NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Robin Hood: the sword and the Magna Carta

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Russell Crowe stars in a scene from the movie "Robin Hood."

"Robin Hood" (Universal) is director Sir Ridley Scott's latest epic foray into the time of the crusades (His "Kingdom of Heaven" in 2005 dealt with the third crusade; see my review of the film [1]). In this film King Richard the Lionheart (Danny Huston; "The Edge of Darkness") is killed in France while raiding a castle. He needs to finance the final leg of his journey home to England after ten years of fighting and imprisonment.

A knight, Sir Robert Loxley (Douglas Hodge; "Vanity Fair"), is entrusted with the dead king's helmet to take home to the Queen Mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine (Eileen Atkins; "Last Chance Harvey"), and her gormless son, Prince John (Oscar Isaac; "The Nativity Story"). When Loxley in turn is seriously wounded, Robin Longstride (Russell Crowe; "Gladiator"), one of Richard's archers traveling with his friends to reach the coast ahead of the scattered English army, chases off the attackers. Sir Robert then entrusts Richard's helmet to Robin and asks him also to return his sword to his father, Sir Walter of Loxley (Max von Sydow; "Shutter Island") in Nottingham.

The words on the sword, "Rise and rise again until lambs become lions" impress Robin; later they will inspire him and link him to his own deceased father.

For safe passage, Robin dresses in Sir Robert's attire and passes himself off as the knight. After presenting the helmet to Eleanor and John, the new king, Robin and his friends head for Nottingham. Sir Walter Loxley welcomes Robin and tells him to maintain the disguise to protect the village. Lady Marian (Cate Blanchette; "The Gift"), Robert's widow, is less than pleased but agrees to keep up the charade.

King John needs money to run the monarchy. He sends his henchmen to raid the already impoverished villages to fill his coffers. He fires Richard's chancellor, William (William Hurt; "Smoke") and appoints a friend who turns out to be a traitor, Gordon (Mark Strong; "Sherlock Holmes"). He is to secure the kingdom and prepare to invade France.

The actors look solid and give solid, earthy performances. Oscar Isaac's portrayal of King John is thoroughly repelling; watch how well his eyes reveal his dark soul. Despite the precise attention to costume and set design, the film is not overdone. Nor is it a caricature of the legend or the 30 previous film versions of Robin Hood

since the first in 1913. Is the plot probable? Perhaps.

It doesn't matter too much because the key to the interpretation of "Robin Hood" by Oscar-winning screenwriter Brian Hegleland ("Mystic River") and director Scott is their focus on the sword and how it points to the origins and meaning of the Magna Carta, "the great charter" for which King John under duress, would give up his "divine right of kings", in 1215.

We in the United States don't think of the Magna Carta very much [2] today. In those days, kings believed they were divinely appointed and this gave them license to use and abuse anyone and anything that suited their wants or needs. The Magna Carta was a legal document that limited the power of kings in regard to the nobility. This was much later transposed to dealing with commoners and became the basis for democracy and our own Constitution. Today contemporary business and political leaders look to the unregulated market almost as a divine entity to crown them kings or queens and validate whatever they can take or make, any ill consequences to their fellow human beings not withstanding.

The Jan. 21, U.S. Supreme Court decision (*Citizens United* v. *FEC*) expanded the rights of corporations as individuals before the law. These rights were first granted in the Supreme Court's interpretations of the 14th amendment (1867) in the Slaughterhouse Cases around 1870 when the court extended to corporations the rights to citizenship that had been given to former slaves. With this 2010 decision, the Supreme Court expanded the already extensive First Amendment rights and powers that U.S. corporations have over U.S. political life by increasing their financial power and influence in U.S electoral process. The power to express themselves can not be limited. This inflated power weakens the power of less affluent businesses or individuals in our democracy. It could be said that money has rights for as the saying goes: money talks. Thus corporations have expanded power over the electoral process and the canyon between the powerful rich and powerless poor grows greater.

Those who demanded certain rights from the king in the Magna Carta, which is the very basis of the limited-powers doctrine of the U.S Constitution, would be appalled. We are back where they started. The recent bill attempting to regulate the financial market which is making its way through Congress is, in a way, attempting what the nobles did in the Magna Carta. It is the principle of due process in law vis-à-vis absolute faith in the autonomy of the market that is at stake (as Thomas J. Reese, SJ, writes in the Washington Post May 21 [3]).

What has this got to do with Robin Hood? King John proclaimed him an outlaw, a criminal, because he shot one of the king's deer in Sherwood Forest after the king's men raided the village and took whatever they could -- or some variation of that theme. All the deer belonged to the king because he said so. The film ends with the possibility for a sequel or two leading up to the moment when King John will sign the Magna Carta some sixteen years in the future.

The irony here is between the powerful merge of cinematic storytelling, history, and the dominant role of the market, because if Sir Ridley Scott's epic doesn't make a profit (it is reported to have cost about $250 million to make), there won't be a sequel, and more's the pity.

As responsible citizens and disciples, we are called to critically examine the meaning of our myths, our heroes, and our stories so we will never give up our passion for life and justice for all. To use whatever peaceful means at our disposal to "Rise and rise again until lambs become lions." Some may interpret this as saying that the oppressed must then become the oppressors, but no. It is about every person having the God-given right to thrive, to be fully human and fully alive.

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[1] http://www.the-tidings.com/2005/0506/kingdom.htm
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