

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The “Rite” Stuff

After rewatching the exorcism chiller “The Rite,” I once again came to this conclusion: In Hollywood, the devil gets the best lines and puts on a great show.

The story follows a young seminarian, wavering in his vocation, who is dispatched to Rome to apprentice with a grizzled Welsh exorcist (Anthony Hopkins, of course), who teaches him a thing or two about how to handle Satan—who, of course, never lacks for theatrics.

In Hollywood, evil is never banal or boring, and that holds true here, too. Veins bulge, eyes roll, skin turns scaly, and booming voices echo out of small bodies. There’s also a mule with red eyes.

Understandably, it’s a cheerless enterprise, with only one really good laugh: After a client for an exorcism knocks on Hopkins’s door, he says, brightly, “Speak of the devil!”

Otherwise, the story entails lots of rain and thunder and ominous noises. There are a couple of creepy exorcisms that are best watched through fingers covering your eyes, but the movie is blessedly free of pea soup (though the devil’s victims do have a curious penchant for spitting up large, painful-looking nails). A note at the beginning of the movie indicates that it is based on actual events (and is drawn in part from a book by the same name by Matt Baglio), but it’s unclear just where fact lets off and fiction begins. Ultimately, that may be beside the point.

The real point of the story isn’t the devilish doings, but something much more compelling and infinitely more absorbing: the battle between doubt and faith.

The young seminarian’s journey from unbelief to belief, and finally to certainty, struck me as credible and, ultimately, moving. It’s rare that you see a young religious depicted sympathetically on screen these days, so it was gratifying to watch a lukewarm vocation heat up and boil over—and the movie’s conclusion, in a confessional, struck just the right tone. Sin happens. And it’s not always accompanied by bellowing voices from hell.

“Faith becomes you,” the old priest says to his young protégé near the end. That may well be the movie’s moral right there—and one many of us need to hear, no matter how much we believe or how much we don’t. Faith somehow imbues us with a measure of grace and gives dimension and meaning and hope to our lives. It is a gift. But one that sometimes needs to be sought or, in the case of “The Rite,” earned.

I’m glad I watched “The Rite” again. Authoritative observers in the Church had positive things to say about its depiction of exorcism and its sympathetic stance toward Catholicism. Still, it’s not for everyone—my wife wouldn’t have lasted through the first spit nail—but it does have something to say about the mystery of evil, the reality of Satan, and the struggle to believe in something that seems unbelievable.

So few people today are willing to give the devil his due.

“The Rite” suggests that maybe, in fact, we should.

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STATIONS OF THE CROSS

“Praying the Stations with Mary, the Mother of Jesus”
Fridays during Lent, at 7:30 p.m., followed by Benediction