

Sins of the fathers

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [November 20, 2002](#) issue

Through the decades filmmakers from assorted countries have attempted to probe the inner lives of the clergy. Pastors' lives have been approached in hushed tones, as in Ingmar Bergman's *Winter Light* (1963); with compassion, as in Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1950); and with a cutting edge, as in Luis Buñuel's *Nazarin* (1958). In 1994, a new wrinkle was added to the holy cloth with Antonia Bird's *Priest*, which not only addressed the issue of celibacy in the Catholic Church but zeroed in on homosexual love.

Now the controversial Mexican film *The Crime of Father Amaro*, a huge hit and a cause célèbre in its home country, delivers a broadside against corruption and hypocrisy in the church, and especially against priests who turn away from their flocks to consolidate power, be it economic, political or sexual. Though based on an 1875 Portuguese novel, director Carlos Carrera's film is full of contemporary resonances.

The film begins on a rickety bus where an old man who is carrying his life savings in a purse tells a younger man about his hopes for the future. The bus is robbed and the old man loses everything. When the bus arrives in the small village of Los Reyes, the young man compassionately gives the old man the little money he has.

The sensitive and generous young man turns out to be 24-year-old Father Amaro, who was recently ordained and sent to Los Reyes to help (and eventually replace) the aging Father Benito.

Father Amaro (Gael García Bernal, who appeared in *Y Tu Mamá También*) quickly discovers that all is not well in the religious affairs of Los Reyes. Not only is the crafty Father Benito accepting money from a local drug lord to help pay for a village hospital, but he is sleeping with the widow Sanjuanera, who does his housework and allows him to eat at her small cantina.

Father Amaro is still staggering from this discovery when he is hit by another revelation: another local priest, Father Natalio, is aiding and abetting guerrillas in

their mountain retreat (the guerrillas are never named, but it's clear that they are intended to be Zapatistas).

Amaro's first instinct is to report Father Benito to the bishop (who already has his suspicions about Father Natalio), but over time he comes to appreciate the way things are done in Los Reyes. Wrapping himself tighter in his clerical garb, he quickly proves that when it comes to matters of money and power, he is a very quick learner. When a newspaper prints a story about the ethical shenanigans of Benito and Natalio, Amaro, under the watchful eye of the politically savvy bishop, forces the paper to fire the reporter and print a front-page retraction, even though he knows the story is true.

Father Amaro then gets involved with 16-year-old Amelia, the beautiful daughter of the woman who is servicing Father Benito. Though Amelia is engaged to a liberal reporter (he wrote the front-page story about church corruption), her first love is Jesus Christ. Her dizzying religious devotion gets more complex as the story develops, leading to an amazing confession scene where Amelia asks Father Amaro if masturbation is a sin. He says it is not. She then asks if it is a sin to masturbate to visions of our savior, a question that Father Amaro never had to wrestle with in the seminary.

Father Amaro adds lust to his list of sins while he consolidates his power grab, playing the unsuspecting bishop and the greedy local mayor off against each other. The final scene, where Father Amaro performs a funeral mass before a hushed congregation, is reminiscent of the final scene in *The Godfather*, where Michael Corleone, after lying to his wife, closes the door on her. The transition is complete: Father Amaro has become worse than all of them.

No plot summary can do justice to the moral complexities of the film. Yes, Father Benito is cozying up to drug lords, but how does this compare to the many lives that will be saved at the hospital he hopes to build? Of course, he is not supposed to be having sex, but who provided Sanjuanera with tenderness and understanding when she was alone in the world? Sure, Father Natalio is aware that the guerrillas sometimes kill to survive, but if he doesn't champion their cause and work for their rights, who will?

The Crime of Father Amaro seems to be saying that there is no moral absolute, either in the teachings of the Catholic Church or those who are quick to defy those

teachings. On one level, the film asks whether the ends justify the means; on another level, it asks why such choices need to be made at all.

By the end of the film, the only one left standing is Father Amaro. Besting his elders, he is a new breed of moral hypocrite--a man who doesn't even try to justify his sins.