

# H O R I Z O N

JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

VOLUME 29

NUMBER 2

WINTER 2004

## Vocation themes in popular media

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## Turn up the volume; it might be God talking

Talk about the Holy Spirit. How is this for coincidence? I was doing the layout for this edition of *HORIZON* and I popped in a CD. As I rearranged type on paper, I was half listening to the lyrics and intermittently talking with my 5-year-old son. Then I just about fell off the chair. If my life were a movie, the music would have swelled, we would see my son's lips moving (without hearing his words), and the camera would zoom to a close up of my face.

I was stunned to hear the musician Tracy Chapman speaking directly to a problem that had been on my mind for weeks. She sang, as she does so beautifully: "Don't be tempted by the shiny apple/ Don't you eat of a bitter fruit/ Hunger only for a taste of justice/ Hunger only for a world of truth/ 'Cause all that you have is your soul."

The rest of the lyrics had nothing to do with my dilemma, but the above refrain seemed to have been written and sung for precisely that moment in my life. When I heard the very values I was grasping at articulated so soulfully, I was moved almost to tears. A dozen theology books; a hundred ethics courses could never pack the wallop of that song. I felt God pointing me toward the decision I had been praying about.

That is the power of music. And it's the power of film, TV, books and every other form of popular media. If God can communicate through me as an editor and use you as a vocation minister, why can't he use popular media to communicate with young adults?

Actually religious educators have been using popular media for years. Not long ago, my 14-year-old son and I talked about whether the TV show "Friends" depicted what his confirmation book called "The Right Idea of Love" or the "Wrong Idea of Love." It was a good question and a good way to look at a show with messages of mixed value. Some vocation ministers have been using this show for years as a launching pad for discussions about community. They haven't made any vows, but what are Monica, Rachel, Chandler and the rest if they're not a community?

The authors in this edition of *HORIZON* scrutinize popular media from a vocation minister's perspective. They've come up with insights and food for thought that can help move us toward the "culture of vocation" which the Pastoral Plan of the Continental Congress encourages us to build. The Catholic concept of vocation is a deeply human theme. It draws on timeless questions that every thoughtful person in every culture struggles with: what gives my life meaning? To what purpose will I dedicate my life? These are the themes of art, whether it be populist art like TV and cartoons or classical art such as opera or literature.

So read these pages, then go ahead and turn on the CD player, tune your TV set, stop by the bookstore, and go out to the movies.

*Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor*

***TV is clearly a force to be reckoned with. This author urges vocation ministers to harness this powerful medium to help discuss important vocation themes.***

## **TV can be a vocation ministry tool**

**by Bill Miller**

Ever since television's early cameras covered the welcoming address of Franklin D. Roosevelt at the 1939 New York World's Fair, people have discussed and debated the influence of this "markedly American" form of media on the cultures of the world. Hardly a week goes by without reference to the latest study designed to answer such questions as: Does television violence promote violence in society? Do the rapid-fire images on TV contribute to children's shortened attention spans?

This medium, which literary giant E.B. White nearly 50 years ago predicted would be used to heighten the noblest dreams of humanity, has been responsible for bringing us such memorable fare as Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon, the award-winning mini-series *Roots*, and the profoundly poignant treatment of war and suffering presented in the hit series *M.A.S.H.* On the other hand, this very same symbol of our technological advancement—which Federal Communications Commission Chairperson Newton Minow, speaking before the National Association of Broadcasters in 1961, called a "vast wasteland"—has presented us with such unfortunate offerings as *Jackass*, *South Park*, and "reality television" which is frequently anything but real.

What is unmistakable in either case is the fact that a medium that was once merely a part of our culture has become the defining element of the culture. From the marketing of ever more media-savvy political candidates to the marketing of the latest fashions in clothes, cars, food and medicine, we are a culture immersed in a world of screen images. This begs the question: What does TV have to say to those of us who are interested in catechesis, and more specifically, religious formation?

If our experience of 60-plus years of television has taught us anything, it is that TV is a force to be reck-

oned with. Our experience has also taught us that this little box with transistors, resistors, speakers and a screen is neither good nor bad in and of itself. Rather, it is a tool that can be used in myriad ways for good and for ill. It is up to us to decide how we will use it.

In 1992 the Vatican's Pontifical Council on Social Communications recognized the significant role of the media when they issued the pastoral instruction entitled: "*Aetatis Novae*" ("Dawn of a New Era"). The writers of the document took great care to emphasize the important role of media and communications in today's world. At one point they wrote: "...the Church, recognizing the media of social communications as 'the privileged way' today for the creation and transmission of culture, acknowledges its own duty to offer formation to communications professionals and to the public, so that they will approach media with 'a critical sense which is animated by a passion for the truth'...."<sup>1</sup> The authors also emphasized the important connection between media and faith development when they wrote: "The media can be used to proclaim the Gospel or to reduce it to silence in human hearts."<sup>2</sup>

### **It's all about "the story"**

Preparing to use television as a tool for catechesis and vocation education is a process. First we must acknowledge the importance of stories and storytelling as a tool for faith formation. We are "people of the

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story.” The central story is revealed in Sacred Scripture as salvation history and made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. The story of Christ and the stories of Christ (the parables) contain the heart of God’s message to us, a message concerning such wonderful universal principles as faith, hope, love, reconciliation, justice, peace and vocation. It is the message of our mission to be co-creators with the Lord: assisting in bringing forth the reign of God. We are people of the story: the story of God, the story of our lives and the story of how these profound events and concepts intersect, overlap and intertwine. Renowned theologian and educator Thomas Groome captures the essence of this idea when he writes: “Approach Christian faith as a great unfolding story of the virtual partnership between God and humankind....”<sup>3</sup>

This understanding that we are “people of the story” is precisely what makes television and movies wonderful tools for faith formation. At their best, television programs and movies tell wonderful stories which can help us tap into our thoughts, emotions, values and events—the stories of our lives. In doing so they provide opportunities for simple yet profound “dialogues” between our own experiences (our stories) and the story of God.

In order to make the most of what TV offers by way of life lessons, we must begin by understanding five important concepts that together form the basic tenets of a discipline called “media literacy.” Media literacy can be defined as: “Understanding how television works and what role it plays in our own lives and in our modern world.”<sup>4</sup> The five principles are as follows:

1. **We help create TV as we watch it.** As we watch we are comparing what we see and hear to our own life experiences. We have the power to affirm, question, challenge or enhance what we watch.
2. **TV’s world is made up.** While we all know this at the intellectual level, sometimes we may forget. It is important to remember that even such “objective factual material” as the nightly news is given a specific spin by how it is presented, what is edited in or out, etc.
3. **TV producers use identifiable techniques.** Such things as camera angles, music, symbols and special effects are constantly being used to help conjure specific emotions and ideas in our hearts and minds.
4. **TV teaches that some people and ideas are**

**more important than others.** Every producer has specific ideas of what he or she wants to present. What concepts are important to this person? We must learn to identify what the producer is really suggesting by the way he or she presents a specific issue or idea. Is monetary wealth the ultimate reward? Is physical combat the preferred strategy for resolving a specific conflict? Is deception the easiest way out of a difficult circumstance? Or are the opposite viewpoints more accurate? What are the producers and writers of this show (or commercial) really trying to tell or sell us?

5. **TV is in business to make money.** While television can and often does provide legitimate public service, the bottom line is all about money. A show will not remain on the

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air if it does not deliver a significant audience to the advertisers who sponsor it. Ratings are all-important because they are used to measure the success or failure of a show and, as a result, how long the show will be produced and broadcast.

### **“You gotta know the territory”**

During the opening song of the popular musical, *The Music Man*, an experienced salesman emphatically proclaims, “You gotta know the territory.” That is sound advice for all of us to remember as well. Once we have admitted to television’s powerful abilities to communicate a story and have become more aware of how, why and for whom the stories are created, what type of audience should we prepare to encounter in today’s late adolescent or young adult? It is important that we acknowledge we are dealing with individuals who, by the time they graduate from high school, will probably have spent more than twice as much time watching TV than going to school. The great major-

ity of them will have TVs in their bedrooms. They will have seen over 500,000 commercials, from birth control to funeral arrangements, from beer to diet pills. 75 percent of them will be prepared to tell us that the media influence their sexual behavior. These same young people will have witnessed over 18,000 murders (real or contrived) by the time they are 18 years of age. These statistics are alarming; however, they indicate once again the all-pervasive presence of television in our culture.<sup>5</sup>

A poll conducted by *Entertainment Weekly*, on 17 college campuses across the U.S., revealed some interesting trends. Cartoons are a major source of television entertainment for college students, with *The Simpson's* leading the pack in this category. Comedies such as *Friends*, *Malcolm in the Middle* and *Will and Grace* are often mentioned, while a number of students enjoy the "reality" programming of *Survivor* and *American Idol*. In the drama category, shows such as *The Practice* and the recently canceled *Dawson's Creek* are cited. The students also digest their share of televised sports and the occasional soap opera (*Days of Our Lives* is a favorite). While this list is far from exhaustive, it gives us a glimpse into the TV habits of the college set.<sup>6</sup>

In my work with young people, from pre-teens to young parents in their 20s and 30s, I always attempt to give them good questions about television to ask themselves and those with whom they talk. The questions are designed to get past superficiality to what is really happening in a given program. Some of my favorites are:

1. Why do you watch a particular show?
2. What are some of the most memorable moments from the episode in question?
3. What is the over-reaching theme of this episode; and what values are being portrayed?
4. How do the experiences being shown compare with experiences you've had?
5. How do the values being demonstrated compare with your values?
6. How do those same values compare with the values we find in such formational guidelines as the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes?
7. How does the show make you feel? What emotions does it evoke? Does it challenge you in any way to believe or to act differently?
8. Do you like the show? Why? Why not?

Not only do the answers to these questions reveal why the individual watches the show; they also afford an

opportunity for the all-important interaction between Gospel values, the values which the viewer holds, and the values which prevail on the program itself. Using these tricks of the "media literacy trade," I have facilitated some lively and enlightening discussions about television.

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### **Immersing ourselves in the story**

As mentioned earlier, the most popular cartoon (and one of the most popular shows of all) for young people aged 17-21 is *The Simpsons*. I must admit that I was not a fan of *The Simpsons* when it made the jump from a three-minute segment on the *Tracey Ullman Show* to a full-fledged 22-minute sitcom on the Fox network in 1989. I felt the humor was too crass and sometimes at the expense of innocents who were defenseless in the wake of such insensitive wit. However, one day I experienced a significant conversion moment.

The episode in question finds Marge Simpson (the rock-solid matriarch) celebrating a birthday. Homer, her dolt-of-a-husband, gives Marge a bowling ball for her birthday. Marge does not bowl, but Homer does. He probably imagines that once Marge shelves the ball he can take it out and have it re-drilled to fit his own fingers. However, Marge foils his plan. She decides she will learn to bowl. After all it may even draw their family closer together. In the process she meets Jacques, a suave, debonair bowling enthusiast who proceeds to teach Marge how to bowl while luring her with his French café charm. Marge finds herself attracted to Jacques and enamored with the differences in personality between Jacques and Homer. Homer senses the widening gap between himself and Marge and begins to regret the ways he has taken their relationship for granted through the years. A dramatic moment arises when Marge, summoned by Jacques to a secret rendezvous, must decide whether she will go to be with him or will recommit to her relationship with Homer. In a charming and hilarious final scene, we see

Marge choose Homer over Jacques—fidelity over adultery—by opting to drive to the nuclear power plant where Homer works, rather than to Jacques’ place. Homer is ecstatic, and in classic Richard Gere fashion he takes Marge in his arms and carries her out of the plant to the theme music from *An Officer and a Gentleman*. I have rarely seen fidelity more beautifully or disarmingly presented; and fidelity, or faithfulness, is one of the most important virtues for living any authentic vocation.

After viewing that episode, I began to watch *The Simpsons* with a different perspective. I realized that the biting wit and hilarious hijinks of Homer and the

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other characters are often used to highlight important social problems such as hypocrisy, social injustice, irresponsible treatment of the environment, and rampant consumerism. Even the undue influence of the media on our society has been addressed. Nothing is sacred on *The Simpsons*. There is much to be gleaned here. And what makes this show even more important is its huge following among young people, many of whom enjoy it because of the irreverent but pertinent (and often hysterical) social criticism. More so than many shows that attract young people, *The Simpsons* can provide a solid forum for thoughtful conversation on significant subjects.<sup>7</sup>

### **Shows that portray priests and religious**

Finding faith-related themes in television shows is not uncommon. Finding themes which revolve around stories of a religious vocation is more difficult but not impossible. When I’m in the market for a good discussion starter related to religious vocations, I generally look to dramas that I know from experience will be well-written and challenging. For example, an episode of the Emmy-winning drama, *Law and Order* (on NBC Wednesdays) featured a middle-aged woman religious who was a counselor at a girls’ half-way house. She was accused of molesting one of the residents;

however, as the story developed we learned that not only was she innocent of the crime, she was the most honest and compassionate adult figure in the lives of any of the young women in the home. Her love for God, her street knowledge, and her desire to help the girls turn their lives around were presented in an honest and compelling way.

For seven seasons a drama about a Boston law firm called *The Practice* (on ABC Sundays) featured a Catholic lead character played by Dylan McDermott. For me, some of the most memorable scenes of the show were those in which he and his pastor, played by the venerable Robert Prosky, would discuss and debate moral dilemmas—from capital punishment to the clergy abuse crisis. Prosky’s priest was a strong character who always gave an impassioned and convincing performance as a beacon to whom McDermott could turn for pastoral guidance ... even if McDermott was not always ready to accept the assistance.

An excellent, long-running example of faithfulness to a ministerial call can be found in the family drama, *Seventh Heaven*, now in its eighth season on the WB Network. This series about a Protestant minister and his family is popular with teens because it frequently deals with moral dilemmas as well as relationship issues (and often the two intertwine). The pastor on *Seventh Heaven*, played by Stephen Collins, deals with many of the issues that anyone with a vocation to religious life must face. Among them are questions such as: How can I be a spiritual leader to those who look to me for guidance in these troubled times? Am I prepared to give up the security that monetary wealth can bring, in exchange for the security that God promises? Am I truly worthy of this call I have received? Collins generally delivers an honest and believable performance, thanks to his own ability and the talent of the show’s writers.

*Hack* (on CBS Saturdays) is the story of a former policeman who is now driving a cab for a living. In its first season it featured a well-drawn relationship between the protagonist (David Morse) and his best friend, a parish priest in urban Philadelphia. Story lines would often refer to the difficulties faced by the priest and/or his parishioners at the inner-city parish, such as poverty, homelessness, violence, etc. The pastor (George Dzundza) was a wonderful blend of human imperfections (alcoholism, obesity) and genuine holiness. His contributions to the story were always genuine and central to the plot. Although the priest’s character has reportedly been written out of this sea-

son's episodes, the cabby now has a new acquaintance—a parole officer and former woman religious who may provide some interesting perspectives on why people enter (and sometimes leave) religious life.

*The West Wing* (on NBC Wednesdays) is widely acclaimed as one of the finest programs on television, having won an unprecedented four consecutive Emmys for best drama. In the show we find Martin Sheen, himself a devout Catholic, portraying Catholic presi-

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dent Josiah Bartlett. Some of Bartlett's finest dramatic moments are those in which he allows the viewer to see how his faith has shaped his life. In one unforgettable episode, he is compelled to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation from his friend and pastor after making a difficult policy decision which is contrary to his personal moral code. The interchange between the two men, alone in the Oval Office, struggling with the consequences of the president's actions, is a beautiful testimony to the sacramental nature of the call to priesthood.

One of my favorite portraits of a compelling vocation to religious life aired this past fall on a second season show called *Without a Trace* (on CBS Thursdays). The episode featured a middle-aged priest who had been missing for two days when the F.B.I. was notified and asked to find him. As the story developed, in a series of clever plot twists and turns, viewers caught a glimpse of what the various characters in the show thought about religion, faith, the priesthood, etc. We watched as the priest (played to perfection by Hector Elizondo) was suspected of everything from drug dealing to sexual abuse to embezzlement. However, every glimpse of his character on screen presented a man of incredible compassion, honesty and love. In the end, we discovered that he was indeed flawed, as are all of us ... very human. However, his honesty, compassion and love were real. He was seeking rec-

onciliation for past sins; turning to God and to those he had offended, in an effort to achieve inner peace. This episode was a wonderful example of what good television can do to promote vocations to ministry.

As I write this article the new television season is upon us, bringing with it the hopes and dreams of television executives everywhere, each hoping that his or her show will be the next great hit, a ratings champion. Amidst the plethora of new shows is one that has caught my attention. *Joan of Arcadia* (on CBS Fridays) has a very interesting premise. The show, which is loosely inspired by the biography of Joan of Arc, promises to raise lots of questions about both the nature and the role of God in the life of an average teenage girl. The show's creator, Barbara Hall, has distinguished herself as a producer and writer for such shows as *Northern Exposure* and *Judging Amy*. She was raised Methodist, jettisoned organized religion for a time, and eventually converted to Catholicism. While *Joan of Arcadia* is not specifically about Catholicism, it is about faith and love and becoming all that one can become. Isn't that what we, as ministers who work with young people, are interested in promoting? Early indications are that this is the kind of show that could provide excellent opportunities for discussion, faith sharing and spiritual growth. I hope subsequent episodes will bear this out.<sup>8</sup>

### Staying the course

The people to whom we minister respect the idea that we might actually know something about the television they watch. Moreover they are often looking for introductions into thinking about and discussing important life topics such as those examined regularly on TV. Becoming media literate can open important doors for us into their minds and hearts. In so doing, we facilitate the working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the faithful. "As the Spirit helped the prophets of old to see the divine plan in the signs of their times, so today the Spirit helps the Church interpret the signs of our times and carry out its prophetic tasks, among which the study, evaluation and right use of communications and the media of social communications are now fundamental."<sup>9</sup>

Becoming media literate is a beginning. Staying "tuned in" to what is going on in the media-saturated culture of today is an ongoing challenge. In my efforts to learn more about the entertainment industry—including television, movies, music, books, etc.—I have found several sources particularly helpful.

Among these are *Entertainment Weekly*, *TV Guide*, *The New York Times* (online), and my local daily newspaper. When I want to add a spiritual dimension to my research on a particular production, I may turn to *America Magazine*, *Commonweal*, *St. Anthony Messenger*, or *The National Catholic Reporter*. (See endnotes for contact information on these resources.)<sup>10</sup> These are my choices. However, there are many additional resource options available as well. There are also a number of media literacy organizations that have impressive Web sites. Two such groups that I have found particularly helpful are: the Center for Media Literacy and the National Institute on Media and the Family.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, there is much that is wrong with television programming, just as there is much that is right and good. I have chosen here to concentrate on programming that is generally considered high caliber and thought-provoking. However, there is much to be learned from dissecting and analyzing anything that television delivers. One of the greatest services we can provide is the promotion of critical thinking skills, skills that are less and less evident in a society which is, all too often, being spoon-fed the pabulum of the masses. To the extent that we sit back and allow the images and concepts of the media to wash over us unquestioningly, we promote this pabulum. On the other hand, as we begin to discuss and question what we see and hear over the airwaves, we learn to separate the wheat from the chaff.

The television, movie and music industries tell the stories of our culture. Dr. David Walsh, founder of the National Institute on Media and the Family (mentioned above) has said: "Whoever tells the stories defines the culture." It is a culture in which we are being called to make a difference for Christ in the lives of those whom we touch. We hold a treasure, the treasure of faith, lived out in love, the Spirit of God. That same treasure is to be found described and illustrated in the culture around us, in story and song. The culture, flawed as it is, is itself merely a vessel. It is for us to work to uncover that treasure wherever it is to be found ... and to awaken it in whomever it is resting. ✚

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1. Pontifical Council on Social Communications. "Aetatis Novae." Vatican City: 1992, No. 13.

2. Ibid. No. 4.

3. Groome, Thomas H. *What Makes Us Catholic: Eight Gifts for Life*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002, p. 19.

4. This information was excerpted from material published by the Center for Media Literacy, 4727 Wilshire Blvd., #403, Los Angeles, Calif. 90010, www.medialit.org.

5. Statistics in this section were compiled using two sources: the National Institute on Media and Family, 606 24<sup>th</sup> Ave. South, Suite 606, Minneapolis, Minn. 55454; and Thompson, Rick, *Hot Topics: Youth Electives (TV and Movies)*. Elgin, Ill.: David C. Cook, 1989.

6. Stine, Norman Pearl. "Pop Beta Kappa," *Entertainment Weekly*. September 21, 2001, No. 616, pp. 34-40.

7. For interesting reading concerning the spiritual implications of *The Simpsons*, see: Pinsky, Mark I., *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

8. For a detailed description and additional background on this show, see: Gross, Michael Joseph, "A Modern Joan of Arc Has Her Own Trials." *The New York Times*, September 7, 2003.

9. "Aetatis Novae," No. 22.

10. Web sites for the periodicals mentioned herein are as follows: *Entertainment Weekly*, www.ew.com; *TV Guide*, www.tvguide.com; *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com; *America*, www.americamagazine.org; *Commonweal*, www.commonwealmagazine.org; *St. Anthony Messenger*, www.americancatholic.org; *National Catholic Reporter*, www.natcath.org

11. Web sites for these two organizations are as follows: Center for Media Literacy, www.medialit.org; and National Institute on Media and the Family, www.mediafamily.org.

**Television shows have portrayed flying nuns, angels, bishops, rabbis and now God. What exactly does TV tell us about the divine?**

## A brief theology of television

by Teresa Blythe

What would you know about God if your only source of information were television? It's a question worth asking this year, with no fewer than four new shows with theological implications. CBS is taking its second shot in three years at portraying God with its heavily promoted *Joan of Arcadia*. Meanwhile Fox has introduced *Tru Calling*, and *Carnivale* is on HBO, which is the Almighty's cable debut.

From their founding to the late 1970s, America's TV networks channeled God almost exclusively through gray-haired, honey-toned men like Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, whose *Life Is Worth Living* beat Milton Berle's ratings in the 1950s, Norman Vincent Peale, and his protégé Robert Schuller. God was an optimist, a booster who'd fit in on the motivational speaking circuit. From the appearance of *Highway to Heaven* in 1984 until last season, when *Touched By An Angel* ended its seven-year run, God was an unseen helper acting through angels who took the form of Michael Landon and Della Reese.

Nowadays God is on more shows than ever, speaking, not so much through, but to young women. The portrait they draw says as much about Hollywood as about the divine. But these shows make their points with a verve that the earlier treatments didn't, forcing the question of divine revelation, and asserting a theology unique to television.

Here are some of the theological themes found on *Joan* and other current television shows that touch on religion:

**God is one of us.** The best of the new God shows, *Joan of Arcadia*, is nothing if not bold. While cool special effects have given us tasteful glimpses of the invisible realm, *Joan* faces us with a human likeness of God, exploring what theologians call the immanence of God—the divine expressed in the world, specifically in humans. God is a fellow teenager, a cafete-

ria hash slinger; Joan ends up peering expectantly at any stranger who looks at her funny.

But the supernatural is only one way God manifests himself. Joan also finds God's love in her father, who comforts her when she is frightened by her visions, and her physics-whiz brother, who helps her grasp the possibility of God from the rationalist side.

**God is not who or what we expect.** If God wants to appear as the lunch lady, that's God's prerogative. Shows that challenge rigid or fixed ideas about God perform the same service as Theology 101—questioning the limits we put on God, and allowing God to surprise us.

**God is good. Religion is bad.** Joan's mother asks a minister where God was when her son had the accident that left him paralyzed. The minister lamely suggests she make an appointment, and tells her, "I'll pray for you." This skepticism about institutional faith is common on the tube. On the WB's *Everwood*, a rabbi responded to a girl's question about the existence of God with a string of convoluted metaphysical principles. Like Joan's mom, the girl did better learning about God on her own.

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**God as pursuer** God pops up on the bus, at school: the “hound of heaven” won’t let Joan go. Often this principle is personified in a righteous person who stands by another, even in the face of rejection. A few seasons ago on *ER*, a dying bishop pursued a close friendship with the angry lapsed Catholic, Dr. Luka Kovac. The relationship ended in spiritual healing for both men.

**God expects us to use our talents.** God wants Joan to “fulfill her nature.” A nod to the human potential movement, yes, but also recognition that God has given us special gifts for a purpose. This being TV, the characters on Fox’s upcoming *Tru Calling*, and USA Channel’s *The Dead Zone* both use their supernatural insight to help the police solve crimes.

**God works through ordinary individuals.** Movies, like the semi-Biblical epics like *Spartacus* or the more recent *Ghandi*, stress the power of one to inspire the community and change the world. On the small screen, God is a strictly small-bore thinker. He mysteriously tells Joan to take a job in a bookstore, which inspires her disabled brother to stop feeling sorry for himself and get a job too. Perhaps one day TV writers will risk creating characters who reveal the prophetic and communal nature of God’s will.

**God is interfaith.** “I come off a little friendlier in the New Testament and Qur’an [than in the Old Testament],” says God inclusively in the *Joan* premier. The show’s creator, Barbara Hall, says the show won’t side with any religion. This is only practical, since the show will succeed by appealing to all viewers. But it also reflects our culture’s growing respect for all religions.

TV writers sometimes mistake mentioning religions for understanding them. What precisely does *Joan*’s God mean to imply—that the Hebrew Bible misunderstood God’s nature? Some Christians do see the New Testament as a “corrective” to the Hebrew Scriptures, but is this what *Joan*’s God means to say?

**God oversees a cosmic battle between good and evil.** Shows with religious undertones often take a page from Manichaeism, a third-century Persian religion that emphasized the eternal fight between good and evil spirits. Salvation comes when the God’s good spirits defeat the bad ones. Faced weekly with a pantheistic anarchy of demons, gods, goddesses, wood nymphs, faeries and “white-lighters,” the witches of the WB’s *Charmed* fight the good fight. Good usually reigns, although its hold on the world seems tenuous.

HBO’s new show, *Carnivale*, promises more Manichaeism-lite: “In every generation is born a creature of light and a creature of darkness,” its opening sequence intones. Several characters are candidates for both kinds of creatures: a preacher; a young man who has the power to heal and, in some cases resurrect (a dead kitten anyway); a carny who reads minds; and the comatose psychic who talks telepathically to her daughter. Which of these are agents of God? *Carnivale* doesn’t answer. It wants us to decide. (Hint: It’s a safe bet that the fist-shaking preacher isn’t a creature of light.)

**God intervenes.** *Joan*’s Hall says her God will not directly intervene in the characters’ lives, but it’s hard not to point out that waltzing into the life of a girl in Anytown USA is already a rather obvious intervention. Most of us don’t experience God with that sort of clarity. We muddle through: praying, considering feelings, carefully sifting through voices in the culture and community, and relying upon the tenets of our religious traditions.

**God plays it safe.** Theologian Paul Tillich contended that our “god” is that thing we care most about. Using that standard, the “god” of any network TV show is market share. If a God show does well, it’s probably not seriously challenging the status quo.

Assuming God delivers eyeballs, however, we should be watching God on TV for a few seasons to come. The demands of good storytelling make it likely that writers and producers will eventually favor characters who sincerely and intelligently practice a specific religion. Some of the most successful episodes in recent seasons of *ER*, *The West Wing*, *Everwood* and *Six Feet Under* have shown us characters with definite denominational attachments. Audiences seem to know instinctively what theologians in the interfaith movement discovered early on: generalizing about God is never as invigorating as sharing our deep and particular experiences.

Television can never be our preacher or guru—it has too many ulterior motives. It can, however, sensitively embrace the holy and invite us to examine and form our own theology. What greater compliment could be paid TV than to say, “That show made me think seriously about my faith”? ✚

***After five books and two movies, Harry Potter has become a worldwide icon. What is less well-known is that the first Harry Potter book is brimming with vocation themes.***

## **What Harry Potter has to say about vocation**

**by Kathleen McDonagh, IWBS**

*—Dedicated to Stephanie, now Sister Stephanie Francis, whose questions called forth these reflections.*

The language and imagery of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* are not in the Christian tradition. However, many elements in the story reflect Christian values. I do not mean to imply that this was what the author, J.K. Rowling, had in mind. Nonetheless a person of faith reading the book can see and appreciate in the adventures of Harry Potter important elements of faith and vocation.

### **Chosen one**

We begin with the element of being chosen. Harry Potter, the hero of the book, is a chosen person, just as Christians are chosen by Jesus to share in his life. Jesus tells us, "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain..." (John 15:16).

Harry's special calling is shown to us from the time he was a baby. Harry cannot be killed when his parents are killed, not even by Voldemort, that evil power who terrifies people so much that they are afraid to speak his name. They will only refer to him in hushed tones as "You-Know-Who."

Harry survives Voldemort's attempt to kill him and emerges from it marked only by a strange scar on his forehead. Throughout his life, this sign will warn Harry that he is facing great danger because the scar will burn and cause him pain when peril threatens.

Similarly the devil, try as he would, could not overcome Jesus, the Messiah, through temptation (Luke 4:1-13), and "so he departed from him for a time" (Luke 4:13)—only to return at the time of his

passion through the betrayal of Judas (Luke 22:3). Even when that betrayal led to Jesus' suffering and death, the devil is not finally successful. He is ultimately overcome by the resurrection.

In our Christian vocation, we are called to follow Jesus. In some way each one of us has to live out again some aspect of the life of Christ. We too can meet and triumph over evil, if we believe that, however powerful temptation may be, we will be strengthened by the Lord to meet and overcome it. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us:

In order that I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

—2 Corinthians 12:7-10

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## Strength in weakness

Who could be weaker than a little child, left without parents, at the mercy of evil? Yet the powers of good watch out for Harry Potter. As described in the imagery of the story, Harry is protected by strange creatures—cats, owls, strangely dressed people. He is delivered for a time into the care of his less-than-loving relatives, left sleeping on their doorstep. He sleeps on without knowing that he is special, famous, that at that moment, in many places, people are drinking a toast to him because the powers of evil have tested him but have not been able to overcome this baby (see p. 17 of

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**At first it seems that Harry will reject his vocation as a wizard. He is bewildered by all that is happening and feels sure that Hagrid is making a mistake. How could he be a wizard? He is so ... so ordinary.**

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*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, by J.K. Rowling, Scholastic, Inc., 1997).

So Harry comes to live with his uncle, aunt and cousin, to a life that is particularly difficult. His relatives resent having to take care of him, and they treat him abusively. Compared with his cousin, Duncan, he is a nobody, a nuisance in the house. Thus he is one of the “little ones” who, Mary tells us in her *Magnificat*, are God’s chosen ones:

He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.

He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones, but lifted up the lowly.

—Luke 1:51-52

Mistreated as he is by his relatives, as he grows, Harry does not turn away from his own vision of life. He remains true to his calling. And he does this without realizing that he is someone special. He just knows that his view is very different from that of his uncle, aunt, and cousin.

From the world of Wizardry comes Hagrid, the Keeper of the Keys, to bring news to Harry of the world to which he belongs. This is the world of magic—a world

of wonderful happenings—as opposed to the world of the Muggles—the world of people who are interested only in material things. Hagrid is startled to discover that Harry has no knowledge of his heritage of magic. Hagrid questions Harry’s relatives, the Dursleys, and Harry himself. When he realizes that Harry knows absolutely nothing about his heritage, Hagrid explodes, informing Harry: “Harry, you are a wizard.”

Thus, part of his special calling is stated, although its meaning is far from clear to Harry. At that moment, he can only respond with a question: “What?” (pp. 50-51). Being a wizard is not something Harry has chosen. Hagrid’s statement is an invitation to Harry to accept his heritage as it is made known to him at this time. At this point, he must either accept or reject.

And at first it seems that Harry will reject it. He is bewildered by all that is happening and feels sure that Hagrid is making a mistake. How could he be a wizard? He is so ... so ordinary. But when he tells Hagrid what he is thinking, Hagrid reminds him of some strange things that he had done in the past that had angered his aunt or uncle. And Harry realizes that there is indeed some power within him that others do not seem to have.

At that moment, his uncle interferes in the conversation and announces that Harry can forget about all of this nonsense, that he will not allow him to follow through on this heritage. He is not going to any School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and that is that. Hagrid, however, tells him that there is nothing Uncle Vernon can do about that. Harry has been destined for this vocation since his birth (pp. 57-58).

Something similar happens with us. When God calls us to a vocation, we often have only the most minimal understanding of the gift being offered us. We feel, perhaps very dimly, an attraction, an urge, sometimes with a corresponding desire to turn away from this urge. Why do we want to follow this calling? We may not be able to respond with a logical reason. We may only know that it is difficult for us *not* to respond positively. Relatives and friends may try to “reason” with us, to get us to give up on such a foolish idea. If, however, we are honest with ourselves and look into the deepest recesses of our hearts, we may indeed find that we have been destined for this vocation ever since we were born. Jesus is saying to us in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1). We are being invited to respond positively to a calling

that resonates with the core of our being. We are invited to develop the deepest desire of our hearts. But it is an invitation. We are free to accept or reject our calling.

### **First response**

Harry accepts the challenge of going to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and so he takes the first steps toward growth in his vocation. His acceptance leads him into a world he has never dreamed of. Shopping for school supplies for a school of witchcraft and wizardry is an experience beyond his wildest expectations. And his name seems to be magic. Old and young, people of every walk of life look at him with awe when his name is announced. Harry is bewildered by this. He is further bewildered by being taken to a top security vault where Hagrid picks up a seemingly insignificant, certainly unattractive, little

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**Harry accepts the challenge of going to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and so he takes the first steps toward growth in his vocation. His acceptance leads him into a world he has never dreamed of.**

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package wrapped in brown paper which is lying on the floor. Of what importance can this be? But Hagrid does not explain, and Harry does not question further (p. 76). Unknown to him, the seemingly ordinary little package will be of major importance later on.

Right now Harry is overwhelmed by the special treatment he is receiving. Why are people acting as though he is somehow extraordinary? Will they expect great things from him? How can he measure up to their expectations? To this, Hagrid gives him excellent advice—Harry should not try to meet the expectations of others. He should just be himself (p. 86).

“Just be yourself.” No more is asked of us in following our vocation. We cannot live the vocation of another person; we are doomed to failure if we try. Jesus speaks to each of us just as we are, with our personal gifts, our personal talents, our personal problems, our personal weaknesses. Our positive response is to over-

come our weaknesses, to work out the solutions to our problems, to develop our personal talents and gifts, to become our very best selves. Then we will live in Christ and he in us as he wants to.

On the train to Hogwarts, Harry makes friends with Ron who introduces him to new aspects of the world of magic, including collectible cards. The first card which Harry receives features a picture of Albus Dumbledore, who is the headmaster of the School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. As Harry looks at it, the face on the card appears and disappears. Harry will find later that Dumbledore is the most important person in the world of wizardry. He will not often be visible, but when there is great need, he will be present and powerful, always calling Harry to goodness and truth.

### **Personal growth in following vocation**

In Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Harry is introduced to a world of witches, wizards, ghosts. Here the new students are sorted into four different houses by the Hogwart Sorting Hat. Some instinct causes Harry to dislike the house called Slytherin, and as the Sorting Hat makes the choice, Harry says repeatedly within himself that he hopes he does not go to Slytherin. The Hat assures Harry he could be great in Slytherin, but Harry knows instinctively that this is not the kind of greatness he desires, and so he holds to his deeper values. He goes to the house known as Gryffindor as do the friends he has made on the train—Ron, Hermione and Neville. And in the start-of-term banquet, they see for the first time Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, who is described to Harry by an older student as a genius, the greatest wizard in the world but very different from most people—perhaps even a little insane (p. 125). Harry also meets the stuttering professor, Professor Quirrell, and another teacher, Professor Snape, who he instinctively feels does not like him. Professor Snape looks directly into Harry’s eyes, and immediately the scar on his forehead burns with pain. Harry is convinced that Snape must be an evil man indeed (p. 126).

Much later, Harry will find that Snape indeed does not like him, but that does not make him evil. Harry has to learn that his judgment of Snape is very erroneous, that dislike is not the same thing as evil, and that he must be careful not to judge others rashly. In general, even in the world of wizardry, good and evil elements are to be found, Harry discovers, and he consistently has to make choices in line with what he knows to be right.

And Harry too has his faults and failings. Before coming to Hogwarts, he argued and fought with his cousin. Now he sometimes argues and fights with other students. He disobeys school rules and gets into trouble. He has a very special calling, but he is not perfect, and he will have to struggle to overcome his faults.

So too with each one of us. God calls us in his good time, not ours, and sometimes, when we experience God's call, our first reaction is a feeling of unworthiness. "God couldn't be calling *me*," we say. "I'm not good enough." And yet, in vocation, God does call us

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**Harry is aware that he is in great personal danger, that after Snape steals the Stone, Voldemort will come and kill him. In the process of becoming aware of our vocation and struggling with our acceptance or rejection of it, we too will encounter evil. Our encounter may not be as dramatic as meeting Evil Personified, but there will be times when we are tempted to sin, when we may feel we are in great personal danger.**

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according to his timing, just as we are, with our gifts and virtues, but also with our faults and failings. He does not expect us to be perfect from the start. All he asks is that we seek to grow in his love and in the love of others, and to work humbly to overcome the negative aspects of our character.

### **Seeking the treasure**

The insignificant little package comes to the fore again and seems to be a matter of central importance—a treasure sought by many. Hagrid has taken it from the secret vault in the bank, and as time passes, Harry gradually comes to realize that it is hidden in Hogwarts in a corridor on the third floor where students are forbidden to go. Harry and his friends do go there, and there they find a huge, vicious, three-headed dog guarding a trapdoor. Here, Harry is convinced, is the treasure. What could this treasure possibly be? Hermione, the most intellectual of the four friends, reads widely, and in her reading she has come across an account of the Sorcerer's Stone. This, she tells the

boys, will transform all metals into gold and will make anyone who drinks it immortal. Wealth and immortality! Surely these are riches worth seeking! Harry comes to know that the package contains the Sorcerer's Stone.

In our vocation, we too seek a treasure—the treasure of union with God and of serving him according to his will. This may not be entirely clear to us as we begin our vocational journey. Our vision may be so clouded that we see only "an insignificant little package" where the treasure really is. We may go off on erroneous side paths in seeking it; we may think that the treasure we seek is something other than what it is, but if we are faithful, the Lord will gradually clarify for us what it is he wants us to seek.

### **Confrontation with evil**

Because of an incident of serious disobedience, Harry and his friends are punished by being sent into the forest at night with Hagrid to do they know not what. In the forest, they are exposed to great danger. They find the blood of a unicorn, and ultimately, the dead unicorn itself. Harry is told that it is a terrible thing to kill a unicorn, and that anyone who drinks its blood will be cursed as a result (p. 260).

But there, right before him, by the side of the dead unicorn, Harry meets a hooded figure who *is* drinking the unicorn's blood. This figure looks at Harry and a most horrible pain flashes through his scar. He is terrified, but, in the nick of time, he is saved from personal encounter with this figure by a centaur. The hooded figure turns out to be Evil Personified, Voldemort himself, the one responsible for the death of Harry's parents. Voldemort is desperate to get the treasure, the Sorcerer's Stone, and as things develop, Harry reaches the conclusion that Professor Snape is out to get the Sorcerer's stone to give it to Voldemort, and that Voldemort is waiting in the forest to receive it. And now Harry is aware that he is in great personal danger, that after Snape steals the Stone, Voldemort will come and kill him (p. 260).

In the process of becoming aware of our vocation and struggling with our acceptance or rejection of it, we too will encounter evil. Our encounter may not be as dramatic as meeting Evil Personified, but there will be times when we are tempted to sin, when we may feel we are in great personal danger. "Drinking the unicorn's blood" may bring a curse, but it seems to give some strange power too. We may be tempted to go af-

ter power, at whatever cost, to avoid the vocation to which God is calling us.

### **Crucial point in Harry's vocation**

Harry does get back safely to the school, but throughout the period of final exams, he experiences stabbing pains in his scar, the meaning of which he does not understand at this point. Nevertheless, as time passes, he comes to the conclusion that he cannot just sit around and wait for Voldemort to come and finish him off. He realizes that part of his vocation is to prevent Voldemort from coming back into power! And with this realization, he vows that he will never join the forces of evil. With this vow, Harry commits himself to do what he must do (p. 270).

In our vocation search too, there may come a time,

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**As with Harry, so too in our efforts to follow our vocation, friends may help or hinder us. Some will try to prevent our even beginning to follow our call. Others may help us up to a point. But they too are working out a response to *their* vocation, and we have to recognize the moment when our paths diverge.**

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first of discouragement, when all seems lost, and we feel all that we can do is to let the Voldemort of our lives come and kill us. Then we need to trust in God, to pray with all our hearts in spite of our discouragement, and if we do, we will be graced with the realization that the Lord is on our side. Like Harry, we are being urged to vow that we will never join the forces of evil.

### **Community during the moment of decision**

As a basic step toward overcoming Voldemort, Harry decides to go seek the stone. His three friends, however, refuse to allow him to go alone, and so each one goes as far as he or she can in helping him. Neville, the youngest, shyest, least capable, does what he can by standing up to his friends. But he is seen as a liability, and Hermione casts a spell on him through which he is paralyzed and cannot go further.

After many difficulties, the remaining children, Harry, Ron and Hermione, reach a room where living chessmen block their way. Ron, the master chess player, directs their way through the game, but ultimately realizes that, to allow the others to proceed, he must allow himself to be taken in the chess game. So he sacrifices himself in order to free the others to go forward.

Hermione and Harry continue on their way and come to a room on fire. There they find a liquid that will protect people from the fire. However there is sufficient liquid for only one person. Harry is certain that this battle is his, so he sends Hermione back to bring a message to Dumbledore, then drinks the liquid of protection and goes alone to his destiny.

So too in our efforts to follow our vocation, friends may help or hinder us. Some will try to prevent our even beginning to follow our call. Others may help us up to a point. But they too are working out a response to *their* vocation, and we have to recognize the moment when our paths diverge and when each one of us must act in such a way that we may have to go it alone. If we are truly trying to follow God's will, however, he is directing us. We may have to do the difficult, the very difficult, even the seemingly impossible, but the Lord is with us, and he will direct us even through the most difficult situation.

### **Moment of crisis**

Safely through the fire and inside the last chamber, Harry meets the person he least expects to meet—the stuttering Professor Quirrell! As it turns out, the seemingly weak and harmless Quirrell is the villain, not Professor Snape! Harry realizes his rash judgment of Snape as Quirrell tells how he was the one trying to kill Harry, whereas Snape, in spite of his personal dislike of Harry, was trying to save him. Now Harry is alone with Quirrell, and Quirrell assures him he will be killed that very night (p. 289).

But they are standing in front of a mirror—the mirror—the Mirror of Erised. Harry had already encountered this mirror in Hogwarts—had seen reflections of his parents and family in it, and had been much drawn to it. Dumbledore, however, had warned him that what he saw in there were dreams and that it was dangerous to lose oneself in the world of dreams. Harry had, therefore, removed himself from the mirror and its attractions and had devoted himself to the real world and to the development of his calling.

Now Quirrell is very attracted to the mirror.

Quirrell is convinced that the mirror will somehow lead him to find the Sorcerer's Stone (p. 289), and in it, he sees himself with the stone, presenting it to his master. But he does not know how to use the mirror. At that moment, Voldemort's voice is heard, urging him to use Harry to get to the stone, (p. 292), and so Quirrell takes Harry to the mirror. There Harry sees his own image, holding the blood red stone—and then he feels something heavy drop into his pocket. *He* has the stone. His task now is to prevent Quirrell from getting it!

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**In our vocation journey, we can meet someone as two-faced as Quirrell, or we ourselves can be the two-faced one. We can choose to turn away from the greatness of our task, lose ourselves in a dream world, or sell ourselves to evil. The crucial moment of our vocation is that moment when we make the decision to face the demands that our vocation will make upon us and to accept it.**

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But where is Voldemort in all of this? As Harry wonders, Quirrell slowly upwraps the turban around his head and turns around. There, instead of the back of his head, is another face—the face of Voldemort! Voldemort can live only in others—Quirrell has allowed him to take over his person! In the ensuing struggle for mastery, Harry's scar screams with pain as Quirrell tries to get the Sorcerer's Stone from him. As he tries to seize Harry, however, Quirrell burns his own fingers. He cannot touch Harry without being burned. And mercifully, in the midst of the struggle, Harry goes down into darkness.

In our vocation journey, we can meet someone as two-faced as Quirrell, or we ourselves can be the two-faced one. We can choose to turn away from the greatness of our task, lose ourselves in a dream world, or sell ourselves to evil. The crucial moment of our vocation is that moment when we make the decision to face the demands that our vocation will make upon us and to accept it. We will go after the stone of our own vocation, whatever the cost may be. The cost may indeed

drag us down into darkness, but in the long run, we will be brought to resurrection by the Lord.

## **Resurrection**

Three days later, reminiscent of Jesus' three days in the tomb, Harry comes to in the hospital wing of Hogwarts. To his relief, Dumbledore is with him, and he helps Harry understand what has happened. Dumbledore had arrived on the scene just in time to prevent Quirrell/Voldemort from getting the stone from Harry. And, Professor Dumbledore tells him, the Stone is not, after all, the greatest of great treasures. Immortality in this life, gold and wealth, are not the highest points of life. They are great, but there is something greater. To reach that true greatness, we must go down through the doors of death to come to a new and better life, incomprehensible to us now, but a life which will give us true immortality. To prevent others from seeking to put all their efforts into the less-than-greatest immortality available in this life, Dumbledore tells Harry, the stone has been destroyed.

Just as Harry did, so we too have to grow in understanding the center of our vocation. Success in this life, fame and wealth, are not what our Christian vocation is all about. We are called to follow a crucified and Risen Lord, and if we do, crucifixion will surely bring us to death, but we will also rise to a new and better life.

Clear in this vocation account is the realization that our vocation is not immediately obvious from the very beginning. We begin where we are, but we are always invited to grow. As we make our way through life, thinking we understand clearly, with each new experience, we come to realize there is more to the journey than we had ever suspected. We make mistakes. We may be guilty of personal wrongdoing, of rash or mistaken judgment. We reach goals along the way, but our vocation story is a growth story—each accomplishment is an invitation to new growth. But if we persevere according to what we know at each stage, all the while trusting in the Lord, we will eventually come to our vocation, which will bring us to new life in him. ✚

***TV and the movies didn't inspire this Gen X novice to follow his call. But when he looks closely at current media, he finds a few vocational gems.***

## **A novice's perspective on vocation messages in pop media**

**by David Johnson, OSC**

I remember the precise moment when I was invited to begin serious discernment of religious life. I had finally decided to pursue the sacrament of Confirmation through the RCIA program some 10 years after abandoning those seemingly insipid Wednesday night classes in high school. One night my fellow elect and I had a particularly fascinating guest speaker who beamed with love for the Holy Spirit. Her exuberant love for us, a room full of complete strangers, caught my attention. She was a sister.

At one of the breaks, this smiling woman pulled me aside. She asked me how I was enjoying the RCIA and then asked if I was married. I should have seen it coming: turns out Sister Mary did vocation work as her day job. "I feel the Holy Spirit is very strong with you," she said as she handed me her business card. "I would like to invite you to a discernment retreat. We invite a handful of single women and men, like you, who want to figure out where God is calling them in life. No pressure," she assured, "just a chance to get away for the weekend and talk to religious women and men. And of course, time to pray." As it happened, time to pray was exactly what I needed. Like many recent college grads, I hadn't been able to find a job in the field I thought I wanted. Sister Mary must have sensed this confusion on my face. Going to that retreat was the first of many steps, choreographed by the Spirit, that led me into vocation discernment and ultimately to the Crosier Fathers and Brothers.

At first, the idea that I might be called to religious life was a little weird to say the least. My notions of "priest" and "brother" in particular were both limited and inaccurate. I learned most of what I knew about religious women and men from popular film and TV. Even as a lifelong Catholic, my understanding of religious women and men was based almost entirely on Hollywood fiction. Some of it was positive, some not.

But no movie or TV program I saw ever depicted how religious actually lived together day to day. Too bad. Had I seen a movie portraying authentic community life, I could have considered a religious vocation earlier on.

Nonetheless, popular media is not completely without characters representing nuns and priests in a positive perspective. One of the finest TV nuns appears on HBO's edgy prison drama, *Oz*. *Oz* is a fictional maximum-security prison where inmates and staff members struggle to survive in an ultra-realistic, brutal and frequently inhumane environment with occasional moments of honesty and tenderness. Often shocking and appalling in its depictions of life—and death—in prison, the series has earned numerous awards for its innovative approach to hard-hitting issues.

Broadway veteran Rita Moreno plays Sister Peter Marie, the seasoned prison psychiatrist who gently counsels inmates and their victims and fiercely protects the vulnerable. Her passion for justice motivates her work. Each season Sister "Pete" wrestles with tough moral issues such as the death penalty, falling in love and personal revenge. She also acts as the ethical anchor for inmates and officers who often experience moral dilemmas of their own. Viewers admire her fortitude, patience and strong faith that keep her going in moments of apparent hopelessness.

The character of Peter Marie represents pure God-given courage and offers a compelling image of how an individual, armed with Christian love and respect

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for human dignity, is able to flourish in the most tenuous of environments. She is an effective minister to the forgotten souls of *Oz*. There is only one thing missing. Sister Peter Marie is portrayed as a spiritual lone ranger of sorts. We know nothing about her home life or her experience of community. Even the episode where she considers seeking dispensation from her vows, it is the bishop, rather than a member of her community, that begs her to remain. Her decision to stay is ultimately motivated by the inmates that need

**I had just begun living in the Crosier residence when I started watching *Oz* on TV. The character of Sister Pete urged me to reflect during my own discernment on the value of community.**

her. The prison, not the convent, is her community. Rita Moreno's earnest portrayal of Sister Peter Marie is that of a nun doing remarkable ministry all on her own.

For me, such work would be impossible without a spiritual family to come home to at the end of the day. I didn't know how important that was to me until I accepted a personal invitation to visit the Crosiers and share some of their common life. How could I have ever guessed the love shared within a community of men, living together for God alone, was so fulfilling? The genuine warmth I found among them was unlike anything I had ever encountered in real life or film and TV. I had just begun living in the Crosier residence when I started watching *Oz* on TV. The character of Sister Pete urged me to reflect during my own discernment on the value of community.

I do not know if the character Sister "Pete" was in any way inspired by real life activist Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ, author of the book *Dead Man Walking*. Susan Sarandon's critically acclaimed portrayal of Prejean in the 1995 film of the same title earned her an Oscar for Best Actress; and deservedly so, for hers is a truly unforgettable performance. The emotional journey explores themes of forgiveness, justice and human dignity, which are of interest to all Christians. Of particular interest to vocation ministers and those discerning religious life, is the faithful way Sister Helen accepts

the invitation and challenge to serve as spiritual minister to Matthew Poncelot, a convicted murderer on death row. This unpleasant task is made even more difficult by the fact that Prejean has little experience with the criminal justice system and no knowledge of Poncelot's case, except what he chooses to reveal. Despite the heart-rending, high-stakes obstacles, Prejean confronts her limitations with poise and grace, eventually bringing Poncelot to reconciliation with God and the families of his victims.

I saw *Dead Man Walking* at the age of 22 when I was choosing a career path. The film helped me claim the value of investing one's work in the greater good, rather than merely working to acquire personal wealth and status. At that point in my life I was not ready to consider a religious vocation, but I knew my life's work had to make the world a better place. Sister Helen's choice to work for justice appealed to me as a model of living one's faith, as opposed to merely practicing it.

The vows of celibacy and poverty also figure into the film, which raises its value for those eager to see honest depictions of the consecrated life in the movies. Early in the film Prejean and Poncelot are getting acquainted. He does not understand her decision to become a sister, specifically to live celibately. He asks, "Don't you ever miss being with a man and having a family?"

Without missing a beat, she responds, "If I had family, I guess I'd be at home with them right now instead of here with you."

"Good point," he admits. Her response is beautifully appropriate and as succinct an account of choosing celibate life as one ever sees in the movies.

Regarding poverty, there is a scene where Helen's work is discouraged by her well-to-do parents during a visit. Their fancy table and nice home contrast starkly with Prejean's community of sisters in a low-income housing unit. But she remarks that she would rather live closer to those she serves, and we understand why. By choosing to live among the poor, the sisters have chosen them as spiritual companions. This spiritual family supports and understands Prejean in ways that her immediate family cannot. The contrast between the lives of privileged and the lives of those in poverty is very clear at several points in the film.

One reason I love this film is that it transformed my

understanding of the role of women religious. I used to think their work was limited to teaching in Catholic schools or nursing in Catholic hospitals. Because of this story, however, I came to understand that sometimes the work of God can only be done by a woman and must be accomplished through Christian love. This is an unusual theme in the movies and perhaps accounts for some of the success of *Dead Man Walking*. Prejean's real life experience as a religious woman gives the film a rare authenticity.

Another real life figure making a positive difference in today's media is (unfortunately) one of the best kept secrets on TV. Father Alberto Cutié, of the Archdiocese of Miami, has earned a reputation in Spanish-speaking culture as one of the brightest faces in the American priesthood. Since 1998, he has hosted several radio and TV talk shows in Spanish that address a broad range of social topics and relationship issues. Padre Alberto, as he is known, can be found every Saturday on EWTN Español and weekday mornings on Radio Paz, which broadcasts on the Internet (see [www.padrealberto.net](http://www.padrealberto.net)). Cutié is most likely to be described by his fans as "bien chévere," or "really cool." With natural good looks, flawless bilingual ability in English and Spanish, and a particular savvy with the media, Cutié is seen as an especially good role model for the Latino youth with whom he often works.

Cutié is the sort of priest I hope to become one day. Many have given up on the church due to scandals and financial troubles. Critics denounce the church as outmoded or self-serving. Today, I see a church in need of a new generation of healthy, well-rounded leaders who are eager to make a difference in people's lives. Cutié uses the power of television to remind the faithful that the institution of the priesthood is still vital, and he restores a feeling of pride to Catholics of all ages.

The ideal priests and nuns played by the likes of Bing Crosby and Sally Field belong to a world that no longer exists, if it ever did. Today's generation of discerners is hungry for compelling religious figures motivated to make the world a better place. We want current examples, either real life or fictionalized, of those who live a consecrated life for its own rewards. Even a Hollywood fiction that shows viewers the daily grind of life in a contemporary convent, monastery, seminary or religious community could do much to help to allay the potent misconceptions about religious life.

Like many in my generation, I finished college and

spent a few years in the workforce before I made a prayerful decision to get out of the way and let God guide my search for fulfillment. The false gods I used to seek, financial success and romance, are common motivators that are often exulted in our media. One personal invitation from Sister Mary helped me to begin the discernment process. Another personal invitation to visit the Crosiers encouraged me along the way. Vocation ministers know they must reach potential candidates and personally invite them to consider consecrated life. Movies and TV will never do

**Cutié, of EWTN Español and Radio Paz, is the sort of priest I hope to become one day. He uses the power of television to remind the faithful that the institution of the priesthood is still vital, and he restores a feeling of pride to Catholics of all ages.**

that job for them. Still, even though popular media doesn't always get it right when it portrays religious, sometimes it does, as in *Oz*, *Dead Man Walking* and Padre Alberto Cutie's addresses. That's a fact worth celebrating. ✚

***Here are five films with themes to spur lively vocation discussions.***

## Seen any good movies lately?

**by Lou Ella Hickman, IWBS**

It is perhaps one of the most difficult situations vocation directors face in their ministry. They not only seek out possible candidates; they also help people who express an interest in a religious vocation discern God's direction for their lives. However, due to a multitude of options, cultural influences, and pressures, discernment is far more difficult today than it has ever been. In a word, how *does* a vocation director deal with the immense burden of ambivalence people carry today? One tool that could help answer that question is movies. Film has become so much a part of our culture that it is part of the mind-set or language of many people. Thus, utilizing that language to help people make life choices can be a richly rewarding.

Using film as a tool involves more than popping a movie into a VCR or DVD player. When vocation ministers make the most of this hidden treasure, movies can enhance the time spent with those discerning God's call. Because film incorporates powerful symbols, these symbols can help people not only articulate their faith but also help them express what their growing awareness of life choices means to them. Such awareness is part and parcel of the discernment process. To facilitate that process I have included possible reflection or discussion questions that focus on decision making as well as theological resources for five movies. I include a short list of other possible movies, as well as Web site addresses for additional background.

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### ***Time Machine***

(PG-13)

**Plot summary** This is an updated film version (2002) of H.G. Wells' classic story of a man who builds a time machine and travels to the future.

**Viewing guide** For some people, the opening scenes might seem a little long. However, they set the stage for the action to follow. Once the action is set in motion, the story is nonstop. The plot is rich with details that may be missed on the first viewing. Even though the acting was not outstanding, I particularly liked how Alexander grew as a character. The soundtrack is unobtrusive and helps to set the mood for the scene being watched.

**Sexual or violent content** Alexander, the main character, will become a Christ-figure when he confronts creatures whose violence will destroy those he cares about. (I took issue with the cassette cover, as it is somewhat suggestive; you might note that the cover does not do justice to the story line.)

**Possible themes** Dealing with the past, finding one's self, making loving choices

#### **Possible reflection/discussion questions**

- In one of the opening scenes, Alexander asks, "What time is it?" Most people ask that type of question in making life choices. Many people can become very impatient with such a question, so how does one deal with God's timing? What are helps to know the time is right to make a decision?
- What is love? How does the movie define love? How does the viewer know Alexander is a loving person? How does he embody St. Paul's great hymn to love in 1 Corinthians? How do Alexander's deci-

sions reflect his growing understanding of love? What were some of the consequences of his choices?

- What does Alexander discover about dealing with the past? How does this discovery influence the rest of the story? How do I see God in the past choices I've made? What direction do the circumstances of my life point to?
- How were the women symbols of Alexander's change of heart or conversion?
- Why was Alexander willing to take the risk of loving? How did he make his decisions? What regrets would Alexander have had if he hadn't taken the risks he did?
- Were there any decisions he avoided making? What are the consequences of avoiding decisions?
- What in society today reflects similar choices of love?
- What do you think will happen to Alexander? What kind of life do you think he will have? What life would he have had if he had chosen not to build the machine?
- What were your favorite scenes? What do they teach you?

### Tips on using movies in vocation ministry

In order to use the suggested movies well, consider the following ideas. First, preview the movie. While this may seem obvious, it is often overlooked. Previewing the movie will also be especially helpful if you are on a limited time schedule and can use only a few selected scenes.

Second, depending on your audience you may need to add discussion questions to those already provided here. Also it might be helpful to prepare a list of main ideas of what to look for when the film is shown. Third, if there is enough time, plot the major scenes of the movie with those viewing it. This can be a great asset as this activity will help the viewers "see" what actually happened, not what they think happened.

- What is the theme or message that runs through the movie?
- Simon Wells, the great grandson of H.G. Wells, directed this movie. What possible influences do you think this may have had on the movie? What are some the influences that can help you make a good life choice?

### ***Sister Act***

(PG)

**Plot summary** A second-rate singer witnesses a mob-related murder. The police hide her in a convent until the murderer can be arrested.

**Viewing guide** Not all of Reno is glitz and glamour; *Sister Act's* opening scenes remind us of that. Then it is a short step into the *inner sanctum* behind convent walls. There, two strong-willed personalities meet, or I should say, collide. Those personalities and the need for survival provide the plot with numerous twists and turns. I wish the plot had been more precise about how long Delores actually was in the convent rather than merely alluding to it. I think this would have helped create a better sense of her frustration as a protected witness.

**Comment on sexual or violent content** While there is little overt sexual or violent content, there is the reality that Delores is a mobster's mistress. This highlights how much the main character, Delores, changes. The final scene in the casino is an apt description of that change.

**Possible themes** Facing one's fears, discipleship, discovering one's true self in the context of community, commitment, using one's gifts to make a difference

### **Possible reflection/discussion questions**

- A number of sisters and members of the laity were offended by the movie's depiction of religious life. They believed the film re-enforced society's view that religious life is a shallow lifestyle or degraded the concept of religious life. However, if we take another look at the story line, we might discover a profound understanding of grace within a community. With this in mind, the question can be posed—how was community a means of transformation for Sister Mary Clarence? How was Sister Mary Clarence a means of transformation for the other sisters? How was the community a means of transformation for the neighborhood?

- After the fall Adam and Eve hide from God out of fear. In what ways do we sometimes hide from God out of fear?
- In many of Jesus' parables there is a sense of extravagance or overflowing grace. What scenes suggest the same quality of extravagance? If Jesus had told this story as a parable, what do you think his message might have been?
- What are some choices the sisters make? What happens as a result?
- One of the songs the sisters sing is in honor of Mary, and they sing it with great joy. What does this say about their understanding of Mary? How would the plot of the movie have changed if that song and "I Will Follow Him" not been included?
- In a final scene, Sister Mary Clarence faces the hit men sent to kill her. How does this scene symbolize the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the Age of Martyrs?
- Discovering the deep meanings of our vocation is a lifelong process. By the end of the movie, what has Sister Mary Clarence discovered about herself? What have the other Sisters discovered about themselves?
- Why is Sister Mary Clarence willing to risk everything in order to be loyal to the community? What is your deepest desire? What do you want so much that you would give your life to it?
- How does Delores know she is loved? How have you known God's love? How do you wish to respond to God's love with your life?
- The movie is obviously a caricature of religious life. However, caricature is based on some kernel of truth. What is that truth? In what ways *could* this movie be used to help promote religious life?
- At the beginning of the movie, Delores Van Cartier (Whoopi Goldberg's character) is not only afraid, she is very ambivalent about many things in her life. What were they? What helped her to change? When did she start to change? How do fear and ambivalence intertwine?
- The movie sees discipleship as \_\_\_\_\_.
- In the scene where the sisters are told they can min-

ister to the people in the neighborhood, one of the sisters comments, "There are so many problems out there that maybe we could help with. That's why many of us became nuns." People choose a religious vocation for various reasons. What could some of those reasons be?

- When I was studying for my master's in theology, one of my courses was a class on parables. The teacher mentioned that what was omitted in a parable was as important as what was stated. While the movie underscores an active ministry for sisters, it omits other valid ministries such as prayer and the contemplative life. What other aspects of religious life are missing from the film? If you were the director, how would you incorporate those aspects into the movie?
- Sister Mary Clarence makes a comment in the process of organizing the choir, "We call that an 'A' with an attitude." What attitude was she referring to? What attitudes would help a person make good life choices?
- "Well then, every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both new and old." (Matthew 13:51-52) How does this apply to the movie?

### ***Star Trek®: Nemesis®***

(PG-13)

**Plot summary** Captain Picard must battle a cloned version of himself. If he loses, the earth will be destroyed.

**Viewing guide** This movie also begins very slowly. However, these scenes help to introduce the story line as well as a sub-theme that brokenness can be made whole later, which will be clearer later in the plot. Again, once the action begins, the pace is tense. After all, this is a race against time. I especially liked the fact that the special effects were kept to a minimum. Thus the story was not lost amid the overuse of visuals.

**Comment on sexual or violent content** Violence is not gratuitous but is part and parcel of the battle between good and evil. The one sex scene reveals an evil that will commit the most personal of violations—reaching into someone's thoughts.

**Possible themes** Coming to self-knowledge, learning

from our humanness, the influence of choices, dealing with our dark side

### **Possible reflection/discussion questions**

- In what ways does Data represent the human longing to be more?
- How does Data's final choice mirror the captain's struggle with his alter ego?
- What helped Data to make his final decision? Was it a free choice? Why was he willing to do what he did? Why did he think the decision was worth making?
- What do you think Data would tell someone today who had to make a difficult decision? What do you think the captain would suggest?
- Data had several advantages in being an android or a robot. One advantage was that he didn't have to struggle with emotions. How can our feelings help guide us in a life choice?
- Imagine the story five to ten years into the future. How has the crew changed because of Data's gift of himself? What was Data's legacy? What legacy do we want to leave to others? What is the legacy that we have received? What gifts do I have that could make a difference in today's world?
- "Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it." (Mark 8:35) How did Data live his life to the full by losing it? How can I live life fully?

## ***Jurassic Park***

(PG-13)

**Plot summary** Three scientists are invited to an island made over into a theme park complete with live dinosaurs.

**Viewing guide** Since the story takes place on a tropical island, the cinematography is breathtaking. Because the soundtrack was written by John Williams, five time Oscar ® winner, the music provides another wonderful backdrop to the story line. After a very short introduction, the viewer is taken to the island and is treated to the tour intended for future guests. However, one staff member has greedy intentions. Due to his bungled attempt to sell out during a tropical storm, chaos ensues. The story line builds up to this point

with danger alternately appearing and disappearing. This creates a sense of "what-will-happen-next?"

**Comment on sexual or violent content** The violence in the movie provides the basis of the story—human beings will suffer from their own lack of respect for the laws of nature.

**Possible themes** care for the earth, ecology and moral choices

### **Possible reflection/discussion questions**

- Why did the creator of the park, John Hammond, feel he was entitled to make the choices he did? Why did he believe he was doing something good? What are my motives for the way of life I am seeking?
- In what ways does respect reveal itself in the movie? How does respect differ from love? Or are they different?
- In the creation story of Genesis, Adam's vocation is pictured as being a co-creator with God. How are we partners in the on-going process of creation? While priests, brothers and sisters do not share a biological role as partners in creation, we nevertheless share in creation's on-going development. What is that role?
- One of the major physical characteristics common to all humanity is our ability to adapt to our environment. How does this ability impact our partnership with God in terms of creation? How does it impact our choices?
- What are some signs of God's presence in the story? What are some signs of God's presence in my life?
- Imagine you are a visitor or a scientist in Jurassic Park. What does the park mean to you? How has the park impacted your life? Why did you choose to come or work at the park? Why might you choose ordained or consecrated life?
- Imagine someone from the 25<sup>th</sup> century watches the film. How do you think that person will view the different choices, especially life choices, in the film?
- If you were the director of the film, what changes would you make in terms of discerning a religious vocation? Why do you think the film was popular (besides the fact that some of the main characters are dinosaurs)?

- In one scene a young boy is hanging on a fence. He is told, “You have to jump.” Why doesn’t he? Why does it take a jolt of electricity to get him off the fence? What steps can you take to prepare to step (or jump) into a new life path?
- At the end of the movie a small flock of pelicans appears. In art, the pelican is the traditional symbol of the Eucharist, as it was believed the pelican would feed its young with its own blood if needed. Why is this a fitting symbol for the end of the movie? In what way of life could you best give of your self for others?
- Even though Dr. Ian Malcolm, the mathematician, is an invited guest, he doesn’t wear the appropriate attire for a jungle. Yet he is the first to speak up to defend the wildness of nature. In other words, he is not what he seems to be—below the surface he is a man of great depth and wisdom. How does this apply to the idea of vocation?
- The meal is a celluloid form of Andrei Rublev’s famous icon of The Holy Trinity. At the meal, John Hammond is challenged with the gift of self-knowledge so that he can be invited through the window of reverence. It will be the “trinity” (the three scientists) who will save the park and not its “creator.” (Suggested activity: if you are walking with someone in discernment, have that person sit with an icon on a regular basis over a period of time. This activity could help in the discernment

process, especially if that person has a spiritual director.)

- What are some of the lines in the movie that speak to you in your discernment?

### ***Shawshank Redemption***

(R)

**Plot summary** A successful banker is found guilty of a double murder and sent to prison in 1946.

**Viewing guide** One of the major drawbacks to this film is its length. However, as one critic put it, the length of the film is necessary to help reveal Andy’s patience. The length (almost two and one-half hours) also helps to give the viewer a sense of how time slows down for a prisoner. We get to see Andy’s personality through the eyes of Morgan Freeman, who does an outstanding job with his character as Ellis Boyd “Red” Redding. The plot plays out for almost the entire film in an understated manner, much like Andy’s personality. Without giving away the twist in the plot, I would suggest to the viewer to not let the movie’s simplicity fool you.

**Comment on sexual or violent content** The two brief opening scenes where the couple is beginning to engage in sex not only sets the stage for the story but will later be part of Andy’s journey of self-discovery. Scenes of prison violence underscore Andy’s patience and inner strength.

### **Generic questions**

*These can be used with any or all five movies.*

- How does this movie teach the importance of trust in God and self in the discernment process?
- How did the characters make their decisions? What doors opened and/or closed in the characters’ lives that helped shaped their decisions? What doors have opened or closed in your life? In what direction do these openings or closings seem to be leading you?
- Which characters were mentors or guides for others? What does this say about the importance of finding a mentor or spiritual director?
- What resources were available to the characters that helped them to make good decisions? What resources are available to you in your discernment?
- What insight did the film give you to use in your life?
- Discernment is a two-way process between an individual and a community. Which scenes reveal that two-way process?
- Which character based his or her decisions on little or no information? Which made intelligent decisions? How does one go about getting enough information to make a mature decision? How does one recognize the right time for a decision?

**Possible themes** Justice, redemption, true freedom

**Possible reflection/discussion questions**

- The film takes place in a prison. What in my life hinders my inner freedom?
- What does the banker (Andy) learn about himself and the other men while he is in prison? What circumstances of my life have taught me about who I am?
- Who or what is redeemed? How does it happen? What have been moments of redemption in my life?
- What impact does Andy have on the other prisoners? What impact do you think he had on the guards? In other words, how did Andy make a difference? If you want to make a difference in the world, what concrete steps can you take now to start making that difference?
- What kind of banker do you think Andy was before he went to prison? What skills did he have that helped him during his stay in prison? What skills in my life could help me be a person for others?
- What kind of prisons do people make for themselves? What is true freedom? Did justice prevail in the end? What is justice? What in our world today cries out for justice?
- Where did Andy's inner strength come from? What made him a free man?
- In what ways was Andy a spiritual person? In what ways was his friend Ellis "Red" Redding a spiritual person? What makes a person spiritual?
- I found a line on a scrap of paper I picked up where I work. A high school student had written, "How you see yourself is how you live." How did each character see himself? What actions reveal that character's self-image or self-understanding? How do those actions also reveal a sense of commitment?
- What did the gift of the opera music symbolize?
- Comte de Buffon once wrote, "Never think that God's delays are God's denials. Hold on; hold fast; hold out. Patience is genius." How does that insight apply to both the movie and to vocation discernment?

**Backdoor questions**

(These might be helpful if you plan to show the movie or sections of the movie to teenagers. They tend to be very hesitant about sharing their private life.)

- How could this movie be used to help vocation programs or directors?
- What do you think adults might see in this movie in terms of discerning a religious vocation?
- How do you think other teens might benefit from seeing this movie to help them to think about a religious vocation?
- What other movies would you suggest that might be helpful to support vocation ministry?
- In what ways could this movie help or hinder someone thinking about a religious vocation?
- If teenagers could make a movie to help promote religious vocations, what do you think it would look like?

**Other movie suggestions**

***Babette's Feast***

A woman spends her entire lottery winnings on creating a feast for her village. **Possible themes:** the gift of self, God's extravagance, reconciliation through celebration

***Willow***

A wannabe magician must fight evil in order to return a baby princess to her rightful place. **Possible themes:** believing in yourself, an unlikely hero

***Harry and the Hendersons***

A family encounters Bigfoot. **Possible themes:** The journey of conversion, grace, nonviolence

For a more complete listing of possible movies, refer to *The Family Guide to Movies on Video* edited by Henry Herx and Tony Zaza. +

# Film-related resources for vocation ministers

Compiled by Lou Ella Hickman, IWBS

## Theological resources

Baugh, Lloyd. *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1997.

Blake, Richard A., SJ. "Film" column, *America*.

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Debona, Gueric. "The American Cinema's Challenge to Adult Faith Formation," *The Living Light*, fall, 2000, pp. 53-63.

Johnston, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Baker Book House, 2000.

Leon-Dufour, Xavier. "Creation," *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Word Among Us Press, 1995, pp. 98-102.

Ibid. "Parable," pp. 400-402.

"Man's Freedom," *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pp. 430-433.

McCormick, Patrick. "Quick Takes," column, *U.S. Catholic*.

McNulty, Edward N. *Praying the Movies: Daily Meditations from Classic Films*. Geneva Press, 2001.

Nicolosi, Barbara R. "Media Matters" column *Liguorian*.

Pacatte, Rose, FSP; and Malone, Peter. *Lights, Camera ... Faith: A Movie Lectionary*. A series of three separate books for Cycle A, Cycle B, Cycle C. Pauline Books & Media, 2001, 2002, and 2003.

Pacatte, Rose, FSP. "Eye on Entertainment" column, *St. Anthony Messenger*.

"Parables of Jesus." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Second Edition, Vol. 10, pp. 865-872.

Ibid. "Time." Vol. 14, pp. 77-82.

Ibid. Articles on Creation. Vol. 4, pp. 417-428.

Ibid. "Parables." Vol. 10, pp. 984-988.

*Reel Faith: Where Meaning Meets the Movies*. Abingdon Press, 2002.

Solomon, Gary. *Reel Therapy: How Movies Inspire You to Overcome Life's Problems*. Aslan Publishing, 2001. (While this book is not theology, it will help in providing psychological background for a variety of situations.)

McKenzie, John L., SJ. "Creation," *Dictionary of the Bible*. Touchstone Books, 1995. pp. 157-160.

Ibid. "Parable," pp. 635-636.

For titles of other books on this theme (there are many), try a search on Amazon.com.

## Web sites

Sister Rose Pacatte's Web site  
[www.paulinecenterformediastudies.org](http://www.paulinecenterformediastudies.org)

film lists  
[www.filmsite.org](http://www.filmsite.org)

Insights  
[www.hollywoodjesus.com/](http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/)

Journal of Religion and Society  
[www.creighton.edu/JRS](http://www.creighton.edu/JRS)

Journal of Religion and Film  
[www.unomaha.edu/~www.jrf](http://www.unomaha.edu/~www.jrf)

Movies illustrating aspects of different faiths  
[www.adherents.com](http://www.adherents.com)

List of movies with religious themes and movie reviews, [www.usccb.org/movies](http://www.usccb.org/movies)

Phone line with movie reviews from the Office for Film and Broadcasting, United States Catholic Conference (1-800-311-4222)

Most movies have their own Web sites. These could provide plot summaries as well as other important background information.

***“Deep viewing” of films can help anyone get more out of them, including those who want to pick up on vocation themes.***

## **Finding vocation themes in popular movies**

**by Rose Pacatte, FSP**

If you were a castaway on a desert island—with electricity—what entertainment and information media would you most like to have with you? If I were marooned, I’d hope to have the *Complete Works of Shakespeare* and *The Bible* in the book category; I’d choose *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Matrix* trilogies, *Shrek* and *The Searchers* in the movie category; in television, someone would have to float in DVDs with current episodes of *Judging Amy*, *Alias*, *Everwood*, *Without a Trace* and *Meet the Press*; in music, just to guarantee I’d be left alone, I’d choose anything country and maybe some Alicia Keyes and Nora Jones. Why all these? I’d choose them mostly for the stories—human and divine and a mix of both.

### **Movies and the stories they tell**

I love stories because I can enter different times and places, I can meet people, experience their lives and journeys, see and understand their choices. I love stories because I can learn. In a special way I love movies because they are such an immersion experience into life. I love how smart they are and I admire the intelligence and creativity that produce them—even when a particular genre or movie is not my preference.

I love movies when I am surprised by the layers of

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meaning in a film. I love it when I can see the protagonist’s inner self, with his or her flaws, struggles and gifts. When I enter into the conflict by exercising my moral imagination, I wonder at how the tension will be resolved, what choices the characters will make—and what I might do if I were in their shoes. Then there is the subjective nature of humor, which can activate one’s endorphins if it is intelligent.

Most of all, I love the depth, the beauty, the truth and goodness I find in movies: the kindness, perseverance, forbearance, reconciliation, humility, purity of spirit, the struggle for social justice and the price some are willing to pay so that others might live; the questioning of the political, ecclesial, educational status quo; the call to seek, to grow, to change and respond to one’s vocation, or even to a call within a call.

### **Deep viewing**

“Deep viewing” is a term I heard a few years ago and promptly added to my vocabulary. It means thoughtful viewing and listening. Rather than only a cognitive approach to entertainment and information media, it is a more integrated attitude and life skill that means to choose our “media experiences” thoughtfully and then enter into the story with our minds and hearts. More than finding the “moral of the story” or counting bad words, this process recognizes the human journey of the characters, the sins, the repentance, reconciliation, and the call to be more human and sometimes holy, including the failures, the struggles, the triumphs. When the arc of a character’s development is believable and the story well-crafted, then the film engages viewers.

Deep viewing can raise issues about whether a film we are considering is appropriate, moral or even interesting. However, we usually do not choose to watch what does not seem to correspond with the values that guide

our lives. True, the human and Gospel values that we articulate for ourselves and our understanding of them can grow and develop as we mature. When this happens, our deep viewing lens is made more clear. Sometimes what is publicized as a terrible film, as something contrary to our values, can be a life-changing event for us because we see beyond content to underlying meanings, even when they are contested. Everyone experiences the same media differently. Sometimes a casual invitation to accompany a friend to a movie can be the means for hearing the call of God.

There are five basic reasons, among many, as to why a vocation director would do well to develop “deep viewing” skills.

- 1) For personal spiritual development and enrichment;
- 2) For relevance: so that in using films in vocation ministry, you know what you are talking about from personal experience;
- 3) To understand the cultural context from which potential religious and clerical vocations derive self and body image, notions of morality (including social justice), faith, spirituality and meaningful relationships;
- 4) To learn to identify films or “clips” in films that can be used for prayer and liturgy, retreats and story references in spiritual direction;
- 5) To develop dialogic skills using film as a safe and respectful place to talk about what is important.

Here are also a couple of hints about what to avoid: 1) to pass judgment on a film you have not seen and 2) to instrumentalize the use of popular film and film clips as ways to convince rather than as ways to invite people to reflect on life, Scriptures, spirituality, prayer, etc.

### **How to become a deep viewer**

1. **Construct your viewing lens** Identify three (or more) elements or values that make you judge a film worth your time. If you are a vocation minister, you may want to look for how the characters enter into discernment—or not; if you are interested in family, race, gender, political and economic justice, education, health, relationships or attributes such as love, integrity, kindness, faith—

write these down to help you form your viewing lens.

2. **Be informed.** Read reviews so that you will be informed. I recommend the Internet Movie Database because you can access almost every print review available for current films and those going back decades: [www.imdb.org](http://www.imdb.org).
3. **Keep a movie journal**, in a diary or even an online “blog,” that is, an online journal that can be per-

**Sometimes what is publicized as a terrible film, as something contrary to our values, can be a life-changing event for us because we see beyond content to underlying meanings, even when they are contested.**

sonal or that you can let others read and comment on, online!

4. **Write down the title, main storyline and anything you noticed** such as the music, visual motifs, and why you liked it or not. This develops “deep viewing” and critical thinking skills.
5. **Write down what the film might have meant** to your own human and spiritual journey. I know a mother who always asks her teen daughter when she comes home from a film: did you find God in the movie? (Think of *X-Men 2* and *Daredevil*, both of which take place within a religious context with much Catholic imagery.)
6. **Talk about the movies you experience** with your family, friends, community members and other vocation ministers. This kind of respectful communication creates relationships, gives believers a chance to build bridges between people, and develops a culture permeated by human and Gospel values. All that is required for this is a casual coffee break, a shared meal, a ride home from work, *casual* being the operative word for the context and *respect* for the methodology.

## Some favorite vocation-theme films

Here are some of my favorite movies about vocation, from the call to moral integration and freedom, to the call to lay down one's life for others. Some of these films are light, some are very serious, and some lie in between—and some are not what you might expect.

### ***Making life decisions***

“To live is to be slowly born.” —de Saint-Exupéry  
“In my opinion, all men are islands. And what's more, now's the time to be one. This is an island age.”—Will, in *About a Boy*

***About a Boy*** This Hugh Grant comedy is about a man who is out to prove that modern life has made the words of the poet John Donne obsolete: instead of no man, every man is, or should be, an island. By the end of the film he has become an island chain, part of a community and a family. He has decided to be an adult in relationship to people rather than things and money. The film is funny, with elements of near-tragedy. Most of all it has heart.

**Other films on this theme:** *Crazy from the Heart, Enchanted April, Koyla, Bagdad Café, October Sky, Disney's The Kid*

### ***Choosing the road less traveled***

“Be the change you want to see in the world”—Gandhi  
“I want the last face you see in this world to be the face of love, so you look at me when they do this thing. I'll be the face of love for you.” —Sister Helen in *Dead Man Walking*

***Dead Man Walking*** This true story of a woman religious who daily seeks to be Jesus in the world, who took the road less traveled between Baton Rouge and Angola State Prison in Louisiana, to be the agent of change for a man on death row. Her ministry was misunderstood and unpopular and at times she had doubts, too. With faith, in solidarity with her sisters, in humility, she kept walking—to be the face of Jesus to the condemned.

**Other films on this theme:** *The Burning Season, Romero, Entertaining Angels, Cry Freedom, Gandhi, A World Apart, The Mission, Erin Brockovich, At Play in the Fields of the Lord, The Insider*

### ***Faithful and true***

“What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but

rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him.”—Victor Frankl

“It's Hebrew, it's from the Talmud. It says, ‘Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire.’” Itzhak Stern in *Schindler's List*

***Schindler's List*** Oskar Schindler was a loser in his professional and personal life before World War II and a loser after. But he is the quintessential example of a man who heard a call within the human need before him. He saved the lives of about 1,000 Jewish people against all odds. He was a man who responded and persevered completely until the end of the war. He is known as a righteous gentile in Israel, and to all, a human being who was faithful and true to his brothers and sisters, who met the challenge of his time with resources he didn't even know he had.

**Other films on this theme** *The Green Mile, The Magnificent Seven, On the Waterfront, Mi Familia, A Man for All Seasons, Steel Magnolias, Music of the Heart*

### ***The seekers***

“Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.” —Carl Jung  
“No, this is Mount Everest. You really should turn on the Discovery Channel every now and then.” —God, in *Bruce Almighty*

***Bruce Almighty*** Bruce is already a believer, but his faith is immature. He is self-centered; he seeks success in his professional life and is clueless about the relationships that a person needs to nourish to exist meaningfully in the world. He blames God for everything that goes wrong on the one hand, while unaware, he is actually seeking a deeper and more meaningful relationship with God and others at the same time. This comedy is about a man on a spiritual journey, that invites the audience to step into Bruce's shoes and come along for the ride.

Other films on this theme: *Smoke Signals, Leap of Faith, Regarding Henry, As Good as It Gets, The Crossing Guard, Tender Mercies, Wit, Marvin's Room, Simon Birch, Keeping the Faith, The Third Miracle, Cast Away, The End of the Affair, About Schmidt, Catch Me If You Can.*

### ***Together in community***

“This is the duty of our generation as we enter the 21st

century—solidarity with the weak, the persecuted, the lonely, the sick, and those in despair. It is expressed by the desire to give a noble and humanizing meaning to a community in which all members will define themselves not by their own identity but by that of others.” —Elie Wiesel

“Leaders get tired, too.” —Pai, in *Whale Rider*

**Whale Rider** Pai is the young granddaughter of a Maori chief in a small New Zealand village. She loves her people and her community and has a mystical connection with a pod of whales in the ocean near her home. When his canoe capsized, the leader of their people rode a whale across the ocean centuries before, and the legend captivates Pai. When her grandfather rejects her for the boys of the tribe, Pai perseveres in love, sacrifice and dedication for her community. She has an innate sense of solidarity and leadership.

**Other films on this theme:** *Paradise Road, Pay It Forward, Remember the Titans, Places in the Heart, Babette’s Feast, Lilies of the Field, Chocolat, Dinosaur, Lord of the Rings trilogy, The Matrix*

### **Moving on**

“You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters are continually flowing in.” — Heraclitus

“However much we stumble, it is a teacher’s burden always to hope, that with learning, a boy’s character might be changed. And, so, the destiny of a man.” — William Hundert in *The Emperor’s Club*

**The Emperor’s Club** The most interesting thing about *The Emperor’s Club* is that the protagonist, William Hundert, only “moves on” within his own little universe, the prep school where he lives and works. Though he educates boys whose lives go on to shape history and society, the audience wants to see him grow and develop and move on. Hundert’s life is rife with moral and ethical challenges as he lives out his passion for teaching about Greek and Roman classics. The film is a more than competent “space” to consider moving on from a comfort zone to a new place.

“Life offers you a thousand chances ... all you have to do is take one.” Tagline, *Under the Tuscan Sun*

**Under the Tuscan Sun** Frances, a writer in her mid-30s, is in danger of not recovering from the sadness of her husband’s infidelity and the subsequent divorce. When her friends give her a ticket for a gay tour of Tuscany (“So no one will hit on you”), she goes. On a whim, she buys a villa and sets about rebuilding the

house and her life. In this somewhat fairy-tale adaptation of the book, we are invited inside the inner journey of a woman who takes a risk at living. She makes mistakes, true, but she also makes friends, and she lets strangers become part of her new family. Frances is a fallen-away Methodist and she lets the Blessed Mother become her friend and guide. *Under the Tuscan Sun* provides a cinema space to talk about taking the next best step in life.

**Other films on this theme** *Life as a House, Moonstruck, Black Robe, Kundun, The Truman Show, Bed of Roses, Titanic, Savior, The Joy Luck Club, Tortilla Soup, Shadowlands, The Fisher King, Antwone Fisher, Born on the Fourth of July, Secrets and Lies, The Color Purple, The Straight Story, Princess Caraboo, Regarding Henry*

### **Call of the cinema, calls from God**

Jesus never told a true story. He told fictitious stories, parables—stories that pointed the way to the reality they represented: the treasure in the field, the lost coin, the unjust judge, the rich man and Lazarus, the good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son.... Why did he speak in parables? Because this is how he got the people’s attention. Movies, and the tales they tell, can get our attention, too, and help us take the next best step in life.

Teresa Sanders, author of *Celluloid Saints: Images of Sanctity in Film*, states well the impact film can have, not only on those in discernment but on anyone. “Movies do more than entertain, though they surely do that,” she writes. “They also shape our hopes and desires. They tell us who we are and who we ought to be. They give us a language to express our loves and our fears and the full scope of our messy, complicated humanity. That humanity is contemptible and noble, craven and courageous, pitiable and dignified. As members of it, we share one thing in common: a desire that something matter. We long for something to devote our lives to with all our heart and with all our mind and with all our strength.... Film is an extraordinary medium. It can literally change lives....” ✚

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***Although the word “celibacy” may not be in the script, some contemporary film heroes have made a celibate choice for the greater good.***

## **Celibacy at the movies**

**by Jim Kent, OFM, Conv.**

Sex in the movies is as prevalent as popcorn, salty popcorn. Buttered or unbuttered, it's often there to simply help milk the cash cow. But if sex sells, what then does celibacy do for a movie? Surprisingly, in the last couple of years a number of films have broached that very subject.

In *40 Days and 40 Nights* the protagonist (Josh Hartnett) attempts to find meaning in his life by going celibate for an entire Lent. The perceived impossibility of such a feat leads to a betting pool, come-ons and trickery by friends, and skepticism by his seminarian brother who feels his promiscuous sibling will never make it.

He just about does. Kind of. Of course, he soon meets Miss Right, tries to remain true to his Lenten promise, and finally is duped and sexually assaulted in the last hour of his vow. (Though, a liturgist—or seminarian brother—could have easily explained that Lent technically ends with the celebration of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, and thereby made it a truly happy—and perhaps witty—ending.) But in the end, *40 Days and 40 Nights* has as little value for celibacy as a 10-year-old has for giving up candy. By the time the Easter Bunny arrives, they are both aching to appease their appetites.

While *40 Days and 40 Nights* attempts to give a casual glance at the mere comic possibilities of celibacy, other recent films feature heroic characters whose celibacy is an unspoken yet integral element in their lives. From Jay and Kay in *Men in Black II*, to Frodo, Sam and company in *The Lord of the Rings*, from the Jedi knights to Spider-man, all take on great challenges where celibacy is required by the sheer magnitude of the quest involved.

Will Smith (Jay) and Tommy Lee Jones (Kay) reprise their roles in *Men in Black II*. In *Men in Black I*, Jones

recruited Smith to join this secret agency that keeps resident aliens in line and protects earth from malevolent space creatures. Smith's character has to leave everything behind, even his very identity, to become one of the Men in Black. It not only takes wit and physical stamina to be an agent, but a tolerant and inclusive acceptance of all God's creatures—no matter the galaxy from whence they came. These agents dress in clerical colors and respond not for glory but for the common good. It's a life not for everyone. At the beginning of *Men in Black II*, Smith tells his new partner, “If you joined to be a hero you joined the wrong outfit.” This partner is so lovesick, Smith erases his memory and sends him on his way, telling him to get married and have a bunch of kids.

Smith then has to bring Jones out of retirement to solve a case thought to have been settled 25 years previous when Jones was a young agent. It is rather sad to note that Jones' wife, the woman he retired to, has left him. It seems married life was just not for him, and he finds himself pining for something deep in the distant night sky. When Smith asks him what it's like on the outside, Jones replies with ennui: “You sleep late on the weekends, and watch the weather channel.”

The Men in Black appear to be drawn to their life by an innate call to serve and protect. Their task is so special it requires of them a singleness of purpose that does not allow for a spouse or family. Even Smith, who becomes smitten with a young woman and key

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witness, in the end has to let her go to pursue her role in the cosmos just as he must. “We are who we are,” Jones tells him, “even if we sometimes forget.”

Toby Maguire, the lead in Spider-man, cannot at first keep his thoughts off the object of his affection. As Peter Parker, he’s the scrawny, nerdy, under-confident teen who has nothing going for him until an accident with a rare arachnid transforms him into a superhero. The 98-pound weakling suddenly has the speed, strength and dexterity to conquer the most sinister villain. He not only accepts his newfound powers but the responsibility that comes with them. His mantra becomes the words spoken by his now deceased uncle: Great power means great responsibility. This becomes poignantly true as the film ends. His heroic endeavors have captured the heart of his beloved, Mary Jane, but he tells her he first has other good to do. Delaying the immediate gratification of a romantic (read: sexual) relationship is a cultural anomaly both in film and life. Yet, Spider-man has made the point that some things are more important than pleasing the proverbial raging hormones. And it’s worth noting that Mary Jane seems to understand.

Apparently, Spider-man in no James Bond; 007 is always able to save the world from annihilation and still have time for a liaison or two along the way. This dichotomy raises a question. What is more believable from these celluloid characters: that with the world in peril, libidos must still be waxed (shaken and stirred) or that some quests are so crucial that undivided, celibate attention might be required and actually freely given?

Frodo Baggins (*The Lord of the Rings*) is on such a quest. He is chosen to destroy The Ring and thereby save Middle-earth. He is joined by other Hobbits and protectors of Middle-earth who too sense the urgency of such a task. This is no mere adventure, but a quest that may require of them their very lives. The evil forces that plot for the power of The Ring are quite real and diabolic. The journey is so treacherous and demanding they cannot afford the luxury of love affairs and romantic interludes. They are dedicated to the cause and nothing else. This is not unbridled obsession but commitment to something larger than themselves. They may not be called to a lifelong celibate state, but it is the state required for this mission.

Jedi knights, on the other hand, are seemingly called to a life of celibacy. They are not to attach themselves to possessions, but must be free to totally respond to the

process of becoming a Jedi. In *Attack of the Clones, Episode II*—the fifth film in the Star Wars cycle—the Jedi-in-training, Anakin, is certainly headed for the dark side. He wants everything and wants it now. As he falls in love with Padmé Amidala, he strays further from his commitment as a Jedi. It is not his love that is drawing him ever closer to becoming Darth Vader, but his wanting it all—and wanting it now. A principle of celibacy is letting go and not having it all, in order to become the fullness of who you are. To become a complete member of the noble order of Jedi, exclusive

**Celibacy is not the defining quality that makes a hero a hero, it simply enables him to freely focus on the call and mission. For Christians this quality should not be so surprising. Before the Men in Black, Spider-man, Frodo and friends, and the Jedi was a man who lived a celibate life and actually saved the world.**

relationships are forgone in service of the force. Obi-Wan Kenobi is willing to develop the patience and openness to lifelong learning that it takes to become a Jedi. It is his karma, but he must work it out. And it takes a celibate lifestyle to realize this potential and better serve the force.

These movie characters are all heroes in the classic sense, and are celebrated as such. They also must live a celibate life, temporary or permanent, in order to fulfill their destiny. We’ll never hear the word “celibacy” as one of the essential attributes that makes them what they are; it’s too foreign to and challenging of prevailing culture. Besides, it would never fit well in a movie trailer. Celibacy is not the defining quality that makes a hero a hero, it simply enables him to freely focus on the call and mission. For Christians this quality should not be so surprising. Before the Men in Black, Spider-man, Frodo and friends, and the Jedi was a man who lived a celibate life and actually saved the world. This man from Galilee is the archetype for all these heroes. +

***Music has always had the power to move people. Here's how you can put its impact to work for you.***

## **Popular music can help us deliver a vocation message**

**by Susan Kidd, CND**

Popular music and vocations: what do they have to say to each other? How can I even put the two in the same sentence? I gladly agreed to write on this topic because I think popular music has plenty to say about vocations. As someone who taught religion for 10 years before starting full-time vocation ministry, I have felt for a long time that my role is to help students find the language to describe their religious experience. I believe God is alive and active in their lives as much as in my own; yet sometimes religious expressions are foreign to them and disconnected from their lives. Contemporary music can overcome this disconnect and help young people and vocation ministers to explore vocation themes.

The pastoral plan from the Continental Congress on Vocations calls each one of us to help create a culture of vocation. In North American culture the concept of one's life as a vocation has been largely replaced by such secular notions as success, fulfillment and self-realization. The church urgently needs to translate into a language accessible to a new generation of Catholics the profound human and spiritual reality expressed by the term "vocation"—its abiding significance for our lives and for the future of the church. We need to look to the current culture—including the music our young people listen to—and present "vocation" from there first. All educators know they must begin where the student is and then move forward. Let's begin with music culture and put on the lens of Jesus Christ, inviting students to recognize their call and response.

### **Use a variety of music styles**

Before I discuss some ways I've used popular music in vocation ministry, let me give an important piece of advice. I will be using contemporary music as my vehicle. With the variety of musical styles and people's wildly varying tastes (and the strength with which many hold true to those tastes), I may seem foolish to

venture into the world of music. I am not a DJ (or even a VJ as I recently heard—video jockey). I like music, yet try to keep my likes and dislikes out of my presentations. I look for music with messages that fit into my vocation presentations. It's that simple and that challenging. It is dangerous to present only one style of music—for example, to use strictly hiphop with a rap crowd, or only country with pop listeners. And so my first piece of advice is to use a variety of styles. I don't necessarily have something for everyone, but I think it's important to not limit my music selections to what I like or what the classroom teacher may like. Keep the music broad and on topic. And you may want to use my rule of thumb that songs not include swearing or disrespect.

### **Finding the music**

I can already hear questions popping into my readers' minds—where do you get all that music? How do you know the message is positive? How can you even understand the lyrics to some of it? It is true—starting is the toughest part. Having used music several times in my school and youth group presentations, I've found that a good follow-up activity is to ask for other music selections. (Teachers appreciate activities they can use after the presentation.) "What other songs could Sister use to reflect the themes she presented?" Students may even ask for an e-mail address. I offer it because I like to be open to their feedback. Sometimes I write my e-mail address on the board so they can copy it into their notebooks. Students communicate more by e-mail than

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by phone these days, so when I provide my e-mail address, I create a positive climate to continue the conversation. I often receive music recommendations this way from students. By the way, I don't ask that students only recommend songs by Christian artists. Christian rock is very popular in some areas but not in others. In general, Christian rock has a very limited audience. So I tend to favor music that I can hear on the radio, which means mainstream music and not Christian rock.

Once I receive song recommendations from students, I can usually find a young adult who is able to locate the music for me, either online or on CD. I believe the \$15-\$18 investments in CDs are worth it if I'm going to use them. That's a decision each vocation minister

**There is not much in our world these days that is pure—and music is no different. When students are challenged to put on the lens of faith to see where Jesus is, to hear what God is calling them to, they must be discriminating.**

must make. In one local community, clearly recognized religious music can be purchased with the "house" budget. If this is your community's policy, you might want to educate the women or men with whom you live, buy music with the house budget and use it at home also. Of course vocation budgets usually allow for materials and resources, so that's another way to finance music purchases. Compilation CD's are often a good deal. These offer a variety of artists, often on a particular theme. In Canada the "Women and Song" CD series, featuring top selections of several female artists, is excellent.

### **Incorporating music into presentations**

Lately my presentations have improved technically. (Welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> century!) Our bursar bought an LCD projector for the provincial administration, and I asked for one for vocation ministry too. I am now able to show the lyrics as I play songs. I play the whole song from the CD because students like to hear the music, and it gives me a break from them and them a

break from me! Before hitting "play," I tell them very little. It piques their curiosity and keeps them focused on the song. I do tell them that I'll be asking what about this particular song fits in to my presentation.

### **An introductory theme of "call"**

Depending on the group's age, grade level and prior exposure to vocations, I choose vocation themes that are appropriate. A good introductory theme is "call." Too often "God's call" has received bad press—it's a mystery to be discovered, a problem to be solved. I ask the group to think about this: when we pray the "Our Father"—including "thy kingdom come, thy will be done"—how do I know what that is? Love is a good answer, I tell them. Here I might introduce the music of India Arie. She is a young, soul singer from the southern U.S. Her first CD was such a hit that in her second CD she reminds listeners of the values that are important to her. The first song on her second CD, *Voyage to India*, is called "Growth." It has only one line, and I like to zero in on it: *"The only thing constant in the world is change; that's why, today, I take life as it comes."*

There is not much in our world these days that is pure—and music is no different. When students are challenged to put on the lens of faith to see where Jesus is, to hear what God is calling them to, they must be discriminating. In "Growth," I agree and disagree with parts. I believe God's love is constant but that its expression changes. How my grandmother knew God is different from how I will, which is different from how a 15-year-old will. And that's a good thing! I suggest that by "taking life as it comes" one will live a stress-free life. Yet I'm not sure that God is calling us to be stress-free. I don't see us kneeling or sitting in the chapel 24/7 taking life as it comes, waiting for a voice or an e-mail to tell us what God is asking. I do suggest that God wants us to get up off the couch, to step into the mix that is this wonderful world of ours, and see how we can contribute to making it better.

### **Themes of community and conscious living**

From call, a good transition topic is community—the idea that we do not have to do this alone. For me, as a Sister of the Congregation of Notre Dame, the good news is that for over 350 years women have been saying yes to God's call to live as members of our community. What do we all have in common? Jesus Christ. We are to live our baptism as a verb—alive and visible day in and day out.

The band Creed has a song called “With Arms Wide Open” on their CD *Human Clay*. The vocal artist and his wife (yes, some still get married!) were getting ready to have their first baby when this song first came out. The singer’s hope was that he would be able to receive his child “with arms wide open.” The child would not be alone, but be part of a family, part of a community.

I also ask the students, who else loved us so much he opened his arms wide? Creed’s music is quite religious. I tell students that there is one line in the song that makes me sad: “*If I had just one wish, only one desire—I hope he’s not like me. I hope he understands—that he can take this world and hold it by the hand and greet each day with arms wide open.*” I find it sad that the father-to-be, looking back over his life, realizes that he did not greet each day with arms wide open. When I taught religion to 12<sup>th</sup> graders, an assignment I liked, but they did not, was to write their own obituary. “Sister, that’s gross. It’s so morbid!” they would complain. But I told them that now is the time to live the life we want to be remembered for. You want to be remembered as friendly person, a good listener, a loyal friend? Start now, I tell students. Life needs to be chosen each day, sometimes each minute of each day! But it is worth it. Go for it! Creed’s song helps us talk about making conscious choices about how we live.

### Themes of ministry and belief

Having referred in my presentation to call, community and conscious living, now I move on to ministry, to the idea of making the world a better place by using the gifts God has given us. I ask students to consider what their gifts are. Then with the help of another song, I discuss the implications of putting those gifts to work. The group Five for Fighting has a song called “Superman.” (I thought Five for Fighting was a Canadian band until I saw their CD *Americatown*—oh well!) The very last line in *Superman* is one of the best: “*It ain’t easy being me.*” Even for Superman, it isn’t easy making a difference, deciding to be a contributor more than a debtor. A common misconception is that it is easier for me to pray, to be nice, because I am a sister—not! Even for Superman, red cape and everything, it’s tough to be involved with helping others.

A group called Savage Garden has a song with a similar theme. (You can imagine my mom’s expression when her daughter, the religious sister, once asked for

a Savage Garden CD for Christmas. “My daughter has turned hard line!”) This duet from Australia has a CD called *Affirmation* that includes the song “Crash and Burn.” It acknowledges that life is tough, that things happen that are difficult to understand and accept. While there is truth here for everyone, this will always be particularly true for those who dedicate their lives to ministry, to tackling injustice and helping those in need. But again, the song reminds us that we aren’t alone in dealing with tough stuff: “*When you crash and burn, I’ll be there.*” Some verses say *when you*

**The band Creed has a song called “With Arms Wide Open.” The singer’s hope was that he would be able to receive his child “with arms wide open.” I ask the students, who else loved us so much he opened his arms wide?**

crash and burn; others say *if*. Bottom line? Life gets tough; I’m here to be with you.

The CD’s title song, also called “Affirmation,” is great for clarifying faith beliefs. Every line begins with “I believe.” For example: “*I believe the sun should never set upon an argument; I believe we place our happiness in other people’s hands; I believe that junk food tastes so good because it’s bad for you; I believe your parents did the best job they knew how to do; I believe that beauty magazines promote low self esteem; I believe I’m loved when I’m completely by myself alone. I believe in Karma; what you give is what you get returned; I believe you can’t appreciate real love ‘til you’ve been burned; I believe the grass is no more greener on the other side; I believe you don’t know what you’ve got until you say goodbye.*” A nice follow-up activity after discussing this song is for students to create their own creed. The exercise forces them to consider what they believe and why.

### Using music for meditation

Meditation has become very popular with young adults. This is a great tool when my visit is for a longer period than a regular classroom presentation,

such as a retreat or an evening session with a parish youth group. I often challenge the group to see if they are able to quiet themselves inside and out. This is a good way to reach young people because they like quiet; they, like us, need quiet. I let peer pressure create the tone I'm looking for. The students are capable of responding and often are longing for the calm. Relaxation techniques leading into guided imagery offer a nice blend, and the imagery can lead to an encounter with Jesus about call. Ten-to-15 minutes is a good length of time. Music choices can vary. Some of the Gregorian chant pieces are helpful, or any mellow music will do. I caution against using CDs with nature sounds—birds chirping can lead to students giggling.

The musician Enya is good for meditation. Her CD, *A Day Without Rain*, has a song called "Pilgrim," which is about a person's journey for self-discovery. The lyrics include these lines, "Each heart is a pilgrim/ Each one wants to know/ The reason why the winds die/ And where the stories go./ Pilgrim, in your journey/ You may travel far/ For pilgrim it's a long way/ To find out who you are./ Pilgrim, it's a long way/ To find out who you are." In vocation discernment and in youth ministry, an important message is that we continue the journey of discovery. God rarely is revealed in a one-shot deal. We need to encourage our youth (and ourselves) to persist in the journey.

I've offered here just a few ideas for using popular music in vocation presentations. Just as I encourage young people to persist in their faith journeys, I encourage you to persist in the journey of drawing on popular culture to communicate vocation themes. There are young people out there who want to make a difference, who know and love God and want that relationship to deepen. We, the "religion professionals" need to offer experiences that help nourish their relationship with Jesus Christ, that help them discern their call. Music can be a powerful tool. By looking at contemporary music with the lens of faith, we demonstrate a profound acceptance of young adults. They respond in a positive spirit when an adult affirms their culture, their likes. So let's begin where our young people are and communicate using the language of song—their song.

At a recent community gathering my sisters and I began telling wild and wonderful stories of the women who have gone before us. One such story involved an Elvis Presley tour through Canada and how the sisters not only were forbidden to attend themselves but told their students not to go either. Times have changed. Today this Sister not only enjoys Elvis but has been known to go with students to the latest Shania Twain concert. Can popular culture and vocation ministry work together? You bet! ✚

## Songs and CDs with vocation themes

**Affirmation**, CD by Savage Garden

**All the Way: A decade of Songs, Let's Talk About Love**, CDs by Celine Dion

**Breathe**, CD by Faith Hill

**But Seriously**, CD by Phil Collins

**"Circle of Life,"** song by Elton John on *The Lion King* Soundtrack CD

**"Farthest Shore," "Hold It Up to the Light,"** songs by David Wilcox on *Big Horizon* CD

**"Growth,"** song by India Arie on *Voyage to India* CD

**"Hero,"** song by Mariah Carey

**Human Clay, Weathered**, CDs by Creed

**"I Hope You Dance,"** song by Leanne Womack

**"Pilgrim,"** song by Enya in *A Day Without Rain* CD

**"Something for Everybody,"** song by Baz Luhrmann

**"Superman,"** song by Five for Fighting

**"The Dark Night of the Soul,"** song by Loreenna McKennit on the *Mask and the Mirror* CD

**"The Deer's Cry,"** song by The Pilgrim

**"The River,"** song by Garth Brooks

***Here's a workshop that puts community members into direct contact with Catholic young adults and motivates the community to be involved with vocation ministry.***

## **A workshop to energize the community and form bonds with young adults**

**by Jim Kent, OFM, Conv.**

Through nine years of vocation ministry, animating community members has been a consistent goal and challenge. At times our friars have rallied around the cause of promoting our Franciscan life, and at other times they seem too busy, tired, frustrated or preoccupied to make much effort. One effective tool I've used that has always energized the community in our vocation outreach has been offering a workshop to nourish and inspire members. The most effective of these involves having young people come and share with us friars their experience of faith, the church, and religious. This article spells out one way this was done and, further, how the workshop led our friars to initiate an outreach program to young adults—the cohort from which most of our new members come.

### **Vocation Awareness Workshop**

With my background in sales management and recruiting, I long ago learned the value of seminars and workshops to rally membership around basic needs. This is perhaps even more so with religious who have a common mission yet often work in disparate ministries and locales. While most have a genuine desire to promote vocations, many are not sure how to go about it. They acknowledge that young people today are different from when they entered religious life. Through their life and ministry, they may not have much contact with young people nor young people with them. This particular workshop sought to bring these worlds together. It was titled, "Hope for the Ages, Future *and* Present," and its purpose was for the friars to listen to

young people and see what could be gleaned from their experience and suggestions.

Since our province is scattered throughout the Midwest and Southwest U.S., I hosted the workshop in the region with the largest concentration of friars. All members of the province were invited and encouraged to attend, though I did target certain friars with a greater interest in vocation promotion. These men received phone calls, e-mails and gentle arm-twisting.

I then talked to local youth ministers, pastors and retreat directors and asked them to invite some young men and women (ages 15 to 30-something) to attend the workshop. I wanted our friars to hear from those representing two generational cohorts, often labeled Generation X and the Millennial Generation. These pastoral ministers gave me the name, phone number and email address of those who had accepted the invitation. I then called each young person to explain the event in more detail. First and foremost, I told them the purpose of the workshop was not to "pitch" them about religious life, but for us Franciscans to listen to their experience and see what we could learn. A few days prior to the event I sent emails to the young people (and friars) as a reminder.

For those without the pastoral connections mentioned above, one might contact local campus ministers, high school chaplains, guidance counselors and religion teachers to solicit those initial invitations. Some dioceses also have youth advisory boards, as well as youth and young adult directors who might serve as resources for names.

While assembling the names of both young people and friars, I monitored the lists so that each was about the same size. I did not want either group to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of the other. That balance was important to establish a sense of comfort and

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even intimacy for the planned small group discussions that were at the heart of the workshop. Finally, I contacted a 25-year-old high school teacher to serve as our facilitator for the evening. If the point was to listen to the young church, I wanted a young person to walk us through that process. The night of the workshop, 25 friars gathered with 25 young people for what turned out to be an interesting and enlightening occasion.

### **Vocation Awareness Workshop: “Hope for the Ages, Future *and* Present”**

- 5:15 Evening prayer for the friars.  
5:45 Comments by Vocation Director: purpose of evening, reminder to *listen*.  
6:00 Arrival of young people; snacks and beverages  
6:30 Welcome and simple dinner  
7:00 Purpose: Why are we here? Introduce young adult facilitator  
Break into small groups: four youth/four friars per group. In order to get through the discussion questions in a timely manner, I recommend no more than four youth per group.  
7:10 Prayer  
7:20 Small group introductions and icebreakers.  
7:30 Discussion questions (only young people respond)
- What is your experience of God? (i.e., close/distant; judge/friend, good/bad)
  - What has been your best experience of the church?
  - What has been your most disappointing experience of the church?
  - In what ways has the sexual abuse scandal affected you?
- 7:45 Feedback to large group; facilitator writes responses on newsprint.  
8:00 Stand up break  
8:05 Discussion questions (Only young people respond.)
- What is your experience of sisters, brothers, priests? Give examples.
  - What do you look for in sisters, brothers, priests in terms of witnessing the Gospel and being present to young people?
  - What encourages or inspires young people to consider a vocation to religious life?
  - What discourages it?
  - If you were in our shoes, how would you encourage vocations to religious life?
  - What opportunities, experiences, informa-

tion would you like to see made available?

- 8:25 Feedback to large group. Facilitator writes responses on newsprint. Friars can ask follow-up questions. Final question: What type of follow-up to tonight would our young people suggest?

8:45 Thank yous, prayer.

The following morning we friars met for two hours to process what we heard and felt. We reviewed the newsprint from the previous night and shared what surprised us, what we learned, and any implications for our current ministries. We then brainstormed things we could do both as a province and as individuals in response to what we heard from our guests.

**The workshop’s purpose was for the friars to listen to young people and see what could be gleaned from their experience and suggestions.**

### **Outreach to Young Adults: Francis2**

A few weeks after the brainstorming session, a group of seven interested friars gathered and developed a program to meet some of the needs expressed by the young people. We reviewed the newsprint comments and noted they consistently expressed a longing for the following: spirituality, community, prayer, catechesis, to know more about St. Francis, to learn more about religious life in general and Franciscan life in particular. Knowing the local region has excellent teenage youth ministry, we chose to create something for young adults, especially focusing on the 18-to-25-year-olds. We also recognized the value of developing something that could be offered on a regular basis. We concluded a monthly event would provide the flexibility to those who could not always be present, yet provide the continuity necessary to build upon those needs noted above. Out of this Francis2 was born.

Francis2 meets from 6-8 p.m. the second Sunday of each month. The first 30 minutes we gather in the retreat house chapel for a welcome and prayer. We then

move to a lounge for an In-put-Out Session. This involves a speaker who covers a topic in 20 minutes and who also invites another friar to share a brief personal witness regarding the evening's theme. Those present then gather for 20 minutes of small-group discussion. This is followed by the small groups reporting back to the large group the tenor of their discussion. We also intersperse this time with questions from our Got-To-Know Box. Two questions from the previous month are answered; one question that might require a three-five minute response, and another that might only take 30 seconds. Further Got-To-Know questions are solicited for future gatherings. We end with home-cooked food prepared by the friars. It was felt that such a personal touch better shows the fraternal dimension of our Franciscan life than merely ordering pizza.

While attendance at Francis2 started slowly, it has grown each month. Although we do lots of ads with flyers, e-mails and bulletin announcements, word-of-mouth is the best advertisement. The friars offer Francis2 not as something we "do" for young adults, but as something we share in as well. The 10 friars active in this monthly event take part not only in its preparation and execution, but are also there as participants. While we share our life with them, these young adults have much to teach us as well. In retrospect, I suppose a

few of us friars could have come up with the Francis2 idea without the workshop. It would not, however, have carried the same energy and authenticity. What really animated the friars was the electricity of the workshop. It was such a positive experience for both the young people and friars alike. The young adults

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were genuinely moved that we would want to listen to *them*, and the friars not only learned much from the young adults, but were also greatly affirmed by many of their comments. It was such a success, I'm considering a follow-up workshop titled, "Tell Us More!" +