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The bishops' film critic

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 8, 2006 All Things Catholic

My wife Shannon is one of those film buffs upon whom Hollywood depends. Her idea of a satisfying weekend almost always involves a film, with the question of which film often being secondary. Thus it was that recently I was introduced to a new documentary called "This Film is Not Yet Rated," and discovered an unexpected Catholic angle.

An unconventional documentary in the tradition of Michael Moore, the film offers a polemic against the G, PG, PG-13, R and NC-17 ratings system of the Motion Picture Association of America. Filmmaker Kirby Dick charges that the ratings are arbitrary, that they treat sex as more offensive than violence, that they're biased in favor of major studio productions at the expense of independent films, and that they are doled out by a shadowy band of anonymous raters.

As part of his exposé, Dick discovers that Protestant and Catholic "clergy" sit on the MPAA's appeals panel. He makes reference to the long history of antagonism between Hollywood and the churches, including various attempts over the years at censorship. At the end, Dick flashes the name of the Catholic delegate on the screen: Harry Forbes of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

For the record, Forbes is not "clergy." He's a former New York drama critic and executive for the Public Broadcasting Service, who came to work for the American bishops as their in-house film critic in 2004.

I spoke to Forbes this week, who said that in reality neither he (nor his colleague David DiCerto, who sometimes attends meeting in his stead) has any voice in the MPAA appeals process.

"We observe, we don't contribute to the conversation," said Forbes, head of the bishops' Office for Film and Broadcasting "We're not asked for an opinion. That might influence the vote, and we don't have a vote."

The point of his presence, Forbes said, is to monitor the process and to report back to the bishops about how it's working.

While the appeals panel meets eight to ten times a year, Forbes said, someone from the bishops' conference attends no more than five, given the expense and time involved.

Physically, Forbes said, he sits silently during the screenings, and remains silent during the discussion that follows. If he speaks, it's chit-chat during coffee breaks having nothing to do with the film under consideration.

Msgr. Francis Maniscalco, outgoing spokesperson for the American bishops, said the bishops' participation goes back to the late 1960s, when the movie industry saw a ratings system as a way to fend off calls for external censorship, and wanted religious groups to be involved to show concern for their sentiments.

Forbes said his role with the MPAA shouldn't set off free speech alarms. If anything, he said, it speaks to the high regard the Catholic church has for cinema.

"In general, Catholic film criticism produces some of the most literate, intelligent pieces about film out there," Forbes said, stressing he was not just talking about his office, but the wider range of Catholic media. "It's very nuanced -- people are usually surprised."

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is **jallen@ncronline.org[1]**

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