



Doubt

Rated PG-13. Our Rating: V-0 ; L- 0; S/N- 3. Length: 1 hour 44 min.

Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius become mortal enemies. © 2008 Miramax Films

Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

Mark 9:24

'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes

gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the

same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut

down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Matthew 6:15-20

John Patrick Shanley adapts and directs his own Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award® winning play, graced by an excellent

cast. This is one of those films that people of faith will want to see and discuss, the issues that it raises ranging from the theological to the ethical and even to gender concerns. Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), the new parish priest at St. Nicholas in the Bronx, wants to change things, such as establishing a "more friendly" atmosphere in the school. In this he is opposed by Sister Aloysius Beauvier (Meryl Streep), the school's principal who is as much a dragon lady as was Ms. Streep's magazine editor in *The Devil Wears Prada*— indeed, some might subtitle this film "The Devil Wears a Black Habit." (Father Flynn even calls her a dragon in one scene.)

Caught between them is the young and naive Sister James (Amy Adams), who tells Sister Aloysius that the students are terrified of their principal. Sr. Aloysius sees nothing wrong with that, believing that discipline must be based on an iron fist. She is conservative to the point not only of staying with black bonnets and gowns that make the sisters seem like they belong in the 19th century, but she also decries, and forbids, the use of ball point pens, saying that good penmanship is being destroyed. When she tells her nuns that she is suspicious of their new pastor and that they should watch him, it is Sister James who comes to her to report on Father Flynn's behavior with the new student Donald Muller (Joseph Foster). Donald is the first black student to be enrolled in the school, and most of the other boys are not friendly toward him, one boy especially harassing him. But is it only because of his race? Father Flynn is seen hugging and comforting the boy. Sister James also has spotted the priest with the boy in his study, and later returning the boy's undershirt to his locker. What is up?

Suspecting the worst, Sister Aloysius confronts the priest in her office, and the battle between the two strong-willed clerics rises to the surface, the priest expressing his anger at the head nun's charges and demanding proof. It is not only Sister James who is caught between these two antagonists, but also young Donald and his mother. The scene in which the principal and Mrs. Muller (Viola Davis) talk about Donald, and in which we learn more about him, is so riveting that it has "Supporting Actress Oscar nomination" written all over it. (Remember Beatrice Straight's Oscar for Best Supporting Actress for her equally short scene in 1976's *Network*?)

This is a film that raises important issues, with doubt being explored on at least two levels: from the aspect of faith and doubt in Father Flynn's ser-

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6 Visual Parables Continued

mon which we see at the beginning of the film; and on the level of certainty that leads to seeming intolerance in the case of Sister Aloysius. There is also a third aspect, in regard to the audience itself, but as this could lead to a spoiler or two, I will explore this in the reflection/discussion questions below. This is one film about which, the next morning after seeing it, I had changed my mind about the main characters and the intent of the filmmaker. Do not miss this power film!

Although set in a Roman Catholic school, the issues it deals with concern all people of faith.

For Reflection/Discussion

There are DEFINITELY spoilers in the following, especially in the last few questions.

1. How would you describe the two main characters? Which of the following adjectives would you apply to them: Open; closed; welcoming; distancing; warm; cold; dedicated; concerned; faithful; authoritative; certain; doubtful; trustworthy; appealing; positive; negative?

2. Describe Sister James. How is she torn between the two authority figures? Why did she begin to notice peculiarities in Father Flynn's relationship with young Donald?

3. What do you think of Father Flynn's sermon on doubt? Of his statement, "Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as

certainty”? What is the political and social context that he mentions that was so unsettling at the time? (Death of Pres. Kennedy, changes in the church.) Has doubt been a part of your spiritual development, and if so how have you dealt with it?

4. If you have seen *Religulous*, compare doubt in John Patrick Shanley’s film with Bill Maher’s use of

Fr. Flynn and some students at the parish school. © 2008 Miramax Films

Father Flynn advises Sr. James. © 2008 Miramax Films

doubt in his attack on the foibles and excesses of religion, especially in his final plea that argues that doubt is necessary in order to combat the blind certainty of those who commit terrible deeds against unbelievers because of their unquestioned certainty.

How does Father Flynn seem to agree with Maher, especially in the scene in which Sister Aloysius asks the priest what he is writing, and he responds, “A sermon idea,” and to her question of the subject, he answers, “Intolerance.”

5. Especially for Protestants, and reformers in the Roman Catholic Church, how is doubt an integral part of faith, and not its enemy?

6. What do you think of Father Flynn’s advice to Sister James when they sit together on the bench?

7. What about this exchange between Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius: “You haven’t the slightest proof of anything!” “But I have my certainty!” How much do you think her certainty is based on her dislike of the priest (as Sister James points out) and her arch conservative nature? Have you been in a situation in which all you had was such a hunch or intuition like Sister Aloysius’s? Did you test it? What does the Sister do to test her view?

8. What do you learn about Donald when Sister Aloysius talks with his mother? Were you shocked by Mrs. Muller’s acceptance that Father Flynn might be abusing her son? What do you think of her justification? What does she base her view on: that is, what does she fear might happen to Donald if it were not for the priest (remember this is in 1964)? How does this add to the complexity of the story and of the characters?

9. What visual clue concerning Father Flynn does the filmmaker give us in the office scene in which the two principals confront each other? That is, when Sister Aloysius opens up the venetian blind so that light floods into the room, what does the priest do? Also, what do you think of the short scene in which we see a close up of the stained glass window detail of the Eye of God, at which the priest is staring up.

10. How does the film undermine the certainty of the audience in respect to our reading and acceptance of the two main characters? For whom at first are we led to have the most sympathy? Who is the most attractive in their relationship with the students and the desire to improve their school? Who seems like a purveyor of poison, a virtual paragon of all that is dreadful in an educator dealing with children? (I recall saying to my companion during the film that that character is “pure poison.”) And yet who, in the final analysis, is right? Or is this possible, given the already mentioned complexity of the characters—maybe we should say “is right in regard to the charge of sexual abuse”? How might the above passage from Matthew 6 apply—or does it? Jesus says that we will know the sheep and the wolves “by their fruits,” but what are the fruits of the priest and the nun? Who seems at first the best person to be in charge of the school? Life is a very mixed situation, is it not?

11. What do you think of Sister Aloysius’ confession at the end? Is she a broken, or a maturing person at this point? Or do you think that the filmmaker copped out with this ending? Can you think of a better ending?

12. Given the complexity of the film, where, or in whom, do you see God at work in the film? Do you think that God can use such damaged persons? Do you think that the anguished mother’s love of Mrs. Muller is akin to agape love?