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Review: 'Stella Days' looks at the church, cinema and dark night of the soul

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

In a small town in rural Ireland in the 1950s, Fr. Barry (Martin Sheen) visits the sick, reads Latin prayers to them and promotes the installation of electricity in homes and businesses. Fr. Barry spent 20 years in America and many years in Rome in academic pursuits and research at the Vatican library. He was replaced, however, and sent back to Ireland, where he has been these last three years.

Fr. Barry wants to go back to Rome to finish his doctorate on St. John of the Cross, but Bishop Herarty (Tom Hickey) has other ideas. He tells the priest he won't be going back to Rome ("Being a parish priest in Ireland is not a penance, Fr. Barry," he says) and instead, he is to build a brand-new church (though Fr. Barry protests the one they have is good enough) and raise the money to do it from the rather depressed town.

Brendan (Stephen Rea) is a humorless man who is running for mayor. He wants everyone to walk the straight-and-narrow and has a particular disdain for films that will ruin the souls of children.

Fr. Barry, however, decides to convert a theater to a cinema called Stella and enlists the help of Tim (Trystan Gravelle), the new school teacher.

New church, new cinema, electricity -- it's all too much for some of the people of the town. But others welcome the new changes. The very act of showing films -- censorship and control of what the people will watch -- are themes in the movie. These showcase aspects of the struggle between the church and modernity in Ireland the time before the Second Vatican Council.

"Stella Days" seems to reference several films: "Chocolat" (2000), which looks at hypocrisy in a 1950s French village; "Cinema Divina" (1988), which tells the story of how a poor little boy in post-World War II Sicily fell in love with the movies; and "Diary of a Country Priest" (1951), about a young pastor in his first parish and his desire to be an authentic priest in illness and difficult circumstances.

But the main thread of the film is really the vocation to the priesthood. When Fr. Barry says he wants to finish his doctorate on St. John of the Cross, he establishes what the film is really about: Fr. Barry's vocation and his struggle to make sense out of what the church asks him to do, what he wants to do, and ultimately, obedience in the face of what is sometimes patently absurd, and at other times, deeply human.

Joey (Joey O'Sullivan) is a young boy who lives with his aunt because his father is away working. When she takes in Tim as a lodger and begins spending time with him, Joey is upset and asks Fr. Barry about becoming a priest, even as a student. This causes Fr. Barry to recall his own path to the priesthood and to consider again his motivations, for he, too, joined the seminary as a teenager.

Martin Sheen, whose mother was born and raised in Ireland, is believable as Fr. Barry, and Stephen Rea -- who cinephiles will recall from "The Crying Game" -- is prudish enough in the stereotypical moral arbiter and guardian of the town.

Director Thaddeus O'Sullivan creates an ambiance of Irish melancholy in this very small story. The most dramatic moments are when the bishop sends a letter denouncing movies and the opening of the town's theater. The entire film is a set up for looking at the clash between the old and new in Irish social and moral life that was synonymous with being Catholic in the 1950s. The ending may make you smile, but it also makes a statement about belief, faith and the very soul of the church's pastoral mission and the disconnections and miscommunication that cause dark nights for many even today.

"Stella Days" is an unassuming film and I liked it.

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