

Priest under threat

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [September 17, 2014](#) issue



Father James Lavelle (Brendan Gleeson) is a faithful, genial priest living in what initially looks like an idyllic corner of western Ireland.

In the confessional, he hears a man report being savagely abused by a priest throughout his childhood. As revenge, the man has determined to kill Father James, not because of any suspicion that he is a molester himself but solely because he is a priest. He will carry out his threat on a Sunday in two weeks' time. Father James knows the identity of his potential murderer, but the audience does not—nor will he share the name with any of his neighbors.

Thus begins *Calvary*, an extraordinarily fine Irish film, beautifully acted by some of that country's finest performers, and visually stunning. It is a masterpiece of religious filmmaking, exploring such critical concepts as collective sin, vicarious guilt, and sacrificial death. The film offers a wide-ranging study of the catastrophic effects of religious scandal on believers.

The weakest part of the film is the element of whodunit, or rather who is about to do it. If you have any familiarity with cinema, you know that big-name actors who appear in films always have at least one major set piece. If such an actor has not had such a scene in the course of the film, then he is being saved for a denouement, and so it proves in this case.

That is, however, a tiny criticism of the film and its overall power. *Calvary's* greatest achievement is to convey the impact of the near-collapse of faith in a specific community. Initially, we see Father James giving communion to his neighbors or

mildly remonstrating with them for missing church, as if churchgoing was the absolute social norm it has always been in Catholic rural Ireland.

Soon, though, these encounters with parishioners turn ever darker. Everyone he meets, it seems, makes remarks deeply critical not just of the Catholic Church but of Christianity, and of religion itself. These challenges range from mildly tasteless jokes to screaming rants, and ultimately of physical confrontation. All his parishioners have apparently accepted the most pernicious forms of anticlericalism and anti-Catholicism. When an arsonist strikes the church, locals view the crime with a mixture of indifference and glee. As James is taunted, “Your time has gone, and you don’t even realize it!” The film’s sole faithful lay Catholic is a visiting European tourist.

The parish’s once-faithful have a sweeping repertoire of complaints. They denounce the church for greed and cynicism, for sexual hypocrisy, for the racism of missions, for collaboration with the Nazis. They mock the concept of confession and forgiveness, which seems to give sinners easy license to repeat their misdeeds at will. Some scoff at the idea of a God who could permit the world’s horror and injustices.

Looming over all these grievances is the clergy abuse scandal that has devastated Irish Catholicism over the past 20 years. Although the issues at stake will be broadly familiar to Americans, the Irish manifestation of the story was much more severe. Church authorities were much slower to realize the harm caused by molestation than were their counterparts in the United States, permitting offending priests to carry on their criminal careers for far longer. Church leaders were also much more cozily tied to secular government, to police and politicians.

Aggravating the situation, Ireland’s Catholic Church was not just one powerful part of a broad denominational spectrum, as in the United States, but instead held a near-monopoly of the religious marketplace. For many, the sins of the church thus discredited Christianity as a whole, rather than one part of it. A major survey of Irish opinion in 2011 found 44 percent of respondents declaring themselves nonreligious, with a further 10 percent claiming the atheist label. That’s the essential real-world background from which *Calvary* grows. The film’s characters speculate whether their grandchildren will express astonishment that their ancestors ever believed in this silly God idea.

The abuse scandal resonates throughout *Calvary*. For all the seething hatred and suppressed violence that Father James must deal with, the film's ugliest single moment exposes him directly to the scandal's impact. Walking on a quiet road, he enters into a friendly chat with a passing young girl. Her panicked father drives up suddenly and orders the priest to stay away from the child he is perceived as clearly about to molest. Why else would a Catholic priest have anything to do with a child? That experience above all brings James to the point of despair.

But if the church is discredited, secular society is presented as a moral disaster area. Father James's village looks like an exemplar from a particularly lurid hellfire sermon. It is rife with drug use, violence, and casual adultery, all intended to mask the underlying despair and emptiness, the pervasive self-hatred. However much the inhabitants condemn the misdeeds of the church, the causes for this dreadful situation clearly lie elsewhere, mainly in the aftereffects of the economic crisis that overwhelmed Ireland in 2008 and which still has not been entirely resolved. One of the film's characters is a financial wizard who had helped cause that national meltdown and who explicitly proclaims the resulting moral chaos, the utter lack of meaning.

This is a world that has lost God. It is crying out for meaning, for faith, for a passionately presented Christian message. The ghastly obstacle to that is of course the church's own crisis. Perhaps that dilemma can only be resolved by the sacrifice of an innocent man, through the blood of a priest like Father James, who goes to meet his Calvary. An enigmatic final scene hints at the possibility of reconciliation, of beginning the lengthy process of reconstruction.

In some ways difficult to watch because of its very grim subject matter, *Calvary* is a wonderfully ambitious and provocative film. It demands frequent viewing and discussion.