Culture
Obituary

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As papal conversations at weekly outdoor Masses at the Vatican go, it was characteristically brief, but because of the famous actor involved, reported worldwide.

Robert Redford and his German wife, Sibylle Szaggars, an artist and environmental activist, were in the general audience on Dec. 4, 2019. This brought them in direct contact with Pope Francis, who customarily greeted at least a few worshippers after the Mass in St. Peter's Square.

They clasped hands. "Holy Father, my name is Robert Redford and I want to thank you for all you've done for the environment."

"God bless you," Pope Francis replied. "Pray for me."

"I do," Redford responded.

Redford, who died Sept. 16 at 89, was not Catholic, and his known Catholic ancestry, according to his biographers, consisted only of an Irish lass, Mary-Ann McCreery,

who married his great-great-grandfather, Elisha Redford, a Presbyterian, in Manchester Cathedral in England in 1849. Later that year, they settled in America, at first in Connecticut.

As for his mother's Scotch-Irish ancestors, in 2011, biographer Michael Callan concluded that they were "religiously random."

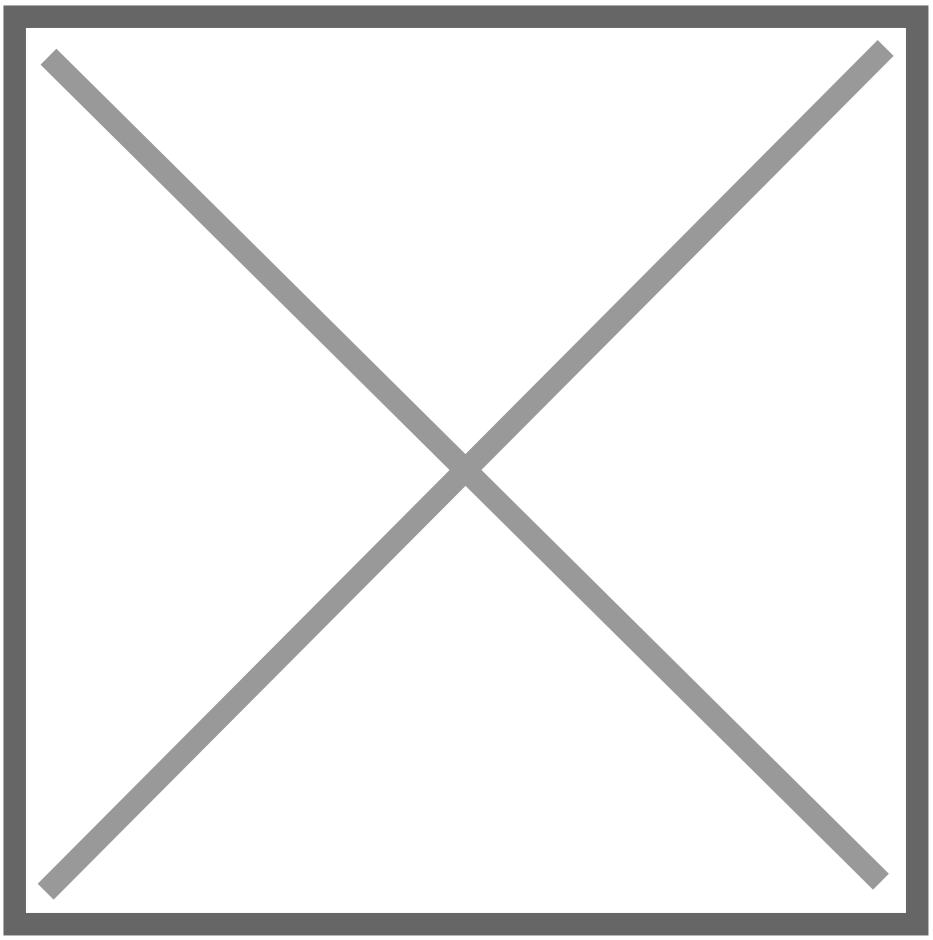
Redford's environmental activism, which included serving as a trustee for Natural Resources Defense Council for decades and lobbying for what became the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, became as famous as anything he'd ever done in Hollywood.

But he was not known to have any association with organized religion. In a frequently quoted interview with Playboy magazine in 2007, he said, "I've explored every religion, some very deeply, enough to know there's not one philosophy that can satisfy me. Problems can't be solved with one way of thinking."

However, many of the more than 70 films in which he starred since 1960, and the nine he directed since 1980, explored themes of ethical quandaries, spirituality and moral decisions and were respectful of faith. Redford sought material for which he could sense an immediate emotional connection.

These included "Quiz Show" (1994), a drama about the quiz show scandals of the 1950s and the ethical decisions involved in putting pleasing believable images on TV, and "All the President's Men" (1976), in which Redford, as Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward and Dustin Hoffman as reporter Carl Bernstein, wrestled with the slowly emerging picture of White House corruption no one thought was possible.

These elements were quite often noted by Catholic movie writers over the years.



Actor Robert Redford is pictured in a scene from "The Horse Whisperer," a 1998 film directed by Redford in which he played the title role. The Hollywood icon died Sept. 16, 2025, at age 89. (OSV News/Touchstone Pictures)

Here is a sampling, beginning with four films Redford directed:

"The Legend of Bagger Vance" (2000)

In 2018, writing in The Georgia Bulletin, David King noted that Redford, "whether as an actor or a director has always demonstrated an affinity for the spiritual and mythical qualities of sport."

In this golf drama, Bagger Vance (Will Smith) is a caddie who appears seemingly out of the mist and guides amateur golfer Rannulph Junuh (Matt Damon) to a championship. King wrote of Bagger, "He strikes me as the epitome of what we would like our angels to be."

At one point, Bagger lectures Rannulph, "So, you think a soul is born with everything that the Lord can give it, and things don't go its way, so it just gives up, and the good Lord takes everything back? No. The soul doesn't die."

"A River Runs Through It" (1992)

In 2016, Timothy Schilling wrote in Commonweal magazine of this adaptation of Norman MacLean's Montana-set novella, "As the superb Redford adaptation made clear, 'A River Runs Through It' was not so much about fishing as about the pain of loving and losing. Also clear was that while Maclean understood this experience in the light of Christian faith, he couldn't quite trust Christianity's promise of redemption. Tragedy — and whether we have an answer for it — was his abiding theme."

In 1992 in the Catholic Northwest Progress, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Seattle, Dawn Raines called it "a story about transcendence." Norman (Tom Skerrett) the father of Norman and Paul (Craig Sheffer and Brad Pitt) and a Presbyterian minister, passes this along: "Jesus' disciples were fishermen. Fly fishermen. And that John, the most favored, was probably … well, a dry fly fisherman."

And of that activity, "We see it perfected as art, therapy and religion."

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"Ordinary People" (1980)

Redford's directorial debut, for which he won his only Academy Award as Best Director, was an understated story of emotionally closed-off parents (Donald Sutherland, Mary Tyler Moore) and their son (Timothy Hutton) dealing with the tragedy of the death of their other son.

Reviewing for the former National Catholic News Service, Michael Gallagher wrote, "Though determinedly secular in tone, it does despite itself, give off a few intimations of an immortality lurking just beneath the very mortal surface of things."

He concluded, "How much better if instead of merely allowing us to discover that these people are guilt-ridden, the movie had gone on to a deeper examination of the

nature of that guilt ... What these people, these ordinary people, have done, in fact, is to shut God and traditional morality out of their lives."

"The Conspirator" (2011)

In this historical drama about Mary Surratt (Robin Wright), the boarding house owner caught up in John Wilkes Booth's (Toby Kebbell) conspiracy to assassinate President Lincoln in 1865, Redford sought to find a calm, realistic approach to how the characters had behaved.

For Catholic News Service, John Mulderig wrote that Redford avoided "heavy-handed politicking."

In addition, "a similarly balanced approach characterizes the portrayal of Surratt's faith. Her Catholicism, symbolized by the rosary she carries with her in prison and to the scaffold, is shown to further enflame Northern public opinion against her."

Perhaps, though, the strongest religious parallel seen in one of Redford's films was this reaction to "Brubaker" (1980), in which Redford played Henry Brubaker, a warden tasked with improving conditions at a notorious Arkansas prison, where he goes undercover as an inmate.

A review carried in the Catholic Northwest Progress concluded that the film "seems to me to be a thinly disguised tale of the Christ, with Brubaker as the Alter Christus (The Latin term for 'another Christ')."

"He is the celibate hero sent by the governor to deliver the people from bondage. But not content to carry out his mission from afar, he takes the sins of the people upon himself, becoming one of the inmates."

Szaggars survives him, as do daughters Shauna and Amy from his first marriage to Lola Van Wagenan. Two sons from that marriage, Scott, died at age 2 in 1959 and James at 58 in 2020.