Opinion
Culture



Ecumenical jurists pose May 19 at the Cannes Film Festival. From left: Konstantin Terzis; Xavier Accart, NCR contributor Sr. Rose Pacatte; Roland Kauffmann; Lucia Cuocci; and Stefan Förner. (Daniel Beguin/Claire Zombas)



by Rose Pacatte

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The ecumenical jury at Cannes was inaugurated in 1974, following the efforts of the organization Interfilm. Delegates from various European Protestant film associations founded Interfilm in 1955. According to the organization, Jan Hes from The Netherlands was appointed as Interfilm's first secretary general, and Interfilm began to participate in various film festivals. The Cannes festival in 1968 was cancelled due to student protests, but the next year the Interfilm jury at Cannes awarded its first prize to "Easy Rider."

The first ecumenical jury consisted of Protestants nominated by Interfilm and Catholics (as well as Orthodox Catholics and at least once, a Jewish member) nominated by the International Catholic Organization for Cinema, now called SIGNIS. The jury was formed in 1973 at the Locarno International Film Festival in Switzerland. Ecumenical juries now participate in the Berlin, Locarno and Montreal film festivals. The SIGNIS Catholic Communicators Forum in the U.S. started an ecumenical jury in 2009 at FilmFest DC in Washington and gave its first award to the Japanese film "Departures."

There are five criteria for judging films for the Ecumenical Jury Prize. The first is high artistic quality: the artistic talents and technical skill of the director and his or her team, and the film's storytelling style must be convincing and original. From my perspective originality can be an issue. Sometimes directors have a certain style they always employ, or the film can fall into a derivative genre trap. So far this year, the films fall into some interesting subgenres that reflect the religious-social-political realities of the world.

The second is religious perspective. For us this means that the jury gives preference to films that illustrate human qualities, raise awareness of spiritual dimensions of human life, Gospel virtues and values, or films that question the choices we make as a society. Several of the films shown so far or are yet to be screened question these choices.

The third criterion is how well the films deal with our responsibility as Christians in the world. This does not mean we are looking for Christian films, but rather those that deal with significant human and Gospel principles and themes: respect for human dignity and human rights; solidarity with minorities or oppressed people; support for the processes of liberation, justice, peace and reconciliation; preservation of creation and the environment. Catholics and many other Christians know that these themes are included in Catholic social teaching, so right away an ecumenical jury has a common starting point that makes our work, however late at night or early in the morning, a delight. Of course, being on the French Riviera — despite days of grey skies, sprinkles and downpours, and steep hills to climb — is rather a delight.

The fourth criterion is that of the film's universal impact. I always regret the use of the word "impact" when it comes to any form of media, and wish we used instead the linguistically more appropriate word "influence." This criterion asks us to look at how various cultures are represented so that audiences worldwide can appreciate cultural differences, values and images of that culture.

Finally, and this criterion moves the film from the theater and our jury discussion room to society at large: The jury is to choose a film (or films depending on the festival when commendations are sometimes given) that lends itself for use in film clubs, societies and discussion groups to foster a better understanding of different realities, and promote dialogue about the challenges and hopes in today's world. I would add film retreats as an ideal "space" for this to happen, and at the end of the festival I will make some recommendations in this regard.

While I must wait to review the rest of the films in the main competition, I would like to mention some from the completion track "Un Certain Regard."

First of all, Lebanese filmmaker Nadine Labaki is the president of the Un Certain Regard Jury for this year's festival, and if you have not yet seen her films, please do. My favorite is "Where Do We Go Now?" and the multi award-winning and Oscar-nominated 2018 film "Capernuam" that she wrote and directed. "Capernuam" also won the Ecumenical Prize here at Cannes last year. She also made "Caramel" which I have at home but have not yet seen.

All five films I have seen from "Un Certain Regard" deal with social issues, some dire.

"Bull," an American film directed and written by Annie Silverstein, stars Amber Havard as the 14-year-old main character Kris, and Rob Morgan as Abe, an African-American neighbor who is a clown on the Texas bull-riding rodeo circuit. This is an introspective coming-of-age story and growing-old story all in one. Kris and her sister live with their grandmother because their mom is in prison. Abe lives in continual pain from bull-riding injuries but goes out every weekend to work. One weekend, Kris, trying to fit in, invites her "friends" into Abe's home to drink and take drugs. She gets caught and, instead of pressing charges, he makes her clean up all the mess. Then he gives her more chores. Then she goes to a rodeo and decides she wants to ride, too. The film doesn't end the way this description may lead you to think. But it has charm and shows growth for both Kris and Abe. It is a story shot through with pain, suffering and benevolence.

My favorite film is "The Swallows of Kabul," an animated film by two women directors, Zabou Breitman and Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec, is an adaptation of Yasmina Khadra's book. It takes place in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan in 1998, as the Taliban rule is intensifying, especially against women, by hijab-wearing policewomen. Two of the main characters are unemployed: an artist Zunaira (voiced by Zita Hanrot) and her husband Mohsen (Swann Arlaud). She makes wonderful — and unlawful — drawings on the walls of their spare room, and he meets up with an old professor, hoping to work at an underground school. They are in love and have hope. Then there is the warden of a women's prison, Atiq (Simon Abkarian) and his very ill wife Mussarat (Hiam Abbass), who was already older and a widow when he married her. The story is about human yearnings, hope and love and how the lives of the characters come crashing together in a line of unintended consequences. So much to talk about here.

Another Islam-themed live action film is "Papicha," written and directed by Mounia Meddour Gens. It takes place in the late '90s in Algeria, where sharia law is again being imposed by various Islamic terrorist groups. At a women's university, several of the students, led by Nedjma (Lyna Khoudri) sneak out at night to go to nightclubs. While they like to party, Nedjma is a self-made fashion designer. She takes measurements and orders from young women at the clubs, buys the fabric and makes money this way. But pressure is building for all women to wear the hijab (and even men cannot roll their sleeves above their elbows). The university is invaded by female militia members in hijab, frightening many students. A young man wants Nedjma to leave the country with him, but she loves her home and wants to stay

and change it from within. As the situation intensifies, she decides to hold a fashion show made up of elegant-looking hijabs. When this is blocked, she decides to have a fashion show at all costs. It is a confident and terrifying act of resistance. If I were a judge on this track, I truly don't know what film I would award.

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"Jeanne" (Joan of Arc) is one film I would not award — ever. It is the second film by French director Bruno Dumont on the saint, starting when she decides to march on Paris (remember this is during the Hundred Years' War) without the guidance of her voices. The first, "Jeanette: The Childhood of Joan of Arc," premiered before the 2017 Cannes Film Festival. It is based on, supposedly, the plays of Charles Peguy from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. All I can say is that this film is a boring mess. The endless dialogue is about nothing central to the story of Joan. For example, men guarding her once she has been captured by the English chat about whether or not they should drink. "Inane" is the best adjective to most of the dialogue. Then the various "hearings" of her trial are mostly clerics and bishops talking about whether or not they can come. There is precious little of Joan in the film. It's a kind of weird pop -rock musical and the actors, except for young Joan alone, played by Lise Leplat Prudhomme (who looks about 12 but knows and delivers her lines in a steely voice and a gaze that never hints at emotion) are either amateurs, or the director is trying to make a satire or farce. It's that bad. I love the poems of Charles Peguy. Can his plays be this bad? Now I have to find out. This version of Joan of Arc's life is simply ridiculous.

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