

Horror movies depict battle with the devil

Horror movies where the devil is real and the solution is Catholic have become a genre unto themselves. It is ironic that, as Mass attendance wanes, interest in Catholic-themed horror movies grows. Warner Brothers' "The Conjuring" franchise taps into a bigger universe where the devil wages war against God through humanity. The fifth in the series, "The Nun," which opened in theaters Sept. 7, is a prequel spawned from the evil nun that appeared in "The Conjuring 2."

The premise is that after a young nun at a cloistered Romanian abbey takes her own life, a priest is sent by the Vatican to investigate. He and the nuns confront evil in the form of the demonic nun from the earlier movie. While the first film in the series was based on a true story, this one was not.

Hollywood vs. theology

Hollywood productions do not usually square with Catholic theology, and such is the case to one extent or another with horror films. For instance, the legendary 1973 film "The Exorcist," inspired by a real-life exorcism, contained liberties and inaccuracies. Yet the movie was groundbreaking, creating a style with wide audience appeal: the Catholic Church fighting the devil.

Also based on a true story is 2011's "The Rite," from the 2010 book of the same name, which chronicled Father Gary Thomas's training in Rome to be an exorcist for the diocese of San Jose, California. In an interview, Father Thomas said there were some errors and artistic license, but it was largely an accurate portrayal.

"I don't consider 'The Rite' to be a horror film," he said. "The devil is real and does scary things."

Father Thomas acknowledges that filmmakers took some license. "But the movie was legitimately done, a serious effort," he said. "'The Rite' had a real plot based on true events."

Father Thomas consulted on the movie and explained that a scene where a pregnant woman was exorcised was very accurate. Also true to life were depictions of marks inexplicably showing up on people and nature being manipulated, such as a multitude of frogs appearing in a room.

Father Thomas said, "An important point though is that possession is rare, and real life is not usually as dramatic as portrayed in movies."

Faith-based audience

Father David Guffey, the national director of Family Theater Productions, in residence at St. Monica Church in Santa Monica, California, sees value in these films despite even when there is poor catechesis. Evil is portrayed as evil, and the effects of evil play out, according to him.

"A lot of horror movies have a fairly traditional sense of morality," he said. "The characters doing things they shouldn't are the ones that get into trouble. There is an element of faith and a moral universe."

He noted that evil is fought by people who seek goodness and stay together with other good people. "That's a beautiful lesson with otherwise dark material," Father Guffey said. "The message is also good, that God is strong and there are ways to avoid evil."

Should you go?

Neither priest is a fan of horror movies, particularly those with gratuitous violence.

"I don't recommend them," Father Thomas said. "I don't think they are healthy. If it's based on something that actually took place, then it depends on how the horror is presented."

Like what you're reading? Subscribe now in print or digital.

As to whether parents should allow their teenagers to see them, Father Guffey recommends for parents to assess what their children can handle.

"If a parent is going to allow it, they should watch with their child and have a conversation about the forces of evil," he said.

Patti Maguire Armstrong writes from North Dakota.