

Easter in memorable DVDs

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Mar. 27, 2009



Juliette Binoche in *Chocolat*, the 2000 film

Pope Benedict XVI declared June 2008 to June 2009 "the Year of St. Paul." At Easter, Paul becomes even more interesting, for me, as a man full of fire, love, hope and faith.

Key themes from Paul's letters can be explored with films, themes that become especially meaningful in the Easter season. Paul experienced God in his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, in his mystical experiences and in his understanding of the Incarnation and redemption. For Paul, everything in his life that followed was rooted in that life-changing Damascus experience, the ultimate, human "holy moment" when Paul beheld the face of God.

God's transforming action

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

"Millions" (2005): A British film directed by Danny Boyle ("Slumdog Millionaire") about a little boy who has a unique relationship with the saints as he tries to find a way to use some unexpected cash to do good for others.

"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.

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." Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr explains 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 does one go in his or her relationship with God once one obeys all the rules?

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

"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 an East German 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 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.

My favorite films about the theme of participation in the body of Christ ? participation that can lead to action, to a blessed altruism that embraces all, as well as to transformation ? are metaphors for the Eucharist: in short, '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) 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 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.

All of creation

That spontaneous, joyful impulse that comes from Easter ? to spread the Good News, to be the Good News ? leads us to communicate the significance of creation, the richness of revelation and the tremendous reality of the Incarnation. For example, 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-tappers' 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.

'Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who!?' (2008): Awesome pachyderm Horton says that every creature has value, no matter how small. The movie is 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.

Finally, '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.

Paul is everywhere, especially in this Easter season.

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