

‘To the wonder’

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [June 26, 2013](#) issue



Ben Affleck and Olga Kurylenko in *To the Wonder*. Copyright Magnolia Pictures.

Filmmaker Terrence Malick is known for his quiet, visually absorbing, ruminative films. He is also known for taking a long time—as many as 20 years—between films. But now, only two years after *The Tree of Life*, Malick has written, directed and released *To the Wonder*. With these last two, film critic David Edelstein writes, Malick has evolved “into a blend of director and Christian minister.” These most recent movies are “psalms writ on film. Again and again Malick’s characters ask why we’re here, how we might locate the presence of the Almighty in the everyday, and how we can accommodate ourselves to the expulsion from the Garden.”

To the Wonder focuses on two lovers: Neil (played by Ben Affleck) and Marina (Olga Kurylenko). We meet them in France, reveling in the sights and places of Paris. Their relationship is erotically charged, but they also find exaltation in the beautiful world around them. Early on they visit a medieval abbey on the coast of Normandy, Mont Saint-Michel.

With its earliest building dating to the 11th century, Mont Saint-Michel is a magnificent symbol dating from the Age of Faith, when believing in the Christian God was second nature. Marina and Neil are duly impressed. Though they do not share the ready faith of the people who communed there centuries earlier, they are struck by a sense of transcendence. They climb the steps to the top of the abbey and come out on a courtyard with gardens and cloistered hallways surrounding it. “We climbed the steps . . . to the wonder,” remarks Marina.

Throughout the movie, Neil and Marina struggle with the inconstancy of love and other exaltations. Eventually they move back to Neil's home in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. For a while they are happy and lost in one another. Then Marina and her ten-year-old daughter by a previous marriage grow bored with the small Oklahoma town, and Marina and Neil quarrel. She moves back to Paris. Later she returns to Oklahoma, and she and Neil are married. We see them attending a Catholic church service. Neil professes no faith at all and is glaringly bored and disengaged in the church. But Marina consults with the priest about receiving the sacraments although she has been previously divorced.

The priest Marina consults is another focus of the film and one who struggles most directly with the challenge of faith in a secularized modern world. He is Father Quintana, played keenly with a sense of agony and quiet desperation by Javier Bardem. We learn about his faith and wrestlings with it through snippets of sermons and a series of voiceovers in which Father Quintana constantly prays.

Father Quintana's parish includes a poor neighborhood. We see him on visitations in the neighborhood, replete with dilapidated houses and yards full of broken furniture and discarded appliances. We hear him pray, "Everywhere you're present. And still I can't see you. You're within me. Around me. And I have no experience of you. Not as I once did. Why don't I hold on to what I have found? My heart is cold. Hard."

Father Quintana suffers a dark night of the soul. His dilemma is reminiscent of what we learned about Mother Teresa posthumously: that she struggled for years without a vivid sense of God's presence and love. But like Mother Teresa before him, Father Quintana soldiers on. He preaches, he visits parishioners, Bible in hand, and listens as they pour out their pains.

In a sermon, Father Quintana preaches as much to himself as to his parishioners. "Love is not only a feeling," he says. "Love is a duty. You show love. Love is a command, and you say I can command my emotions. They come and go like clouds. To that, Christ says you shall love whether you like it or not. You fear your love has died? It perhaps is waiting to be transformed to something higher."

But if this "duty" sounds too much like drudgery, there are hints that Father Quintana not only clings to faith, but that faith clings to him. These hints suggest that God is there, like a rock that is real even if we do not touch it.

Over a montage of shots showing Father Quintana ministering to a man in a wheelchair, ministering to a dying person and helping a weak man walk, as well as shots of natural beauty (grass bending in the wind, ducks in a pond, rippling water), we hear Father Quintana pray, "Where are you leading me? Teach us where to seek you." Then he recites lines from the hymn "St. Patrick's Breastplate": "Christ be with me. Christ before me. Christ behind me. Christ in me. Christ beneath me. Christ above me. Christ on my right. Christ on my left. Christ in the heart."

Father Quintana is surrounded and undergirded by Christ, and he is not without hope and perhaps the possibility of joy as well. Faith is still possible, however beleaguered, in a fractured, secularized, desperate modern world. Malick, the psalmist of film, ends his movie with a long shot of Mont Saint- Michel. Like the ancient abbey, he seems to be telling us, faith still stands.