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Varying approaches to pop culture mirror differences in contemporary church life

by Chase Nordengren

Young Voices

Two notable Catholics had something to say in the last few months about an unusual subject: watching movies. Their answers reveal divergent approaches to engaging with contemporary culture, a divergence I believe defines contemporary church life.

A few observers noted with some fascination Pope Francis' remarks on art in his widely syndicated interview in September. Francis spoke at length and with seeming excitement about painting, classical music, opera and, perhaps a first, the "film culture" of the Italian new wave on which he was raised. "A Jesuit," he said, "must be creative."

Contrast this approach to the outright hostile relationship Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia takes to culture in his interview with *New York* magazine last month:

You can't go to a movie -- or watch a television show for that matter -- without hearing the constant use of the F-word -- including, you know, *ladies* using it. People that I know don't talk like that!

Scalia sees, it seems, only narcissism and vulgarity in contemporary art. Francis, while not exactly contemporary, at least takes a zealous joy in cultural consumption.

Admittedly, resources on culture by and for Christians are a little lacking. With a few notable exceptions, Christian culture has been largely unwilling to approach contemporary art on its own terms. The U.S.

bishops created and still maintain a movie rating system encouraging even adult Catholics to avoid films with graphic content. The evangelical movement has made engagement with culture a priority, but this engagement has manifested largely in forms that seem to borrow tropes of mainstream culture without seriously considering it.

Our obligation to engage serious art isn't precisely to evangelize or to make newcomers more comfortable. The obligation is for us. Despite Scalia's observation, the world is, organically, a rather vulgar place, often replete with violence, anger and disorder. Our souls demand ways of understanding that vulgarity, of learning how to address it through parable.

One starving for Christian cultural analysis must sometimes turn to some odd sources. Christian questions rather inconspicuously make their way into "The Pervert's Guide to Ideology," a documentary out in American theaters this month by the often opaque Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek. While by no means an evangelist, Žižek does demonstrate how even simple films are permeated with ideas about the ways people think and can force us to confront and question those ideas in a way day-to-day life never could.

Ideology is everywhere in film, Žižek argues, even in "The Sound of Music." In his native Slovenia under communism, Žižek says, only one part of the movie was censored: the song "Climb Ev'ry Mountain." Here, he argues, Mother Abbess is making a very Catholic argument: Vocations are worth relentless pursuit, even into the abstinence of the cloister. It's no wonder, he suggests, a censor found a call to such relentlessness threatening.

Relentlessness in vocation is also found in Žižek's take on the controversial film "The Last Temptation of Christ." The unique feature of Christianity, he argues, is that the vital question of accepting or rejecting one's vocation was placed in the hands of Christ himself. The film's depiction of Christ's graphic wrestling of this phenomenon, with his inevitable death, and with the violence of the crucifixion in turn force us to confront the disembodiment of God's will for us and the disconnect between God's love and the vulgarity of the world.

Žižek, of course, responds to this disconnection with atheism. Still, he shows remarkable perspective on the components of the faith we need in light of God's death on the cross. In picking what we might consider the wrong path, he also defines the choice, one that takes into account the brutality of the world in which Christ lived.

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Developing a faith of this complexity in the sacrificial power of love requires wrestling. It also requires a concrete and realistic perception of the world, a rejection of the saccharine. As religious adults, we deny ourselves something vital by avoiding this process and by ignoring realistic yet scary depictions of the world around us. The ability to transcend this place, to reach for a higher dream, requires us to start fully in the here and now.

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