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A cinematic gourmet feast

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Mar. 16, 2011

Meryl Streep stars as Julia Child in the movie "Julie & Julia" (CNS/Sony)

Stanley Tucci?s 1996 writing and directorial debut, ?Big Night,? tells the story of two brothers, Primo (Tony Shalhoub) and Secondo (Stanley Tucci), who come to America in 1951 and open an Italian restaurant on the Jersey Shore. They are in competition with a nightclub across the street owned by Pascal (Ian Holm), who promises to bring jazz singer Louis Prima to their restaurant to increase business. But their other competitor is the American palate that expects spaghetti and meatballs over regional three-course meals lovingly prepared by a chef, Primo, who is an artist.

Secondo is willing to sacrifice quality for profit so they can survive, but Primo is adamant. As the two brothers struggle between art and life, Primo turns his soul inside out when he explains, ?To eat good food is to be close to God.?

They prepare for the big night when Prima will sing and save their restaurant. Primo cooks and Secondo takes care of the details. They invite their friends. It gets late and they break into a celebration of eating, drinking, dancing and singing without the guest of honor. Finally Pascal admits it was a ruse to get the brothers to work for him. The brothers end up struggling on the nearby seashore over whether to return to Italy. They walk away in silence, that silence that can kill families and relationships.

The next morning, in a sequence shot all in one take and in silence, Primo and Cristiano (Marc Anthony), their indispensible assistant, enter the kitchen and Secondo starts breakfast. He sets the table for three, he cooks for three, he breaks bread for three. Secondo sits at the kitchen worktable but Cristiano perches, as if ready to fly away. Then Primo enters and Cristiano, who has never said a word in the entire film, exits. Primo sits next to his brother. Tentatively at first, Secondo puts his arm around Primo?s shoulders; he reciprocates. Their breakfast is filled with grace, love, forgiveness, communication, change, nurturing, growth. The silence is now in full giving mode. ?Big Night? is one of the most theological and spiritual films I have ever seen.

According to the results of my own informal online survey, people enjoy food movies. Thirty-five people responded to the survey and most pray ?often? before meals, though a few checked off ?sometimes.?

I also asked if they prayed during the ritual of preparation of a meal. One person wrote that she had never

thought of it, but now had a new occasion to pray each day, especially for those who are hungry. Another posted: ?My silent prayer consists mainly of giving thanks, especially when the food comes fresh from my own garden. This is when I feel the greatest spiritual connection to God and others.?

I provided a list of 10 food films that I like very much: ?Big Night,? ?Babette?s Feast,? ?Mostly Martha,? ?Eat Drink Man Woman,? ?Soul Food,? ?Ratatouille,? ?No Reservations,? ?Moonstruck,? ?Sideways,? ?What?s Cooking?? and ?Chocolat.?

I left out the 2009 smash hit ?Julie & Julia? about a young woman who had never completed anything and sets about to cook her way over the course of a year through Julia Child?s *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. As with the best food movies, it wasn?t about the food, but about the people who interact around the food. In movies that fit into the genre, food is a character, and often an agent of change for the good.

When one of the sisters in my community saw the film, she marched out of the theater, straight into the Barnes & Noble bookstore across the lobby. I had never seen Sister Tracey so determined. She bought a copy of Child?s cookbook. On her weekly cooking day she began to treat us to French cuisine; she even scripted the menu on the white board in the morning so the meal actually started early in the day with the anticipation.

Summer commitments interrupted Sister Tracey?s adventure to immerse herself in French cuisine, but she promised me she would start again. ?Even though these dishes take a lot of time to prepare, it?s good for me.?

I replied, ?They are wonderful, joyful meals and they are good for all of us.?

In ?Julie & Julia,? young Julie (Amy Adams) waits until the end of the year to cook a duck because she knows duck is the most difficult thing to prepare. She watches one of Child?s TV shows about how to cook this bird (recreated in the film with Meryl Streep playing Child). She plonks the plucked and headless duck on the table and says, ?The first thing one must do is -- confront the duck!? That year of cooking for Julie had been a year of grace in which she confronted her life and grew up. The film, to me, was grace.

Without overinterpreting food movies, it is possible to discover God and identify theological themes. This is especially true when one savors such films because of their artistic quality. ?All these films have to do with relationships, exploration of the meaning of life, and the joy of eating! Such emotion! Hope! Earthiness!? said one of the food movie enthusiasts who responded online.

Gabriel Axel?s 1987 Oscar-winning Danish film ?Babette?s Feast,? based on the novella by Isak Dinesen, is often referred to as an obvious analogy to the eucharistic celebration, with Babette as a Christ-figure. ?Babette?s Feast? tells the story of a French chef who, as a result of the violent Paris Commune government, takes refuge as a servant in a tiny, isolated Christian community in Denmark in 1871. She had to flee, leaving her murdered husband and son unburied. She now uses all the money she has, a lottery prize, to create a memorable feast for her hosts and her new community.

T.J. Curry, a theology teacher at St. John?s College High School in Washington, D.C., moves beyond the eucharistic reading of ?Babette?s Feast,? however. He argues in his unpublished 2010 doctoral dissertation (?On the Promise of Film as a *Locus Mystgogicus*: An Appraisal from the Perspectives of Roman Catholic Teaching on Cinema and Karl Rahner?s Fundamental Theology?) that the preparation of this agape feast, this work of art by a quintessential artiste, was ?a ritual by which she puts to rest all that has been taken from her, family, country, career. ... to defeat the vestiges of evil through aesthetic qualities.? Babette?s own masterpiece, C*ailles en Sarcophage*, a single quail in a sarcophagus of pastry, ?signals her need and readiness to finally put her ?little darlings? to rest and her resolution not to let the evils of her life have the final say.? Axel rightly suggests, Curry says, that ?transformation of the feast is only the beginning.?

At the National Film Retreat a few years ago, we screened the film ?Chocolat.? It is the story of a mysterious woman and her daughter who open a chocolate shop in a very resistant and hypocritical Catholic French village at the beginning of Lent in the 1950s. The townspeople are transformed just in time for Easter.

When the film began, we put a tray of brownies to bake and just before the film ended, with the room still dark, brought the warm goodies into the room. The aroma was overwhelming. One man, who worked for a major studio and should have known better, blurted out as the lights came up, ?Where is that smell coming from? The film?? It was a very funny moment when he realized the sabotage of senses we had perpetrated.

The image of food in movies is without taste and smell, though who knows what the future may hold. Film functions as a storytelling medium because of a phenomenon called ?persistence of vision.? This theory holds that the brain remembers an afterimage, at the rate of 1/25 of a second, the frame that came before and builds a sequence. If the story is appealing, the brain and the heart engage in the narrative and respond to the musical cues, linking these with the viewer?s sensual memories, life experiences, and imagination.

The food movie genre is, for the most part, a cinematic gourmet feast that transcends languages and cultures, a banquet table to gather around, to talk about things that matter, and learn something new about ourselves and the union of heaven and earth.

[Sr. Rose Pacatte, a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, is the director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles.]

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