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'Scenes from a Parish:' Inner-city Massachusetts' parish viewed

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NCR Today

'Scenes from a Parish' is a 90-minute experience of inner-city change seen through the transformation of St. Patrick's parish and its persevering pastor, Father Paul O'Brien.

Filmed over four years, director/producer James Rutenbeck made this film out of a desire to find communion with the forgotten and the marginalized.

Change is never easy and Rutenbeck's film highlights that even noticing change is a challenge. In one scene of a parish meeting, a father of a family voices his confusion by asking for help to see and understand why the parish must minister to the poor; he doesn't even know who they are where they live; they are invisible.

Others don't understand why a Spanish mass is needed. Tensions between the older Irish-American population and newcomers with needs the older folks, who survived extreme changes in the former factory city and the church over almost the same time period (mid-60's to present), never before encountered.

Enter Harvard-educated Fr. Paul O'Brien who went to school with comedian Conan O'Brien (no relation). With quiet determination Fr. Paul enlists the efforts of his parishioners to establish and take part in outreach programs. Together they open a restaurant-style soup kitchen, counsel drug addicts, try to keep families together, all the while tending to the normal parish activities such as the choir. (Conan O'Brien does make an appearance when the restaurant is opened.)

In one poignant sequence the music director invites a young woman with a marvelous voice to re-join the choir. She hesitates. After struggling with her sexual identity for some time, is now in an openly gay

relationship and does not believe her family or the parish will welcome her back.

?Scenes from a Parish? is a strong yet gentle film that shows that people can change; that faith, hope, and charity are alive and well. If sometimes invisible, Fr. Paul and the people of good will in his parish, clothes these virtues in actions touched by grace and makes them visible.

Check local PBS listings for dates and times; the DVD is available from www.NeoFlix.com for \$24.95

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