

Socially isolate and chill

With many families engaging in prescribed “social distancing” as the coronavirus reaches pandemic levels, managing screen time will be the new norm for the foreseeable future. Parents may need to seek diversions for their children as they adapt to managing work-from-home schedules. Seniors may desire a reprieve from the endless and challenging news cycle. Children may finish assigned schoolwork early and find themselves with hours to fill.

It’s good to know that many of the online streaming services offer family options and faith-friendly content to not only fill our days but also to enlighten our hearts and souls. This is a chance to screen content you may have missed in the theaters or to revisit classic options. Movies and shows don’t necessarily need to be overtly religious to provide viewers with an opportunity to grow closer to God and to one another.

“Any art can inspire us to beauty, truth and goodness if it challenges us to look deeply at ourselves, our human needs, desires and intentions, and most importantly, if it brings forth profound human and Christian values, such as compassion, forgiveness, understanding, and love,” Daughters of St. Paul Sister Nancy Usselmann, director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies, said. “Many movies and streaming shows can help us reflect together on our common human experience and guide us in talking about life and societal issues as a family. This is media mindfulness and critical engagement, an educational imperative in our digital age!”

Paulist Father Tom Gibbons, vice president of Paulist Productions is a big believer in reflecting on what we watch or on our actions.

Want more coverage on coronavirus from a perspective of faith? [Sign up](#) for our daily newsletter.

“When I was in college,” Father Gibbons said, “I was able to get involved in some ministries that served the poor. But those in charge of the programs always wanted us to reflect on the experience so it did not go in one ear and out the other ... and to hear how others experienced the situation, particularly through the lens of faith, so that we could grow in our faith journeys together. There is a lot to be gained in doing the same reflection on what we watch, even if it only lets us be more active viewers instead of passive viewers.”

“I think the main way watching a film or a television show can inspire Catholic families, no matter if it is faith-related or not, is to simply have a conversation about it afterward with each other and allow everybody to freely share what their reaction to it was,” Father Gibbons said. “Hopefully, that initial sharing allows for more conversation and connection. But also, to include how God was (or was not) present in the show and reflect on that.”

Holy Cross Father David Guffey, national director of Family Theater Productions, cautions parents that “there is no safe bet in streaming platforms.” He reminds parents to avoid giving children the password credentials to streaming services. “There is good content on many platforms,” Father Guffey said, “but parents need to be vigilant in knowing what their family is watching and whether they are ready for it.”

Recommendations

Along with the commercially available subscription services, Catholic families may have access to books, audio programming and movie selections on Formed (www.formed.org) through parish licensing subscriptions or individual memberships. Formed programming includes original children’s features such as “The Suitcase: A Story About Giving” and a variety of programming on the lives of the saints including “An Ordinary Martyr: The Life and Death of Blessed Stanley Rother.”

On Netflix, interesting options for adult viewers or older teens include "The Two Popes," the studios' recent original work imagining the lives of and relationship between Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis.

Sister Nancy Usselmann recommends "The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind," calling it "a beautiful story of a young boy in a poor area of Africa who tinkers with electronics, but whose village is on the brink of starvation because of lack of water. He uses his talents and ingenuity to save his family and the whole village."

Other viewing options on Netflix include "Same Kind of Different as Me," as well as "Veggie Tales in the House" and "Angela's Christmas" for young viewers.

Hulu offers a variety of programming options, including "The Best of Enemies," a dramatization of the true-life friendship between a racist Klansman and a black civil rights activist in the 1970s and "Bridge to Terabithia" and "The Voyage of The Dawn Treader," inspired by C.S. Lewis' classic series "The Chronicles of Narnia."

Interesting adult programming choices on Amazon Prime include the recent documentary "For Sama," "Romero" and "The Dating Project," jointly produced by PureFlix and Paulist Productions in association with Family Theater Productions.

When considering what to watch together, Father Gibbons humorously said, "I definitely do not recommend 1995's 'Outbreak' with Dustin Hoffman ... that might be a little too close to home!" But he does offer families two suggestions currently streaming on Disney+ and both from Pixar.

"'Up!' is such a great movie," Father Gibbons said, "and in this time of social isolation, it (among many things) reminds us of the need to be connected to one another. Particularly, it reminds us to maintain our contacts with the elderly and the vulnerable, even if that connection has to look different

during this time.”

Father Gibbons also recommends “Wall-E,” sharing that the animated feature is “always a great movie to watch and reflect on now, particularly because the current crisis is really reminding us how interconnected we all are. I have never seen a movie make a point so strongly yet so gently, and there would be loads for any family to talk about after watching that ... particularly in light of the pope’s encyclical *Laudate Si’*.”

Discussion questions

Father Guffey offers the following questions as fodder for families looking to discuss movies and shows together:

What was beautiful in the film?

Which character appealed to you most? Why?

How did this film support the values held most dear?

Was there any decision, action, character that went against our values?

What did the main characters accomplish? learn? become transformed?

Who sacrificed something in the film? What was it? Why did they do it?

Discuss this by filling in the blank: This film made me want to go out and ____.

When planning to view, families may want to investigate films or shows by consulting the Media Review Office of Catholic News Service (www.catholicnews.com/movies.cfm), which assesses motion pictures, television programs, home entertainment, video games and comic books. Rather than simply leaving a television or screening device turned on and playing nonstop,

make a mindful selection, plan a set viewing timeline, and include time for a family conversation or personal reflection and family prayer after the selection is completed.

Lisa Hendey writes from California.