptismal experience of dying and rising in Christ, leaving behind the yeast of malice and wickedness for the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Paul is everywhere, especially at the movies.

Editor's note: *This reflection was originally published in the April 2009 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Easter reflections](#).*

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