

On 'The Way' with Martin Sheen

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Oct. 7, 2011



Martin Sheen in the movie "The Way" (Photos by Elixir Films/David Alexanian)

By the time director/writer Emilio Estevez's new film "The Way" opens nationwide Oct. 21, he and his lead star, dad Martin Sheen, will have crisscrossed the United States and part of Canada on a bus tour with exclusive screenings in about 30 cities.

"The Way" is the story of Tom (Sheen), a widower, sometime Catholic and a Malibu dentist, whose son, Daniel (Estevez), decides to leave his doctorate behind and see the world.

As Tom drives Daniel to the airport, he scolds him for not taking his place in the world. Daniel answers that he needs to find what that place is and gently suggests that his dad might do the same.

Not long after, Tom's golf game is interrupted by a call with the news that Daniel has died in a small town in the French Pyrenees. Tom leaves immediately to bring his son's body home. But once there, a kind police detective informs him that in this remote town his son was about to leave on a spiritual pilgrimage to the medieval shrine of Santiago de Compostela, where many believe the relics of St. James the Apostle are interred.

Tom has Daniel's remains cremated and then decides that the two of them together will make this journey, which is also called pilgrimage, the way, or *camino*. People make this *camino* for different reasons but Tom has little idea of what he is in for or where he is going. He packs the tin with Daniel's ashes in the rucksack the young man had prepared, and starts off.

On the first or second morning, after a terrible night's sleep in a hostel, Tom drops the knapsack in a river and becomes thoroughly drenched fighting the current to retrieve it. It's a cleansing, a rebirth, a humbling baptism for Tom as he begins his journey.



Along the way he collects three people, or characters, that hook their

destiny to his: Joost (Yorick van Wageningen), a jovial Dutchman who travels with recreational pharmaceuticals and wants to lose weight so his wife won't reject him; Sarah (Deborah Kara Unger), a Canadian who says she is on the *camino* to stop smoking; and Jack (James Nesbitt), a chatty Irish novelist who has lost his creative spark. Tom avoids them when he can but after he has a spectacular meltdown in public and Jack puts up his bail, they continue together.

The *camino* is a time for confidences, listening, and seeing oneself, others and the world through new eyes. The journey is rigorous, with many obstacles from lack of sleep to being robbed to very sore feet, but it is a transforming journey toward freedom.

I interviewed Sheen in view of the film's release and we began with his own personal life's journey.

***NCR:* What or who inspired your Catholic social activism?**

Sheen: Daniel Berrigan, SJ. But long before I met Dan and his brother, Phil, they were great sources of inspiration to all of us with their nonviolent resistance to the Vietnam War. But I didn't become associated with him until the 1980s. The organization they founded, the Plowshares Movement, brought together concerned laity, religious and clergy within the church, but not only Catholic Christians but the Jewish community and others as well, to oppose the war nonviolently. It was a movement anchored in the scriptures.

The first time I heard the term the "nonviolent Jesus" was from John Dear, SJ, and it astonished me.

The '60s were such a time of great violence and these men were calling us to activism based on the scriptures in line with the Rev. Martin Luther King. It was Gospel justice and I found it so moving and inspiring and it changed the direction of my life. For the spiritual life to be active you have to put your body where your spirit is. We must find a way to unite the way of the spirit with the work of the flesh

I feel that your opening performance in "Apocalypse Now" (1979) has something to do with your new film, "The Way," because, to me, that performance reveals the sacramentality of film because it outwardly manifests the inner reality of a man's darkness and despair. Thoughts?

I was 36 years old and I was an alcoholic at that time. That sequence was in large part a reflection of my own personal brokenness. I was not a practicing Catholic at the time, and I had no clue as to what I was getting into with the film. I was called in to replace someone [Harvey Keitel] and I came into a volatile situation in the spring of 1976. Six weeks after I arrived [in the Philippines] Typhoon Olga hit and the film was delayed. A year later, I had a heart attack, a really close call.

In film, if something is impersonal, no one cares. Things that last are things that cost people and the actors that portray them. I had an instinct that I could endure this role if I could be honest. I was playing a frightened, confused professional killer [Capt. Benjamin Willard], an unstable frightened alcoholic. I didn't have a clue who this character was supposed to be and the director [Francis Ford Coppola] said to me: "It's you. Whoever

wants to arrive at any kind of certainty as an actor brings themselves.? I realized I could wrestle this demon. There?s an old saying that an artist gets a license to play this part. I used the license to go to a place that was both cathartic and terrifying. My poor wife, Janet, got a glimpse of this poor devil in that sequence, the anger, fear, resentment, disappointment that had built up over 36 years. It was filmed on my 36th birthday, you know.

So ?Apocalypse Now? sounds like it is still with you.

Francis made a documentary in 1991 that came out on DVD a couple of years ago: ?Heart of Darkness: A Filmmaker?s Apocalypse.? When it came out I had a new assistant who didn?t know me very well. And the film is very shocking and an honest portrayal of what went down during production. So she was watching it with me and she said to me, ?This must be very upsetting for you.?

?It?s not who I am now,? I told her, ?but who I was.?

I am conscious of being different from that time. The journey was made in terrible increments, it was hard to reveal myself and I saw it in a flash while watching the documentary -- and saw that I had moved on. I saw where I used to be when the film was made but the audience sees it where they are now.

What came next for you spiritually?

?Apocalypse Now? began a journey for me that culminated in Paris in 1981. This is when I was able to bring it all together -- my life, my family, my career, my brokenness. I was doing this little film in Paris and the family couldn?t come because of school and things. I had time to walk around and reflect on all that had gone down before, and I ran into Terrence Malick. I had known him from the early ?70s, since ?Badlands.? At that time he was living under the radar. He is an articulate and spiritual man and he became a kind of spiritual adviser for me. We would talk endlessly when I wasn?t working. We would talk about spirituality and philosophy and the journey. He?s an Episcopalian.

That?s interesting. Because the Catholic News Service review of Malick?s latest film, ?The Tree of Life,? says that ?Malick?s agnosticism seems to win out.? It sounds like you would not agree with that assessment.

He and his wife Jill Jakes divorced after ?Badlands? [1973]. He was broken and went to a church in Paris and met Michelle Morette. They married in 1985 and he brought her to the States but they split up in 1998. Terrence married his childhood sweetheart, Alexandra ?Ecky? Wallace, that same year in Texas. Ecky attended seminary and I believe she is ordained. Today they attend an Episcopal church. Malick went to St. Stephen?s, an Episcopal boarding school, in Austin, Texas, and he?s very connected to that school.

At any rate, Malick became a kind of life coach for me. He became a great anchor for me. The last book he gave me to read, and he had me read several times, was *The Brothers Karamazov* and it transformed my spirit. When I finished reading it I put it down and literally got up and walked to St. Joseph Church [the English-speaking parish in Paris]. It was May Day and I banged on the door and this Irish Passionist priest opened the door and said, ?What?s going on?? I told him, ?I have been away from the church for a long time and I?d like to go to confession.?

Then what?

I had dropped in at St. Joseph?s occasionally while in Paris, so I was not unfamiliar. And I was fascinated by the new Mass. I had been aware of changes but was not practicing for a long time. I hadn?t wanted to rejoin the church and come back to a sense of fear and condemnation that I had absorbed growing up, that God would strike me down. When I had the heart attack I got the last rites in the hospital. I had a great fear of dying and going to hell. And the thing is, I loved the church as a boy. We were 10 kids in an Irish Catholic family; we

went to Holy Trinity Parish in Dayton [Ohio] where the Sisters of Notre Dame taught.

What's your favorite book?

To this day, *The Brothers Karamazov* -- it was also one of Dorothy Day's favorites. She read Dostoyevsky and thought he was the door to the inner being, that he had an insight into humanity like no other.

How had the church changed from the time you stopped practicing the faith until your return?

I came back to the church of compassion, love and service, not a church that had me waiting to be condemned for my sins. I found the church of Mother Teresa and Daniel Berrigan. Mother Teresa drove me back to Catholicism and Dan Berrigan keeps me here. I became very active at that time.

What have you learned since that day in 1981?

The last 30 years have been by far the most difficult and the happiest of my life. Life has to cost you; if something of value costs you, then it is of inestimable value.

The thing I learned from the Berrigans is that you are not going to change the world, and maybe not even the person next to you. The only person you can change is you.

What's the latest step in your spiritual journey?

I love the journey. I am always nervous on airplanes so when I was on a plane I'd bargain with God: Get us a safe landing, and I'll do this or that. Even when I came back to the church I'd get my rosary out because I was afraid.

Once when I was on a plane leaving Washington, D.C., I was just exhausted. I was the first one on the plane and I fell fast asleep as soon as I took my seat. All of a sudden I was jolted awake. I had no time to get out my rosary, so I told God: Thank you for this life; it's been wonderful. I could not have asked for anything better. If I don't make it back, be with those I leave behind. If this is the end of the journey, it's been wonderful and I am grateful.

Even this horrible time this year with our son [Charlie Sheen], it has made us, my wife and me and our family, pray more fervently. I love Julian of Norwich and St. Therese who said: "Everything is grace." This is what my life is, through all the anger, everything: grace.

What's it like to be a father in Hollywood?

There are no criteria, no code to being a father in Hollywood. It's all happenstance; there is no way you can predict or prepare or plan for such energy that emanates out of this place. Charlie is experiencing what I did in "Apocalypse Now." He is, at the depth of his being, an extraordinary man who is trying to lead an honest life, and he is in a very desperate situation. His choices have not been thoughtful or beneficial. Charlie tries to appease everyone, and he resents having to appease people.

He doesn't seem to want to take the route of Alcoholics Anonymous.

He is decidedly against Alcoholics Anonymous; he won't give a good word for AA. AA is one drunk talking to another. Bill [Dotson] and the other fellow hooked up in Akron [Ohio] and a local Catholic hospital, where with a nun and a Jesuit, began to form the steps together. The focus of the three most important steps is to make a fearless inventory (which for Catholics means the examination of conscience), and tell one person (confession), and make amends (penance and restitution).

Charlie has practical experience about trust and when betrayed he rages. He is a loving, deeply sensitive man trying to find his way in a very dark corridor and he is running out of candles.

But it sounds like you are there for him.

He is going through what I went through in my journey. We will be waiting at the end of that corridor with a lit candle.

?The Way? is your new film, written and directed by your son Emilio Estevez. What's it about?

Themes of father-son relationships. It was Emilio's inspiration. I wanted to do the *camino* and was fascinated by it and I planned to do it between seasons of ?The West Wing.? So in 2003 I organized a family reunion in a village in County Tipperary, Ireland -- we'd lost a brother. My mother would have been 100. Six out of 10 of my siblings attended. It was a great celebration and I suggested that we all walk the *camino* together. They weren't really prepared and the only one who showed any interest was my grandson Taylor, Emilio's son, who was 19, and my friend Matt Clark. We went to Spain and tried to figure out how to make the *camino*. But my sister Carmen wisely noted, ?You don't have enough time or equipment to do this.? So we rented a car in Madrid and went to Burgos and stayed in a small albergo, or small hotel that looks after pilgrims. It was a little upscale. And Taylor met the daughter of the owner and fell in love right before our eyes.

Taylor asked if we could stop in Burgos on the way home from the shrine and stay over one night. Taylor ended up marrying her and lives there to this day.

How did the film come about?

When I came home I was telling Emilio that there's a story there about some old guy who loses a son because I feel like I lost a son on the *camino*. So Emilio went on his own search, in his mind and heart. He sussed out how to do it, got the financing in Spain, and then filmed it in 40 days in sequence. At the end, as with most father-son stories, the son becomes the father and in this one, the father becomes the son. Tom, the father, is set free. That's the journey.

The inward journey is a pilgrimage of transcendence; as you walk you hear the inner voice. You walk alone but you walk in community. For the whole journey Tom just wants to be alone. He's the solo, individual American and these people he meets keep slowing him down and causing delays. He's dragging these people and it becomes harder and harder, and the harder he tries the harder it becomes. He realizes he is just as they are, and he becomes a father to them and part of a community and he saves his spirit. That journey is not easy: the blisters! You have to lubricate your feet for days and days (be sure to carry Vaseline).

Who do these four characters represent?

They represent aspects of us, like ?The Wizard of Oz.? They are on their way to see the wizard, the fulfillment of their hopes, the healing for their pain, and they learn so much. They all want to know why the other is making the journey, and everyone has their own reason for making the *camino*. They receive their diplomas at the end, and realized they had all that they needed because they just needed ?to be.? They were all broken in some way; to be broken is being human; the *camino* is learning to accept and embrace and acknowledge that we are not perfect.

So many couples make the *camino* and they start together and then separate on the walk and then come together in the evening to share food, wash clothes; to share life with others -- the greatest journey.

The *camino*, and the film, show us that we are community and that when we share everything we are nourished. The Gospel tries to teach us that we are never alone, that we are meant to be in community.

The *camino* is a spiritual and a familial journey.

[Sr. Rose Pacatte is a Daughter of St. Paul, director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles, and reviews movies for *NCR*.]

Editor's note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified the order of Catholic priests who serve St. Joseph Church in Paris. The Passionists serve that church. *NCR* regrets the error.

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