



FILM: **CORPUS CHRISTI**

FDG RATING: 3.9 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Jan Komasa/ Mateusz Pacewicz: *director/ writer*
Bartosz Bielenia: *actor, Daniel*

DATE: August 23, 2020

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **CORPUS CHRISTI**

Corpus Christi, is Latin for "the body of Christ", and the holiday celebrates the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the actual body of Christ during Mass. In the 2019/2020 Oscar nominated Polish film titled Corpus Christi, people desperately/passionately want to believe, as we see the village Daniel that visits, succumb to his somewhat questionable style of priesthood. He wants to be a priest although his criminal record prevents him from applying to the seminary, but serendipitously, he finds himself offered the position of temporary vicar when the parish priest is called away (for alcohol abuse treatment). Daniel had been furloughed from the local youth reformatory/detention center to work at the saw mill, and on his way, during a drunken brawl, he donned a priest costume, which he kept and used to bolster his claim that he was a priest, when he arrived at the church in the neighboring village and Marta, the teen age daughter of the parish custodian, accused him of being a "juvie" on his way to work at the mill.

The villagers turned a blind eye to the drunken cravings of their old parish priest, preferring to believe in his saintliness and the priest himself as well as the parish custodian flatly deny his addiction. The villagers also believe that the tragic car crash that killed 5 teenagers was the fault of Ewa's husband who they accuse of driving drunk although he had been sober for 4 years. They refuse to have the "murderer" buried in the cemetery, send hateful messages to her and shun any contact. Daniel is determined to help the villagers heal from the pain of the tragedy, and as he does, he uncovers truths that have been hidden by blind belief and baseless assumptions that caused misplaced guilt and innocence. He also exposes corruption and plays with the culprit Mayor in his very unique irreverent/reverent style when he is asked to bless the opening of a new wing of the Mill, that happens to be owned by the Mayor.

Daniel seems a bit schizophrenic, noted one discussion participant, pointing to his complicity in violent behavior in the reformatory, the fact that he is in the reformatory for murdering the brother of another juvie during a fight, and his other unethical behavior. But Father Tomasz at the reformatory has become a role model for him, and he has an almost angelic voice when he sings hymns during Father's Tomasz's services. We see true empathy and spirituality in Daniel as he ministers to the people in the village. Another discussion participant noted that Daniel tapped into his own pain when trying to heal the pain of the villagers. He showed sincere tenderness with Marta. He wanted to be a better person. The cinematography and makeup purposely intensify this contrast so that Daniel looks devilish or saintly in different scenes.

Daniel is toggling between two paths was another observation. We don't know the circumstance he grew up in which can dictate the life path for a young person. We wondered if he had been able to stay as the priest of that village, he probably would have continued on a path of righteousness, spirituality, and healing. But sadly, as happens to many young people who grow up in violent environments, they cannot break the cycle and become manifestations of violence.

A favorite scene is when Daniel is taking confessions and finding the proper response by searching on his smart phone. Another is when he has the villagers gather outside in front of the improvised memorial to the teens who dies, and forcefully jump forward and backward while yelling and waving their arms to shake off their pain, which was very similar to an anger management activity Father Tomasz had the juvies do during one of his services. Another favorite scene concerns the corrupt Mayor who asks Daniel to say a prayer for the dedication of new wing of his saw mill. Rather than a short prayer, Daniel sermonizes about power, greed, control, and has everyone kneel (in the muddy path where they gathered in front of the new wing) to admit their "smallness" in reverence to God, knowing that the Mayor would get the pants of his suit soiled as he kneeled.

The most impactful scene is toward the end when Father Tomasz goes to the village to bring Daniel back to the detention center after learning that Daniel never showed up at the mill and is impersonating a priest. Daniel refuses to leave until after he has performed his final Mass. He hurries to the church, stands on the altar beneath a painting of Jesus on the cross, strips off his priest robe, and turns his bare back to the parishioners revealing his heavily tattooed skin, unmasking himself as a sinner, and ready to be crucified. One interpretation was that there is no good vs evil, no black vs white, but rather a constant mixture, continual reconciliation, which goes along with another comment that people can change, they can be reformed. But this scene also underscores the theme of passionate, blind belief, based on erroneous assumptions, and especially in the religious realm, leads to questions about what is true spirituality.

Many of the discussion participants who dreaded watching what they assumed would be an uncomfortably religious film, were surprised and fascinated by the unfolding of the religious aspects, acknowledging the extremely creative plot. The acting and cinematography was exceptional. The themes are powerful, thought provoking, and universally relevant resulting in an uplifting score of 3.9 on our scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the best).

Footnote: The film's universal appeal surprised the young director Jan Komasa, and writer Mateusz Pacewicz. They thought it was going to be a local film that didn't go beyond Poland. But after premiering at the Venice Film Festival and screening at the Toronto International Film Festival, it gained traction and attention. Pacewicz said, "It proved far more universal than we expected." The writer, Mateusz Pacewicz, has become an expert on the commonality of fake priests in Poland. He and the director loosely based the story on a real event: a young man pretended to be a priest during the Catholic holiday of Corpus Christi. "He was organizing the event in a small community in Poland and he really was sympathetic and people loved him. They were shocked to learn he was a fake priest," Komasa says. "He really wanted to become a spiritual leader for them. The most surprising thing, astonishing, was the moment he got uncovered, people started to write letters to the Vatican, which ran an independent investigation. To everybody's surprise, the Vatican [sanctioned] his sacraments because people didn't know whether they were married, whether their children were baptized, etc. So, it was a big issue."



See you at the movies!

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