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New film 'Philomena' has lessons worthy of the Gospel

Jamie Manson | Nov. 27, 2013 Grace on the Margins

If all you know about the new Judi Dench film "Philomena" is what you've seen in the movie's trailers [1], do not be deceived.

What appears from the ads as a middlebrow, sentimental comedy about a quirky Irish lady and a slightly exasperated English writer on a road trip is in fact a study in the gift of fortitude, an exploration of a dark chapter in the history of the Catholic church in Ireland and, in the end, a meditation on power of mercy in the face of an unconscionable abuse of power.

And it's remarkably funny, too.

Based on the true story told by Martin Sixsmith in his 2009 book *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee: A Mother, Her Son and a Fifty Year Search* *[2]*, "Philomena," which opened in select theaters Friday and opens nationwide today, recounts the anguished story of an Irish teenager forced to surrender her baby to nuns in the 1950s.

Early in the film, we learn that Philomena lost her mother at 6 years old and was sent by her father to live in a convent. She never learned about "the facts of life" and, as a result, is stunned to find herself pregnant at the age of 18 after an intimate encounter with a teenage boy at a county fair.

Philomena's father tells her family she is dead and secretly sends her to the Sean Ross Abbey in Roscrea, County Tipperary, run by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart. The abbey was one of many convents in Ireland that operated a "Magdalene Laundry."

This system, brought to prominence by Peter Mullan's 2002 film "The Magdalene Sisters," took in unwed pregnant women and other girls deemed morally wayward. The young women were subjected to long hours of arduous, unpaid labor, often in the convent's laundries. Once they gave birth, they were required to give three additional years of work unless they paid the convent 100 pounds, an exorbitant sum for any poor family in mid-20th-century Ireland.

When the mother superior learns young Philomena is writhing in pain because her baby is in the breach position, the nun refuses her painkillers, insisting the suffering is her penance for her licentiousness. On July 5, 1952, Philomena gives birth to a healthy boy she names Anthony.

Most new mothers were given eight weeks to nurse their children. In Philomena's case, once she returned to work, she was permitted to visit Anthony for one hour per day.

Like many young mothers in Magdalene homes, Philomena was forced by the nuns to sign a document that forever relinquished her child to the abbey's mother superior in order to make him available for adoption.

"I further undertake never to attempt to see, interfere with or make any claim to the said child at any future time," the document concludes.

Philomena's worst nightmare comes true when, without warning, she learns Anthony is being adopted by a wealthy American couple. She runs to the window just in time to see her 3-year-old son staring out of the back windshield of an expensive car as it pulls away from the convent.

The film jumps to 2004, when Philomena (Dench) breaks 50 years of silence, telling her daughter, Jane, that she has a half-brother named Anthony. She has longed every day to know where he is and what his life is like.

To find the long-lost son, Jane enlists the help of journalist Martin Sixsmith (Steve Coogan), who balks at the idea of writing a "human interest story." But he needs the work, having recently taken the fall in a well-publicized scandal during his tenure as director of communications in the Tony Blair administration.

In Martin's initial meeting with Philomena, both he and Jane characterize the Catholic church's actions as "evil," but Philomena will have none of it. It is the first of several instances throughout the film where Philomena quickly counters any anti-church sentiment with compassion and understanding.

A former altar boy, Martin now identifies as an atheist. He is baffled by Philomena's sure and simple faith in God's existence. The pair engages in terse metaphysical conversation on their road trips to find clues about Anthony. Their first stop is at the sbbey at Rosecrea, its buildings largely abandoned, its remaining sisters out of the severe habit they donned in the 1950s.

A middle-aged sister tells Philomena that there is no information about her son because most of their records were destroyed in a fire. The only document to survive was Philomena's signed waiver relinquishing Anthony to the nuns, a detail that immediately raises Martin's suspicions.

The sister also tells them that Sister Hildegard, one of the few nuns remaining from Philomena's time in the laundry, is too ill to meet with them. "We cannot take away your pain, but we can walk through it with you," she says, grasping Philomena's hand.

It is a short-lived moment of comfort, as Martin and Philomena's continuing journey unveils increasingly agonizing truths about the nuns' refusal to reconnect the mother and her son.

While chatting with the owner of an Irish pub in Rosecrea, Martin learns that between the 1940s and the 1970s, the abbey gave away hundreds of babies to wealthy couples willing to "donate" 1,000 pounds to the sisters.

Longtime neighbors of the abbey suggest the nuns intentionally destroyed the documentation from the era to cover up what today would be seen as a baby trade. After all, the abbey bears is no evidence of a fire and no one in the community remembers a blaze.

As the revelations of the injuries done to Philomena and her son at the hands of church continue to mount, Martin becomes increasingly confounded at Philomena's enduring faith and her rationalizations of the cruel actions of the nuns, whom he dubs the "sisters of little mercy."

"Some of them were very nice," she says, arguing that the nuns only wanted to offer Anthony a life of privilege she never could have provided him.

But even Philomena's goodwill is rocked when she realizes the depths of silence and secrecy that the nuns maintained in order to keep her and her beloved son apart.

Philomena's humble orientation toward forgiveness remains the film's highest moral value, yet there is a place for Martin's criticism of the church, which helps shatter the internalized clericalism that exacerbates Philomena's guilt. Compassion always remains at the core of Philomena's being, but we watch her character grow spiritually as her passivity and paralyzing sense of her own sinfulness transform into righteous anger.

While Sixsmith's book focuses on the quest to find Anthony and the Irish church's troubling history in the baby trade, the film uses these aspects of the story as only a jumping-off point. Written by Coogan and Jeff Pope, the screenplay centers instead on the relationship between older, working-class believer Philomena and the middle-aged, highly educated skeptic Martin.

Though the script never shies away from the cruelty to which Philomena was subjected, Coogan and Pope reframe the story in a way that keeps the film from dwelling in anger at the church or getting reduced to a tear-jerker.

In a recent interview with *The Boston Globe*, Coogan said though he is no longer religious, his intention was not to bash the Catholic church.

"It's too easy and insulting to go after religion," he said. "For all the mistakes of the institutions, there are decent, ordinary people whose lives are based on faith. It's not black and white."

A well-known comedian in England, Coogan said he likes to use comedy to "sweeten things that are bitter." Coogan and Pope's blend of anguish and humor, tragedy and mystery makes "Philomena" a rich, satisfying emotional experience.

The script's real stroke of genius, however, is in its resolution, where both Philomena and Martin are drawn into lessons worthy of the Gospel.

The film's brief climactic scene plays out like a subtle cosmic battle. Martin's indignant thirst for justice confronts resolute injustice, and Philomena's inconceivable depth of mercy comes face to face with unflinching mercilessness.

Near the conclusion of the movie, Martin offers Philomena a small gift -- an item that, earlier in the film, he found absurd. It is an act of generosity demonstrating that Martin, who had long ago done away with the religion of his childhood, for the first time sees the mature, challenging truths that sustain Philomena's faith.

There won't be a better film to welcome in the seasons of Thanksgiving and Advent.

[Jamie L. Manson is *NCR* books editor. She received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA). Her email address is jmanson@ncronline.org [3].]

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[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DBPqcp6Hc4

[2] http://www.amazon.com/The-Lost-Child-Philomena-Lee/dp/0230744273
[3] mailto:jmanson@ncronline.org
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