

'Midnight Mass': Should Catholics watch it?

With the turn of the calendar to October, we find ourselves surrounded by the trappings of the Halloween industry, which reportedly produced more than \$8 billion in 2020. From the costumes we buy, to the advertisements we see, to the macabre decor on our neighbors' lawns, scary imagery surrounds us. For this reason, it's no surprise that the new Netflix limited edition series "Midnight Mass" is among the streaming service's most-watched shows.

The spooky offering from director Mike Flanagan ("The Haunting of Hill House," "Doctor Sleep") transports us to isolated Crockett Island, an insular fishing community where St. Patrick's Catholic Church serves as a literal and figurative town refuge. Over seven episodes, viewers learn the story of Father Paul Hill (Hamish Linklater), the mesmerizing young priest who has come to serve in the place of the parish's long-term pastor, Msgr. Pruitt. The good monsignor has reportedly been placed in long-term care following a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The citizens of the self-dubbed "Crock Pot," regardless of whether or not they actively practice Catholicism, soon encounter and form relationships with Father Paul. From the resident "church lady" Bev Keane (Samantha Sloan) to the spiritually inquisitive son Ali (Rahul Abburi) of newly arrived Islamic Sheriff Hassan (Rahul Kohli) to recently recovering alcoholic who's just been released from incarceration Riley Fynn (Zach Gilford) and simply goes to Mass to placate his parents, the town is full of souls who become a flock for the new pastor.

Mike Flanagan's Catholic upbringing and his consultation with priests as technical consultants to get the details right is quickly evident. Unlike other horror-genre projects that simply use sacramentals as set pieces, "Midnight Mass" feels

thoroughly Catholic until the story's arc takes us far, far afield. Without offering spoilers, I'll simply say that Father Paul's real backstory and his plan for a new "resurrection" for true believers ultimately wreak havoc on Crockett Island with gore, mayhem and more than a few jump scares. But along the way, faithful Catholics will likely find themselves intrigued not only by the theology that comes from Father Paul's preaching but also by significant dialogue and cinematic choices that underscore important spiritual themes such as familial love, forgiveness, redemption and what happens when this life on earth ends.

Can there be merit in watching horror genre films and series if the project is centered in Catholic imagery? Or is the horror genre spiritually dangerous for Catholics?

Father David L. Guffey, a Holy Cross priest who is the national director of Family Theater Productions, has served as a consultant on horror-genre film productions. "Supernatural and spiritual horror films may sometimes be useful in that they dramatize the reality that the forces of evil present in our world, impacting our lives," Father Guffey said. "Where they often fall short is in their failure to acknowledge that the forces of love, God, are always stronger and always prevail. The best horror films for Christians show how faith, commitment and sacrifices made in love can unleash the saving power of God. The Book of Revelation is essentially a horror show, at the end of which God wins. Films that capture this dynamic include 'The Conjuring,' 'The Rite' and, of course, 'The Exorcist'."

"The fascination with horror films comes from a curiosity about the supernatural realm and is an acknowledgment of the reality of evil in the world – a very Catholic concept," said Pauline Sister Nancy Usselmann, who serves as director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies. "'Midnight Mass' is a Netflix horror series that uses the Catholic faith and sacramentality as a conduit for the search to understand the

reality of human nature, sin, redemption and the supernatural. Is it really Catholic? Even though there is extensive Catholic symbolism and spiritual questioning, the series doesn't completely confirm God as more powerful than evil or show that faith can overcome fear. The series leaves the viewer to wonder about the origin of hope and grace, since religion comes across as an external covering for sin and not the value system that impels characters such as Riley to sacrifice his life for others."

Sister Nancy believes that while Mike Flanagan correctly employs Catholic elements correctly, he ultimately errs, skewing toward a secular humanist and nominalist perspective of human nature.

"Redemption only makes sense when the human person is understood as worth saving by the sacrifice of Christ, God-become-man, the only Savior of humanity, an essential Catholic doctrine," she said. "Without this, we are left with human beings trying to save ourselves, which is an obvious fallacy and a future without hope."

Paulist Father Ryan Casey, C.S.P., associate pastor at St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Community in Los Angeles, believes that there can indeed be merit in watching horror genre films if the project is centered on Catholic imagery.

Of "Midnight Mass," Father Casey said: "The series uses the backdrop of Catholic liturgy, Scripture and understanding of angels to weave together a classic horror examination of the things that we fear and do not understand. Overall, the series is well done, and the audience is able to experience all of the screams, jumps and eye-covering moments of a good horror experience. Hopefully by mixing Catholicism and horror, the audience will also be able to ponder the bigger questions of faith, belief and disbelief that the series shines a light on while still remaining in the darkness of horror."

Ultimately, viewers of “Midnight Mass” should note the series’ TV-MA (mature audience) rating, its inclusion of violence, gore, profanity and references to alcohol and smoking before viewing or watching the program with teens. Some Catholic viewers may be troubled by a storyline that addresses priestly celibacy, varying approaches to the afterlife and intensely frightening images. But others may find, as my husband and I did while watching the series together, that “Midnight Mass” could promote deep and fruitful conversations about the things that matter most to us in our lives and our relationship with God and the Church.

“If a project respectfully embraces the beauty and richness of the Catholic tradition, then a horror project can be a value to help an audience dig deeper into the questions of faith and spirituality,” Father Casey said. “Any genre can be spiritually dangerous depending on the message it is trying to promote. Does the message bring you closer to God or farther away from God? That is the heart of all Catholic imagery. The best advice would be to watch it and figure it out for yourself.”

Lisa Hendey writes from California.