

# CULTURE AND THE CHURCH

## BOOKS

### Children's book illuminates Catholic faith

BY DAVID A KING, Ph.D.  
Commentary

I got passed over by the Secret Santa this year.

You probably know how this works. Your child is allowed to shop for small gifts at school; it's a chance for the child to learn how to choose and give gifts to others, and while the presents are usually pretty cheap, they often end up being treasured by the parents who receive them. I once gave my father a plaster Georgia Tech Yellow Jacket (he was a Tech fan in a house full of Bulldogs) and it

stayed on his bedroom dresser for 20 years.

But my 6-year-old Secret Santa passed me by.

He was so busy choosing gifts for his mother and little brother (which I had encouraged him to do) that he forgot about Daddy. When he got home from school yesterday afternoon, he carefully put all his wrapped and tagged gifts under the tree. There were presents for Mama—even a ring—and presents for little brother, and, well, nothing for Daddy.

My son sobbed the tears that only a 6-year-old boy can cry,

those great big crocodile tears of an innocent child. He tried to smuggle a comic book for me under the Christmas tree. "It's OK," I said, "really." He tried to give me a cardboard piggy bank. Then he put a cracked wise man from one of our many broken Nativity scenes in the piggy bank. Again I refused the gifts. "It's alright," I explained. "You'll have other chances." But still the tears came, and I was deeply touched to watch my son confront the complicated emotions of shame and sorrow.

My boy didn't realize, of course, that he had actually given me the best gift of all. His sadness in having forgotten my cheap present resulted in a display of love for his father that I don't think I will ever forget. In focusing on the material, he overlooked the more meaningful spiritual gifts of sincerity and love.

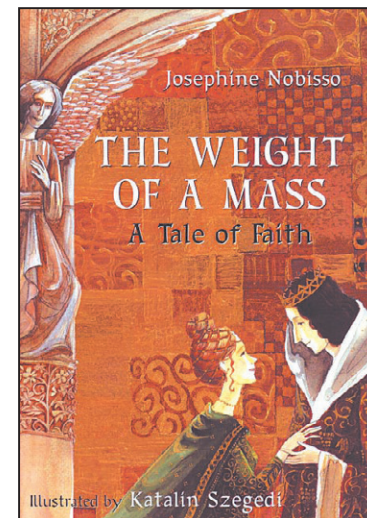
I thought about this important lesson when I read again Josephine Nobisso's marvelous picture book "The Weight of a Mass: A Tale of Faith."

The American picture book is a national cultural treasure, though

I suppose all cultures produce illustrated books for children that become cherished touchstones of youth. In fact, for me one of the greatest joys of parenthood has been introducing, and revisiting, the beloved picture books of my own childhood. Reading Judith Viorst's "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day," or Maurice Sendak's "Where the Wild Things Are," or Ezra Jack Keats' "The Snowy Day" to my own children has allowed me to enter again that marvelous world of childhood imagination where some of the most important lessons we will ever learn are encountered for the first time.

So I've spent a lot of time searching for meaningful Catholic children's books that will teach my boys not only the importance of art and imagination but also the gift of their faith.

There are good books out there; my older son adores, for example, the classic "Picture Book of Saints," published for over 50 years by the Catholic Book Publishing Corporation. In fact, I suspect my son—like generations of



children before him—will forever imagine Heaven as it is depicted on the book's frontispiece.

And there are books that while not explicitly Catholic are so obviously under the influence of Catholic theology and identity that they must be considered classics of religious literature; C. Collodi's big "Pinocchio" of 1925, reprinted in 1969 and 1989 with its iconic illustrations by Attilio Mussino, immediately comes to mind.

But sadly, there are also a slew of books that are didactic, edifying and so overly pious that children are immediately suspicious of them. Children, I have learned, are actually quite wise. They know, as Jesus knew

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“Children, I have learned, are actually quite wise. They know, as Jesus knew of them, that the really important truths are much more compelling when they are expressed in myth and narrative, when they are explained in stories.”

of them, that the really important truths are much more compelling when they are expressed in myth and narrative, when they are explained in stories.

There are exceptions to the heaps of saccharine children’s books of faith, and I should add, these books also provide an antidote to the abundance of secular “Christmas” books that should all be consigned to the ash heaps.

Among these exceptions is Nobisso’s “The Weight of a Mass: A Tale of Faith.” Like all truly great children’s literature, the book engages children even as it also teaches the adult reader.

The story, which Nobisso adapts from a European folk tale, concerns a poor widow who enters a wealthy baker’s shop to beg for a crust of bread. In exchange for the bread, the old woman promises to offer her Mass for the baker. The Mass she is to attend is in fact a wedding Mass of a King and his soon-to-be Queen. The baker is not impressed. In fact, he scoffs at the very idea of Mass, and mocks it as a ritual intended only for the sick and old. The kingdom, as the story explains, “had grown cold and careless in the practice of their faith.”

As the baker’s wealthy customers buy lavish pastries and other expensive goods, the baker cruelly decides to deride the beggar woman publicly. On a slip of paper, he writes the words “One Mass.” He places the paper on one side of a scale. On the other side of the scale, he begins to place bread, cakes, and pastries, but to his astonishment, the scale does not move. In a series of wonderful pages, illustrated by the

award-winning Hungarian artist Katalin Szegeci, the baker rushes around his shop, piling the scale higher and higher. Still, the scale does not move.

The wealthy customers are incredulous. The baker must be a cheat! His scales are off! The baker insists the scales are honest; they’ve just been inspected. Yet when the baker fills the scale with an enormous amount of goods, and places the slip of paper again on the other side, the note actually levitates the opposite scale. As the baker’s son exclaims, “The Mass intention weighs more than these!” “This can’t be,” protests the baker, yet even the royal wedding cake is outweighed by the “One Mass.”

As the cathedral bells began to toll to announce the beginning of the Mass, all the wealthy shoppers who had previously no intention of attending the Mass begin to make their way to the church. Only the widow remains. The baker promises that the old woman will be forever welcome in his shop, “she’ll never go hungry again!” But the widow is content with the small piece of bread she wanted in the first place; it is, after all, all she really needs.

The story is loaded, of course,

with all sorts of connections to Catholic Christianity, particularly the real meaning of the Eucharist. The bread at the baker’s shop, the miracle that occurs on a wedding day, the triumph of simplicity and poverty in the face of the superficial and the rich all correspond to the fundamental lessons of the Gospel and Catholic teaching.

Nobisso even includes a summary of some of the story’s primary Catholic symbols, and the book concludes with an author’s postscript that explains the original fable and some of the miracle’s other consequences (which I’ve not mentioned here, so as not to spoil any surprises). Most impressively, Nobisso concludes her postscript with a quote from the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass—the Eucharistic Celebration—is the priceless source and summit of the Christian life because in it, Christ himself is truly present. In its unfathomably deep richness lies the perfect fulfillment of Jesus’ command to repeat His actions and words until He comes.”

The adult reader will appreciate these explicit reminders. The child who listens to the story and looks at the pictures doesn’t

need them. He or she will know immediately, and intuitively, the truth embedded in the narrative and the art.

So my son, like the baker and his wealthy customers in their jaded kingdom, learned a lesson from the Secret Santa shop. It’s not the material gifts that matter, but the gifts of the spirit that really sustain us. The mystery and the miracle of the Mass are so often overshadowed, not just at Christmas but throughout the year, by things that don’t really mean anything.

Josephine Nobisso’s simple but beautiful book is a wonderful reminder of the gift of the Eucharist, and while it will make a wonderful Christmas present for children and their adult readers, it is a book that merits reading at any time of year when we need to focus on the essence of our life and our faith.

**David A. King, Ph.D.**, is an associate professor of English and film studies at Kennesaw State University and an adjunct faculty member at Spring Hill College, Atlanta. He is also the director of adult education at Holy Spirit Church, Atlanta.

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## Ford's "The Searchers": Connection And Redemption

By DAVID A. KING, Ph.D. Commentary

**R**oger Ebert, who died recently and was perhaps the most important 20th-century apologist for cinema as both popular entertainment and serious art form, said of the relationship between movies and our collective imagination: "We live in a box of space and time. Movies are windows in its walls."

Binx Bolling, in Walker Percy's novel "The Moviegoer," affirms Ebert's statement. As Binx says, "People, ... What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in 'Stagecoach.'"

Both Ebert and Binx are right: one great connection we all share is our sense of collective memory of experiences at the movies. In the dark, we come together as strangers, and when the projector illuminates the screen, we become participants in a ritual charged with the overtones of a religious ceremony. It's no surprise that the great director of widescreen epic films, David Lean, said of going to the cinema that for him it was like entering a cathedral.

In American cinema, only a very few filmmakers have fully understood the power of the motion picture to engage audiences in a world that is paradoxically entirely separate from their own reality, yet mirrors that reality at the same time. Of them, John Ford is perhaps the most remarkable, and his 1956 masterpiece "The Searchers" offers the best introduction to his defining style and compelling themes, many of which are informed by his Catholic imagination.

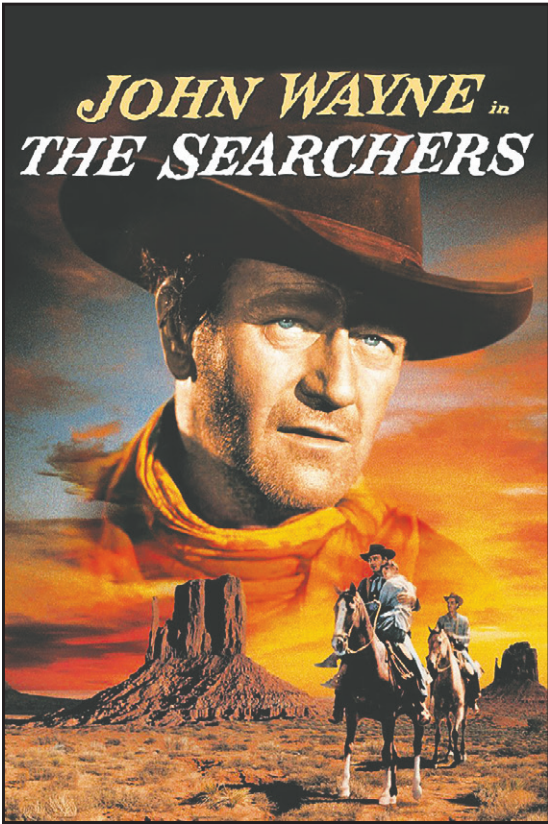
Ford's life and career are both fascinating, for he seemed to live a life as adventurous as that of his characters. Born in 1894 to Irish immigrants in Maine as Sean Aloysius O'Feeny (if one believes Ford's own account of his origins), he came into the movies in the early silent era, shortly after arriving in Hollywood in 1914. He worked on close to a hundred films with some of the greatest pioneers of the early cinema, and made an incredible number of great movies until his death in 1973. Throughout his long career, he won Academy Awards for Best Director four times, Best Picture in 1941 for "How Green Was My Valley," and Best Documentary in 1942 for "The Battle of Midway."

Indeed, Ford was deeply patriotic and committed to the cause of World War II; he was wounded while filming the combat at Midway, and he landed on Omaha Beach during the Normandy Invasion on D-Day. His best known films remain staples of both art-house revivals and television retrospectives and are as relevant to ordinary audiences as they are critics and cinephiles: "Stagecoach," "The Grapes of Wrath," "Young Mr. Lincoln," "The Quiet Man," and—of course—"The Searchers."

"The Searchers" was shot, like so many of Ford's great Westerns, primarily on location in Monument Valley. It stars Ford's greatest collaborator, John Wayne. It is perhaps Ford's greatest visual achievement; shot in a widescreen aspect ratio, it almost has to be seen on a big screen to be fully appreciated. The critic and filmmaker John Milius has said of Ford's work in "The Searchers" that "Ford was having a love affair with the land," and this quality is apparent in almost every shot.

In these characteristics alone, Ford reveals himself as a fundamentally Catholic filmmaker. He relies upon, and trusts in, the iconography associated not only with the Western genre but also the movie star John Wayne. He recognizes humanity's often lonely and isolated existence in the natural world, and yet he insists that the individual is nonetheless part of that natural world. Most importantly, as the film eventually asserts, human beings cannot be alone; as part of nature, and as part of community, they were created to love one another.

The film is based upon a true story of a girl who was kidnapped by Comanche Indians, but Ford shifts the emphasis from the Indians to that of the man who searches for the girl. The film opens as Ethan Edwards, played by John Wayne, returns to his brother's home following the Confederate defeat in the Civil War. Edwards is hardly reconstructed; indeed, he still wears his Confederate uniform. And he's bitter, both about the defeat of the war and the family's acceptance of Martin Pawley, a young man of mixed Indian and white ancestry who insists



The 1956 masterpiece by John Ford sets a man's search for his kidnapped niece against the backdrop of Monument Valley. The film transcends stereotypes associated with the Western genre and endures in the canon of great movies.

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upon calling Ethan "Uncle." Shortly after Ethan's arrival, a Comanche raid upon the homestead results in the violent deaths of Ethan's family. Ethan and Martin, who have been lured away by a Comanche ruse, return home too late. They discover the bodies of the dead, and they learn that the youngest daughter—Debbie—has been taken by the Indians. Ethan vows to search for Debbie; Martin insists upon coming with him. Through the course of their search, Ethan and Martin discover that Debbie has been taken by a Comanche chief named Scar. The quest for vengeance against Scar becomes an obsession for Ethan, a maniacal quest driven more by hatred for the Indian than by love for the missing girl.

Ethan's racist hatred becomes the real emphasis of the film; it's the story that really interests Ford more than a conventional chase film, and certainly more than the familiar aspects of the Western. Like all great Westerns, what the critic Andre Bazin called "the American film par excellence," "The Searchers" transcends the stereotypes associated with the genre to create something ultimately more compelling and universal.

Ford had seen the effects of hatred in World War II. He knew the consequences of unchecked power, as he lived and worked during the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings that placed the film industry at the center of the anti-communist witch hunt. He knew, as a citizen of the United States in the 1950s, the tragedy of racism and the challenges of the civil rights movement. He came to "The Searchers" as one might approach confession; the making of the film became for him like an examination of conscience.

At the same time Ford confronts the issue of racism, he also affirms his great themes of the frontier, the family, and the community. For Ford, like all great Western directors, the allure of the frontier represents the great American myth, a mythology unique to this country, and one particularly appealing to the immigrant. His insistence upon preservation of the family is a motif that runs throughout the film. Most of all, he asserts that we are all part of a singular human community. As a Catholic, Ford intuitively understands the rituals we associate with family and community. The movie includes a number of subplots, all of them fea-

turing social rituals: the sharing of meals, the reading of letters, helping one's neighbors. There is even a wedding, a favorite Ford device.

In "The Searchers," Ford made a film that nearly 60 years later has endured as an essential part of the canon of motion pictures. Decade after decade, it appears on the famous *Sight & Sound* Top Ten poll, and any list of the best Westerns always includes it as one of the greatest Westerns ever made. The movie has all the action one expects from a Western, yet that is not what draws people to it year after year. We watch "The Searchers" on one hand because it is visually stunning; against the backdrop of the buttes and canyons of Monument Valley, we project ourselves into the universe they are meant to represent. We see ourselves as small, perhaps even insignificant. Yet we also see what Ford, as a Catholic, most wants us to see—that we are connected to one another; that we are capable of redemption, even from ignorance and hatred; that each of us has a purpose and a responsibility to the greater good.

In the film it finally becomes clear that what Ethan is really searching for is his soul. At the conclusion of "The Searchers," in one of the most iconic shots in the American cinema, John Wayne stands in a doorway not as soldier, nor stranger, nor even savior. He stands as a seeker. He stands, truly, as a pilgrim.

*David A. King, Ph.D., is an associate professor of English and film studies at Kennesaw State University and an adjunct faculty member at Spring Hill College, Atlanta. He is also the director of adult education at Holy Spirit Church, Atlanta.*

*As the film asserts, human beings cannot be alone; as part of nature, and as part of community, they were created to love one another.*

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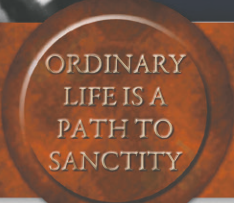
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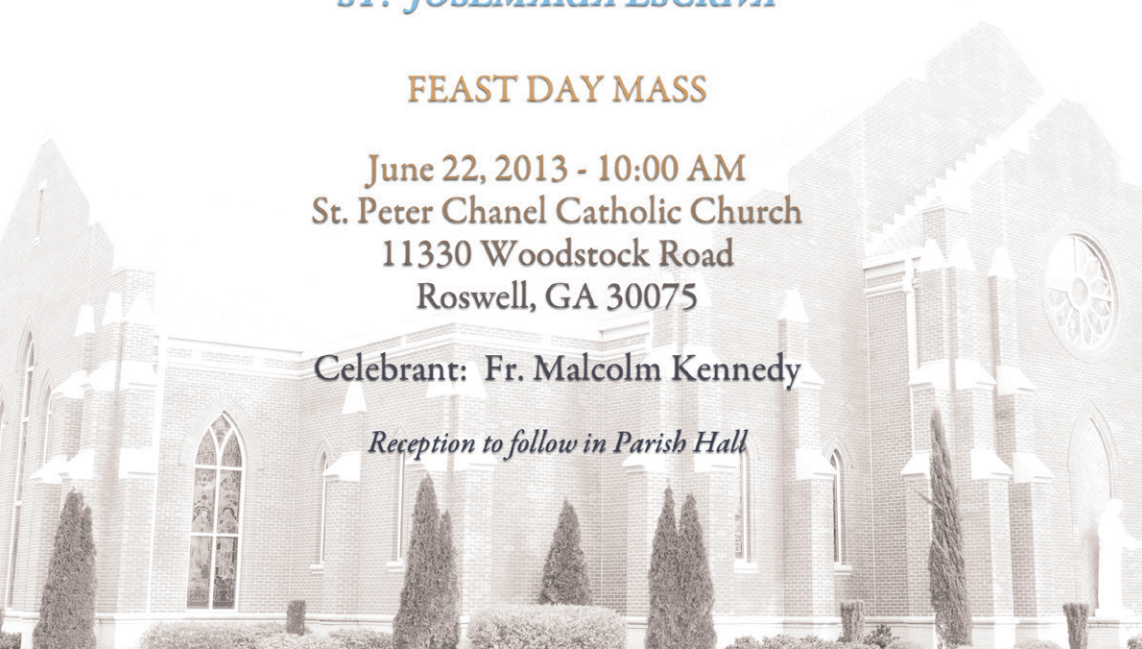
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# CULTURE AND THE CHURCH

## MOVIES

### A view of “The Godfather” trilogy from a Catholic perspective

**“The Godfather” films, while filled with the graphic violence of organized crime, portray the themes and images of the director’s Catholic background**

BY DAVID A KING, Ph.D.  
*Commentary*

In his brilliant book “Art and Scholasticism,” the great Catholic philosopher and theologian Jacques Maritain writes, “By Christian art, I do not mean Church art ... I mean Christian art in the sense of art which bears within it the character of Christianity. ... Everything belongs to it, the sacred as well as the profane. It is at home wherever the ingenuity and the joy of man extend. Symphony or ballet, film or novel, landscape or still-life, puppet-show libretto or opera, it can just as well appear in any of these as in the stained-glass windows and statues of churches.”

In writing my monthly column on great 20th century Catholic art and artists, I often think of Maritain’s words. I thought of them especially last week as I

watched yet again Francis Ford Coppola’s masterful “The Godfather” trilogy.

“The Godfather” is a profoundly Catholic work, and it is without question a wonderful series of films; indeed, the first two movies in the trilogy represent one of the greatest accomplishments in world cinema. Yet many people who see the films for the first time focus solely upon their graphic and operatic depiction of organized crime and violence. Repeated viewings of the films reveal more meaningful insights into the universal human condition and the Holy Spirit that—to use Gerard Manley Hopkins’ word—“broods” over it.

Though Coppola himself has struggled with his Catholicism, his imagination is so steeped in Catholic practice and atmosphere that he can never fully abandon the faith, any more than

#### THE GODFATHER TRILOGY

The multigenerational saga of the rise and fall of the Corleone crime family

**Year:** 1972, 1974, 1990

**Director:** Francis Ford Coppola

**Writers:** Mario Puzo (novel, screenplay) and Francis Ford Coppola (screenplay)

**Stars:** Marlon Brando, Al Pacino and Robert De Niro

Source: IMDb.com

his greatest character Michael Corleone can. Coppola has often said that his favorite word is “hope,” and it is that sense of hope and belief in redemption that best defines “The Godfather” films as Catholic art.

Though the films are full of Catholic themes, including justice and mercy, fate vs. spirituality, the dialectic between family and country and community, the letter and the spirit of the law, and time and timelessness, they are also charged with a deep



Catholic *mise en scene*, or atmosphere. The Church is everywhere in “The Godfather” films: baptisms, funerals, confessions. Catholic iconography is especially prevalent. Images of Jesus, Mary and various saints appear in scene after scene. And, of course, there is sin. Lots of sin. But those who focus only upon the crimes are missing the ideals Coppola insists necessitates the crimes: love and protection of family, belief in idealism for the betterment of the group, and justice. Now the manner in which the Corleone family upholds these values is wrong, but still, their methods

are always informed by hope for the better.

There are three key Catholic moments in the trilogy: the baptism in Part I, Fredo’s murder in Part II, and Michael’s confession in Part III. All three moments are deeply atmospheric and uniquely Catholic; all also raise interesting, even profound, theological questions.

The climax of the first Godfather film occurs at the baptism of Michael’s goddaughter (the baby in the scene is actually Coppola’s own infant daughter, Sofia). This scene is perhaps the most brilliant realization of D.W. Griffith’s parallel action, or crosscutting, narrative technique. Michael has agreed to stand as godfather to his niece; in doing so, he must affirm and renew his own baptism. At the same time, Michael has engineered the elaborate murders of the heads of the five New York mafia families; the killings take place at the same time as the baptism. In essence, Michael is being baptized twice: once as he renews his own baptismal vows, and secondly as he is “baptized” into an almost inescapable union with crime.

Coppola masterfully merges the pre-Vatican II baptism with the preparation for and commitment of the killings. The predominantly Latin rite of baptism provides a voice-over for the scene; the swelling church organ underscores the operatic design of the sequence. The actions of the priest, who administers salt, anoints with chrism oil, and pours water, are matched perfectly to the actions of the gangsters preparing their crimes. Most powerful are the juxtaposition of Michael’s profession of faith and rite of exorcism with the crimes. Michael professes belief in God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Catholic Church while the camera cuts



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to the men Michael commands as they prepare to commit acts completely contrary to the Trinity and the Church. Even more shocking are Michael's replies to the questions "Do you renounce Satan," "And all his works," "And all his pomps." As Michael replies "I do" to each question, the camera cuts to a murder—all of them graphic—then back to Michael's face, an expression of resignation and guilt. Finally the priest asks, "Michael, will you be baptized?" "I will," says Michael, as the camera cuts to final shots of the carnage he has designed. His two-fold baptism is indeed complete.

Michael's full initiation into organized crime reaches its most terrible apex when he orders the murder of his older brother Fredo, who has betrayed the family, and therefore according to the mafia rule of omerta must be killed. Fredo's murder takes place on Lake Tahoe while he fishes with the assassin Al Neri. As a child, Fredo had once gone fishing with his brothers, and he attributes his success on that trip to the fact that he said a Hail Mary before each cast. In the boat with Neri, in a medium long shot, we see Fredo fishing, and hear him say the words of the Hail Mary. At the line, "pray for us sinners," the camera cuts to Michael who is observing the scene from a boathouse. We hear a gunshot, then the camera cuts back to the boat, with only Neri visible under a stark and gloomy sky.

That scene is so memorable that Coppola actually uses it again at the beginning of "The Godfather Part III." Michael is being granted papal honors; he is being conferred into the Order of St. Sebastian. As Michael is honored, he remembers his greatest sin, and Coppola shows it to us in full. The effect is powerful. Decades have passed, yet Michael remains burdened by his sin. He knows, even as he is given a papal blessing, that his life is one of complete hypocrisy and depravity.

This is where Coppola's Catholic concept of hope comes to the fore. Michael has betrayed and blasphemed the Church in a mockery of baptism. He has committed the murder of his own brother. To the world, he

is beyond redemption. But the world is not the Church. In Italy, Michael meets Cardinal Lamberto, a man destined to become the next pope (the implication in the film is that he becomes John Paul I). Lamberto is, in Michael's words, "a true priest."

One afternoon, in a church garden, Michael and Cardinal Lamberto are talking together. The cardinal is explaining to Michael how modern Europe, and by extension Michael himself, have not been penetrated by Christ. While they are talking, Michael is overcome by a fit of hypoglycemia; he requests something sweet, which is given to him. As he regains his strength, Michael explains that these attacks frequently come when he is under stress. The Cardinal understands, and says, "the mind suffers and the body cries out." He then urges Michael to make his confession; he senses, rightly, the burden Michael carries. "It's been 30 years," stammers Michael, "I'd take up too much of your time."

"I always have time to save souls," says the cardinal. Michael replies, "I'm beyond redemption."

Yet he makes his confession. Something about the cardinal compels him to confess. In one of Al Pacino's greatest performances, Michael reveals all. Even the cardinal is shocked as Michael, weeping, confesses "I killed my mother's son. I killed my father's son." Before he grants absolution—a beautiful moment for the Catholic viewer, for even this most terrible sin is forgiven—the cardinal says, "Your life could be redeemed. But I know you do not believe that."

I think Michael does believe it. In spite of all that follows his confession—scandal at the Vatican, multiple murders carried out by his successor, the murder of his own daughter—Michael desperately wants to change. He prays, "I swear on the lives of my children, give me a chance to redeem myself and I will sin no more."

Michael can never fully escape sin or its consequences. As he says, he knows it's not fully possible "in this world" to escape justice. Even the cardinal has told him, "your sins are terrible and it is just that you suffer."

Michael's greatest suffering, his greatest punishment, comes

when he witnesses the brutal death of his daughter. The scene is punctuated by an unforgettable scream, Michael's howl of anguish. It is as though all the sorrow and guilt of the world comes forth from him. And in a sense, they have.

Michael dies old, half-blind and alone. Many see his death as pathetic, but the Catholic viewer, who takes into account the sacramental grace of Michael's

confession and his vow of truly contrite repentance, knows that what Michael has finally found at last is peace.

When asked what he hoped God would say to him if he gets to Heaven, Coppola replied, "Welcome."

Many people would never accept that a man like Michael Corleone could be welcomed in Heaven, but the Catholic, believing in endless hope, knows

otherwise. Because "The Godfather" affirms this hope, the films deserve to be seen again from a Catholic perspective.

**David A. King, Ph.D.**, is an associate professor of English and film studies at Kennesaw State University and an adjunct faculty member at Spring Hill College, Atlanta. He is also the director of adult education at Holy Spirit Church, Atlanta.

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