

8 recent films that take on the church

Across the globe, cinematic portrayals of Christianity are increasingly emphasizing its faults.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [October 25, 2017](#) issue



Maria (Lea van Acken, left) and Bernadette (Lucie Aron, right) in the German film *Stations of the Cross*. © 2014 Film Movement. All rights reserved.

With the Roman Catholic Church hit by scandals involving abusive clergy, the figure of the pedophile priest has attracted the attention of some of the most significant filmmakers around the globe. Anticlerical works of art are nothing new, but the proliferation of hostile images of the church can hardly fail to make a lasting impact on public opinion.

The brilliant 2015 Chilean film *The Club* is set at a remote seaside house that serves as a refuge for disgraced clergy whose sins are mainly sexual in nature. That same year brought another devastating Chilean study of a serially abusive cleric, *Karadima's Forest*. The Mexican film *Perfect Obedience* (2016) describes abusive priests in a tale inspired by the true-life career of Marcial Maciel, the influential founder of the worldwide Legion of Christ movement. The Irish film *Calvary* (2014) has at its center a fine and even heroic priest, but one whose life is destroyed by the fury of an abuse victim seeking revenge against the church.

Each of these films is impressive as an artistic production, and each contains superb acting. But each also carries a potent ideological message: the abuse scandals not only reveal the sins of individuals but are symptoms of comprehensive neglect and connivance by the church as an institution. Such systematic failings poison the work of even the best pastors. None of the films suggests any hope for the institution.

Crimes of sexual abuse are by no means the only indictment against the church. The Chilean church exposed in *The Club* also has to come to terms with its collaboration with that country's homicidal military dictatorship of the 1970s. The British film *Philomena* (2013) addressed the once common custom that forced Ireland's young unmarried mothers to give up their babies to adoption. As in the abuse films, clergy and nuns emerge as ruthless and flint-hearted.

Quite apart from these spectacular scandals, many other recent films depict the Catholic Church as largely irrelevant to the lives of its faithful. One Italian contribution is Alice Rohrwacher's *Heavenly Body* (2011), a study of a teenage girl preparing for confirmation. *Heavenly Body* is in no sense an anti-church film, and it shows the brave if ultimately doomed efforts of lay teachers to make religious training lively and enjoyable. The problem is that any successes occur despite the contributions of the priests rather than because of them. The priests are wholly involved in their political and business dealings and barely even go through the motions of working with youth.

Compared to other films, *Heavenly Body* stands out as almost friendly in its attitudes to belief and believers. More typical is the much-praised German production *Stations of the Cross* (2014), about a teenage girl who decides to follow in Christ's footsteps. Bullied by her church and her parents, her religious resolution drives all hope of joy or achievement from her life and leads to her own Golgotha. In fairness, the family is identified as members of a thinly disguised version of the rigorist Society of Saint

Pius X, rather than as mainstream Catholics, but that distinction is unlikely to register with most viewers. The overall message is not just that Christians fail to live up to the principles of their faith, but that any attempt to do so would be ruinous. Christianity is not intended for the real world.

Organized religion carries a special weight in societies where church and state historically operated in intimate alliance. In recent years, a growing number of individuals have tried to secede from the Catholic loyalty that is assumed of individuals within such a society, seeking the right to have themselves debaptized or otherwise removed from the church's rolls. Such formal disaffiliation is difficult and time-consuming. Such a situation provides the setting for the 2015 Uruguayan-Spanish film *The Apostate*, which turns out to be more of a light comedy than a study of agonized theological debate. Even so, it is notable that the formal rejection of Christianity should be a subject for comedy.

If historians rely on popular culture depictions, they will certainly conclude that the early 21st century was a very dark time indeed for the Catholic Church, especially in its traditional strongholds.

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