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"There Be Dragons" review

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It is 1976. Journalist Robert Torres (Dougray Scott) is researching a Catholic priest, Josemaria Escriva, the founder of a Catholic group called Opus Dei, who had recently died amidst rumors of sanctity. Much to his surprise, Robert discovers that his estranged father, Manolo (Wes Bentley), grew up in the same village in Spain and even went to the same seminary. Robert travels from London to Madrid to find answers to his questions, but even after an eight-year silence, his father will not speak to him.

Manolo is a man haunted by his past. He was the child of wealthy parents while Josemaria's father owned a chocolate factory that he lost when times turned bad. Early on Manolo became envious of Josemaria because he could see that the Escriva family was filled with love while his own father was stern and even cruel.

After a year in the seminary, Manolo leaves. Josemaria (Charlie Cox) however, becomes a priest. He gathers a few young men who are interested in becoming priests and living holy lives. They teach and work in hospitals. After a few years, Josemaria asks permission of the auxiliary bishop of Valencia (Robert Blythe) to found a community that will include laity, both men and women who will live separately, and even married couples. Their mission will be to teach others to find holiness in daily life and work.

Meanwhile the Spanish Civil War breaks out in 1936. Manolo is sent as a spy among the socialists. He learns to kill. He falls in love with Ildiko (Olga Kurylenko), a young Hungarian woman who has come to fight with the revolutionaries. She notices Manolo's jealousy when she becomes attracted to their leader and is repulsed by his envy. Things come to a head when Ildiko becomes pregnant.

Josemaria, after trying to minister as a priest during the war that targeted clergy in particular, finally

agrees to escape over the Pyrenees into France.

"There Be Dragons," written and directed by twice Oscar-nominated Roland Joffe ("The Killing Fields" and "The Mission"), is not a biopic of St. Josemaria Escriva. Instead, Joffe set aside the original script and wrote a fictional story based on themes of love and forgiveness that he gleaned from reading more about Escriva and watching video tapes of him speaking with people.

The good news about this film is that the cinematography is gorgeous, the art direction excellent, and the historical sequences, including the battle scenes, seem quite authentic. The visual parallel narrative structure, the subtleness of the religious imagery, works well.

There are three moments in the film in particular, which stood out for me. One is when the manager of the chocolate factory, Honorio (Sir Derek Jacobi), teaches the young boys about the "patience, skill, hard work and love" that it takes to discover the divine taste of chocolate. Josemaria remembers these themes when he begins "The Work" that his mother will translate into the Latin, "Opus Dei."

The second moment is when Josemaria visits the dying Honorio in the hospital and discovers he is Jewish, and they pray together.

The third moment comes at the end when Josemaria is hidden among the mentally ill in a hospital before escaping into France. There he encounters a young woman who was raped and she talks to him about the reality of God's presence. But is she real, or is she a vision? Either way, it is a luminous moment.

There is yet another scene that I appreciated as well. During the war, one of the young members of "The Work" wants to start a pro-Church crusade, but Josemaria says no because this will only add to the hatred. They ask him why people attack the Church and he says, "Because they see us as part of a system that causes them pain." I thought this reflected the complexity of the Spanish Civil War very well.

The not-so-good news is that Joffe has structured the film as a Cain and Abel story, a dualistic structure that leaves little room for ambiguity. Josemaria is sweetness and light and Manolo is dark, brooding, and violent.

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The acting is even, though Charlie Cox's portrayal of Escriva makes the priest seem too good, almost sweet, to be true; no one character really stands out for me except Ildiko; she's exceptional.

The forgiveness that Robert is asked to extend to his father is so extreme, to me, that it does not seem plausible, as is Manolo's violence. It is jarring. I can only imagine that a biopic of St. Josemaria Escriva might have been rather boring except to the initiated, because he is presented as so ordinary -- a hallmark of Opus Dei's mission. Thus, Joffe must have felt compelled to create such opposites to make the story interesting. I remember reading a 1952 book by Louis de Wohl "The Golden Thread: A Novel about St. Ignatius of Loyola." His life story was told effectively, and entertainingly to a teen reader, because of the way the adventures of the main character, a mercenary soldier, kept intersecting with that of Ignatius.

The title "There be Dragons" refers to early maps of the world, where unknown geographical areas were labeled "Here be dragons." Joffe says that this title appealed to him because he would be going into unknown spiritual areas with this film and exploring love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

If you decide to see "There Be Dragons", approach it as a fictional story, without expectations of a

biography of St. Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer, who was canonized in 2002. Two of the producers for the film are members of Opus Dei and an Opus Dei priest served as a consultant, so one assumes it passed muster. I don't believe the film will cause controversy because there is just not enough information about Opus Dei and the focus is on Escriva who comes off as intelligent, benevolent, and benign -- though he is shown flagellating himself at one point.

If you think you will come away knowing anything specific about "Opus Dei," you will be disappointed. Controversy has dogged the group for decades, coming to a head when they were inaccurately portrayed in the novel and film "The Da Vinci Code." If "Opus Dei" is a secular institute (it is; approved by the Church in 1950) to teach people how to become holy in daily life, I have to ask what is so exceptional about this? As Christians, we are all called to this goal. Therefore, I have to assume that either there is no more to know, or if there is something unique about Opus Dei, the information was not made available to Joffe.

Josemaria Escriva comes off as very ordinary in extraordinary times.

However, to give the story its due, you may be inspired if the violence does not put you off. Fidelity to one's friends (even if not reciprocated), forgiveness and reconciliation are for all seasons.

"There Be Dragons" opens in theaters May 6.

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