

Of Gods and Men

Last week I attended a School of Ministry conference with colleagues from around the state. On Monday night we viewed a French film called "Of Gods and Men." The two hour long movie moved at a meditative pace dealing with issues of life and death, faith and doubt, prayer and community. It left all of us speechless at the end of the night and I found the viewing a deeply spiritual experience.

The Hindu swami Vivekananda has said, "The most intense love that humanity has ever known has come from religion, and the most diabolical hatred that humanity has known has come from religion."

And both of these elements are present in *Of Gods and Men*, a film that depicts the story of seven Roman Catholic French Trappist monks kidnapped by radical Islamists from their monastery in the village of Tibhirine in Algeria during the 1990s Algerian Civil War. It tells of the sacrifices people of good will in both religions are willing to make for each other, and that the separation between religions is not an unbridgeable gap.

The village we are told had sprung up out of the presence of the monks, who attracted a new community to the place. Totally involved in the village, the monks provided medical aid for anyone who came. They were involved with the elders of the village in determining the direction of the community – human beings working peacefully together, whose common humanity rather than religion described who they were.

But one day the serpent enters Eden in form of a group of Mujahadeen soldiers. The doctor of the community, Brother Luc, treats one of them but things go from bad to worse with the monks being asked to leave by the government on the one hand and facing

probable death on the other if they stay. The villagers beg them to stay.

Most of the film is taken up with the monks' agonising choice – to sensibly retreat to safety or to remain with the very real risk that they will be killed.

Two scenes remain imprinted in my mind. The first when the monks decide that they will pray for guidance. Their prayers involve the conventional chanting of psalms, but more powerful for me was their praying as they went about their daily work. The agony of their praying is there for all to see, but eventually they decide to risk death. As one of them says "I have already given my life to Christ, I have nothing to lose."

The second scene is a "Last Supper" where they sit around a table at peace with their decision, listening to a recording of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake ballet. As the camera pans from face to face, we can observe a beatific smile on some faces and tears on others, demonstrating an inner poetry and reverence for life. The monks are not Christian moralists but spiritualists confronting the extremes of the human condition, characters who point the way to overcoming despair.

As I See It, when human beings choose community and love we live most closely the life God wants for all of us. Such a choice is usually painful and hard, but in the end we can be transformed to become beacons of light for the world. This is the Christ story.

Tony would be more than happy to chat about the above article.

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