

CONFESSION IN THE MOVIES: THE TRANSMISSION OF SACRAMENTAL TRADITION THROUGH FILM

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Not unlike confessional role-playing among seminarians or pre-sacramental practice sessions between parents and children, cinematic confession scenes re-present Penance as a traditional performance, making a teachable cultural moment out of a rite which, when performed in solemnity, cannot be observed or examined directly by a third party. For this reason, movies can be a useful tool for introducing Catholic penitential belief and practice to students in the secular higher education classroom, as the author discovered in working with Catholic and non-Catholic students at the University of Toledo. Confession scenes in six films can be related to themes in medieval exempla, church teachings, and folklore related to the Sacrament of Penance.

Directing a motion picture camera upon an enactment of the Sacrament of Penance, in its private confessional form, is a marvelously subversive thing. Generally speaking, confession remains today the only one of the seven Roman Catholic Sacraments whose administration no third party other than God should gaze upon or overhear intentionally. Astonishingly enough, this cinematic act of espionage does not flash and terminate in the form of a photograph, but rather continues, recording itself, finally producing a “confession scene,” which great numbers of Catholics and non-Catholics will watch—once, twice, thousands of times. Not unlike confessional role-playing among seminarians or pre-sacramental practice sessions between parents and children, cinematic confession scenes re-present this traditional performance, making a teachable cultural moment out of a rite which, when performed in solemnity, cannot be observed or examined directly. For this rea-

son, movies are a particularly useful tool for introducing Catholic penitential belief and practice. Such, at least, has been my experience as a folklorist, teaching Religion 3900 (Catholicism in the Movies) as part of the Catholic Thought course offerings at the University of Toledo (UT) in the fall of 1999. Outlined in this article are some of the lessons that several contemporary films' confession scenes helped students to learn about the sacrament as a traditional cultural performance, one whose multimedia representations, as well as its enactments, have changed in many ways over the course of time.

To what length will a priest go to protect the inviolability of the seal of confession? To what length must a priest go? Both questions refer themselves to history and canonical prescription, but they also are good food for the popular imagination in fiction, film, or fantasy. Over three decades before Alfred Hitchcock's better-known *I Confess*, a 1920 film entitled *The Confession*, directed by Bertram Bracken (Connors & Craddock, 1997), portrayed a priest hearing a killer's confession, then finding himself obliged to maintain the seal despite his brother's conviction for the murder. Does this theme sound familiar? It is one of the more common themes in narrative and visual representations of the sacrament, and its roots are medieval rather than modern. *The Confession* was released almost 15 years before the Legion of Decency came into control of the motion picture industry in the United States, with its attendant power to veto, approve, and vilify cinematic representations of moral life in general, and religious life in particular, on the basis of the Lord-Quigley Code. Working from a logic not unlike that informing St. Augustine's description in *Confessions* (Book VI) of the dangerous effects the gladiatorial games had on the soul of his comrade Alypius (whether or not he hid his eyes!), the Code identified a long-standing Catholic belief in the power that public spectacle wields over the disposition of the soul. Cautionary wonder at the awesome transmission range of mass communicative forms like radio, motion pictures, and television was likewise expressed in encyclicals and other documents that emerged before and after the Second Vatican Council. I will turn back to these documents momentarily, after considering a little further the taboo and associated premium placed upon confessional privacy and confidentiality.

The magnitude of the taboo, which is violated only metaphorically by the act of depicting confession on film, is affirmed in the current Code of Canon Law. Canon 983, article 1, states, "The sacramental seal is inviolable. Accordingly, it is absolutely wrong for a confessor in any way to betray the penitent, for any reason whatsoever, whether by word or in any other fashion" (Canon Law Society, 1983, p. 177). On the same page, Canon 983, article 2, adds that, even in the case of the necessity of having an interpreter present between a penitent and a priest, the interpreter is similarly bound, as are all others, "who in any way whatever have come to a knowledge of sins from a confession" (1983, p. 177). A similar value is preserved, as is no surprise to

folklorists, within traditional folklore forms, especially verbal folklore that comments, in its own communicative channels, upon the sacrament. Esteem for the seal is expressed less straightforwardly but just as significantly in jokes, circulated orally for centuries in small group communicative contexts, but today frozen as fixed texts on the Internet or even in the popular medium of the magazine cartoon. The following is a milder paraphrase of a joke which appeared on 8 October, 1999, on the Internet, on an individual's home-page collection of confession jokes (the author shall remain anonymous here). Even in paraphrase, the canonical parallel should be clear. A priest comes out of the confessional for a minute on a Saturday night and notices a little boy sitting close to the side of the box with his ear to it. He grabs him by the ear. "You little devil," he chides him. "Have you been listening to confessions all evening?" "No, Father," the little boy replies. "I've only been here since Mrs. Murphy told you about her trip with the plumber to Niagara Falls."

Since the Vatican II document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of 4 December, 1963, called for the rite of Penance to be revised so that it would "more clearly express the nature and effect of the sacrament" (Flannery, 1975, p. 22), catechetical permission has been granted (within limits) for the sacrament to be celebrated as a public liturgy, with general confession and general absolution; anonymous confessing has been replaced by face-to-face interaction; and confessional boxes and grilles have fallen into less frequent use, disuse, or apparently decorative functions in many parishes. Cartoons from the Catholic magazine *The Critic* during the first decade after Vatican II vented some of the anxieties accompanying so much change. The caption under a cartoon in which a young couple are seen squeezing themselves into the box together and up to the grille, reads: "Bless us, Father, we have sinned...our last confession was" (Murphy, 1974, p. 43). The priest looks alarmed, but looks straight ahead, still shielding his eyes, not turning in their direction. The cartoon seems to ask what the difference is between private confession and general absolution. How can Catholics do both forms at once? If we can't reconcile the justifications for the two forms in the abstract, then what of the practical considerations? Thus, despite the signs of anxiety across several representational registers of Catholic culture, jokes in folk culture, cartoons in popular culture, and articles for the canonically informed, confession scenes in the movies let us look, listen, and watch with impunity. They let us in not only to observe but also to evaluate.

Francesco Casetti's (1998) contemporary semiotic criticism of the way the gaze in movies works reminds us that the choices cinematographers make in directing the camera upon its subject direct, limit, and shape our own evaluative gaze as spectators. However, as folklorists and cultural studies scholars maintain (see for example Peter Narvaez's [1992] extensive comparison of folklore versus cultural studies scholarship, or Narvaez & Laba, 1986), the

consumer of popular and folk cultural forms of artistic expression (e.g., the spectator in the case of the motion picture) is active as well as passive in this consumption. We manage to focus on particular images, movements, and light sources at the movies; we choose to ignore others. We evaluate. With and without reference to an official code or codes, we judge what is before us for its moral, philosophical, aesthetic, and religious value. Catholics of all stripes decide what constitutes a mistake, a lie, or a bias in the representation of their tradition, versus what represents cultural authenticity, fair criticism, honest portrayal, and imaginative improvement.

Some movies may consume us, with questions, emotions, cerebral activity; yet we too consume the movies with our eyes, our ears, our minds, and our hearts. Perhaps movie consumption is not unlike the reception of a sacrament: an intellectually active reception, and a sensitive participation are the ideal. But does a movie about a sacrament capture the *sacramentum tantum* (the sacramental signs alone) or should it capture the *res tantum* (the reality of sacramental grace alone)? Could a movie somehow do both?

French film director Robert Bresson (1977) seems to think so. In his short book, *Notes on Cinematography*, Bresson writes mysteriously, "Religious subjects receive their dignity and their elevation from the images and the sounds. Not (as people believe) the other way about" (p. 48). How does a director capture religious experience on film? Bresson advises directors to be "as ignorant of what you are going to catch as is a fisherman of what is at the end of his fishing rod" (p. 59). Such statements clarify why Bresson, raised Catholic but self-proclaimed a Christian atheist, has long had something of a cult following in contemporary film studies, but they don't offer much in the way of practical advice or explanation. Might a film's sacramental character depend upon the audience, the subject in the camera's view, or some mysterious synthesis of the two? What of Catholic movies that are made, like Bresson's, by a former Catholic, with Catholics, former Catholics, or non-Catholics in mind? I have begun to suggest, by way of introduction, the complexity of the idea of capturing a Catholic Sacrament in the movies, and the particular problem of the representation of such culturally private sacramental moments as those that are part of a confession scene.

CONFESSION IN FOLKLORISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1950), Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess* (1953), Roland Joffe's *The Mission* (1986), Stephen Gyllenhaal's *A Dangerous Woman* (1994), Antonia Bird's *Priest* (1993), and Tim Robbins' *Dead Man Walking* (1995) are films whose confession scenes can teach a great deal about the Catholic confessional tradition. For folklorists, the movies allow for discussion of the age and the meaning of traditional motifs, namely, narrative or performative building blocks, which structure the films'

interpretations of the Sacrament of Penance in its private, confessional form. Motifs' meanings depend in turn upon the context of the text in which they appear, but also upon the contexts informing the movie text as a whole. By "context," a historian might mean the environment of historical development of the Sacrament, according to Scriptural precedents, theology, and recorded customary practices in the western Church, an environment in which the film's images make sense. Folklorists, however, mean "context" in a different sense. We refer frequently to a three-tier model of the context of social communications, in which sacrament, like any other traditional form of artistic expression, is performed, transmitted, and interpreted at one or more of three cultural levels.

In folkloristics, this model is associated with Jan Harold Brunvand, who in his 1994 and earlier editions of *The Study of American Folklore* outlined the way it works. Based on earlier models proposed by folklorists, it helps to explain the transmission of verbal, customary, and material traditions from generation to generation, and from place to place. Brunvand divides cultural communication into three registers or contexts: the folk, the popular (or "normative"), and the elite. By folk, Brunvand, like most folklorists, would mean face-to-face communication, or communication in informal, small-group situations, that is, transmission of tradition by oral means or by imitation (customary example). Communication in this register is direct and immediate, belonging to ordinary folk rather than to experts. Think of all the confession jokes Catholics and others tell and hear, but never write down. By the popular or normative register, Brunvand means communication which spreads farther and wider faster than in the folk context, due to extra help from mass media. Think of television shows watched by millions simultaneously, or even the movie you're waiting to see, sitting in the dark with 150 other people. By elite channels Brunvand means communication in smaller groups than that implied by "mass": those souls more directly engaged in centers of institutional power and privilege, who transmit tradition prescriptively, in writing or via other permanent, but not mass-accessible, artifacts, through formal, official channels. Think of the assertions of canon lawyers, theologians, and other religious scholars, perhaps, and their methods of recording and revising sacramentary, catechism, and canon law.

If we plug a traditional performance like the Sacrament of Penance into Brunvand's model, and then cross its three registers with three more varieties of artistic expression (the verbal, the customary, and the material), we get a folkloristic understanding of the Sacrament of Penance as a historical cultural performance, as follows:

	ELITE	POPULAR	FOLK
MATERIAL CULTURE	Elaborate confessional boxes built into Churches (17th century)	Reconciliation rooms; movable grilles	Face-to-face confession; body language creates privacy in open space (early Middle Ages, 20th century)
VERBAL LORE	Penitentials and canon law	Legends of St. John Nepomucene (encyclopedias, popular vitae, Catholic Saints Online)	Confession stories, e.g., my last confession, my worst confession, false confessions
	Official liturgy and catechism	Confession in novels, film, cartoons	Confession joke cycles
CUSTOMARY LORE	Priest-to-priest confession; nun-to-abbess confession	Lay-to-priest confession	Lay confession

Let's explore just one of the popular dimensions of the Sacrament further, to build a bridge back to traditional movie motifs—namely, the legends of St. John Nepomucene, patron saint of the confessional. Drawing upon popular hagiographical sources one gets the following composite portrait, a mixture of the legendary and the historical. Born in Nepomuk, or Pomuk, Bohemia, between 1340 and 1350, or perhaps even as early as 1330, John Wolflein studied at the University of Prague and became confessor to the Queen of Bavaria, the wife of King Wenceslaus IV, whom one source describes as “a jealous husband who treated his wife outrageously” (Metford, 1983, p. 142). Metford continues:

Although imprisoned, John consistently refused to reveal the innocent queen's confessional secrets to the suspicious monarch. He is therefore represented with his finger to his lips, or with his lips padlocked, and is the patron saint of the confessional. He is also invoked against slander. Outraged by his stubborn silence, the king ordered John to be thrown over a bridge into the Moldau.... As John sank to his death, five stars (his attribute) were seen to rise above the waters. (1983, p. 142)

Alban Butler's (1963) *Lives* affirms that “a tradition, widely credited in Bohemia” attributes the saint's martyrdom to the king's resentments but warns that “on the other hand, no mention of this appears in the contemporary documents or indeed for 40 years after John's violent death” (pp. 332-333), a death which according to Butler consisted of being torched, trussed (tied heels to head), carried through the streets and tossed into the Moldau on

March 20, 1393. Butler also mentions a plaque on the bridge commemorating "seven stars" which hovered above the water at the saint's martyrdom. A *New Catholic Encyclopedia* entry (Szczesniak, 1967) names the queen as Queen Sophie, while other sources call her Joan (the King's first wife).

The whole incident is probably legendary, for it is unthinkable that the Queen's confessor could have been anyone closely connected with the archbishop, who had distinguished himself as a determined opponent of the King ever since they had both assumed office in 1378. (Szczesniak, 1967, p. 1063)

Nevertheless,

in 1729, despite more than three centuries of controversy over the cause and details of his death, Nepomucene was canonized by Pope Benedict XIII. However, in 1961, the Sacred Congregation of Rites suppressed his feast in the calendar of the universal Church. (Szczesniak, 1967, p. 1063)

The Catholic Encyclopedia (Kirsch, 1913) makes it clear that uncertainties about the circumstances and date of the saint's death stemmed from many conflicting reports written decades after the events themselves. However, this source concludes the chronicle with a tantalizing detail: "When in 1719 his grave in the Prague cathedral was opened, his tongue was found to be uncorrupted, though shriveled. His feast is celebrated on the 16th of May" (1913, p. 468).

Although a 1743 painting of St. John Nepomucene by Luccan painter Pompeo Batoni exists in the Vatican (Batoni, 1996), the saint seems to have gone the way of Saints Christopher and Barbara; his image is less often replicated or displayed. However, the theme of suffering to save the sanctity of the seal lives on in the movies. Contemporary patrons of mass media St. Clare of Assisi and the Archangel Gabriel are still on the calendar. In documents like Pius XI's encyclical *Vigilanti Cura* (1936), Pius XII's encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* (1957), and the 1963 conciliar document *Inter Mirifica* (Flannery, 1975), the Vatican expressed its hopes that the awesome power of then-new media forms such as radio, motion pictures, and eventually television to reach hundreds and thousands of people at the same time would be used to spread the Gospel farther and faster. Pius XII declared St. Clare the patroness of television on the basis of a vision she is supposed to have had, in her dying days, of a mass she was too weak to attend. She looked to the wall, the story goes, and the image of the mass appeared there for her to watch without getting out of bed. *Miranda Prorsus* explains its logic in invoking the Archangel Gabriel's protection as well:

The remarkable progress made by modern technology in the fields of motion pictures, radio, and television has given rise to great benefits, and to just as great dangers. For these new means of communication are within the reach of almost everyone, and thus exercise a powerful influence over men's minds. They can enlighten, ennoble, and adorn men's minds, but they can also disfigure them with dark shadows, disgrace them with perversity, and expose them to unrestrained passions...that [the] purpose of Divine Providence might be more surely and efficaciously realized...we constituted "Saint Gabriel, the Archangel who brought the longed-for news of the Redemption to the human race...heavenly patron before God" of those means whereby men are able by means of electricity to transmit words to others who are at a distance...in choosing this heavenly patron it was our intention that all who use these beneficial instruments, by which the inestimable treasures of God may be spread among men like the good seed which bears fruit of truth and goodness, might have their attention focused on the nobility of the work entrusted to them. (Pius XII, 1957, #17, #24)

The 1936 encyclical was slightly less optimistic in its estimation of the evaluative capacities of motion picture spectators themselves:

in conditions of time and place which are as well suited to directing men's enthusiasms towards good as towards evil; such mass enthusiasms as experience tells us may degenerate into something approaching madness. The films are exhibited to spectators who are sitting in darkened theaters, and whose mental faculties and spiritual forces are for the most part dormant. We do not have to go far to find these theaters; they are near our houses, our churches and our schools, so that the influence they exercise and the power they wield over our daily life is very great. (Pius XI, 1936, #22-23)

CONFESSION SCENES: A CONTEMPORARY SAMPLER

With such praise and blame for the cinema in mind, let us turn to several examples from the list of films which students examined in Religion 3900 at the University of Toledo in fall, 1999. I will describe and annotate the motifs in each scene, then synthesize the scenes' collective messages about the Sacrament of Penance. I will conclude with a discussion of the significance of these varying representations of the Sacrament in relation to the sacramental tradition, at all three communicative levels (elite, normative, and folk).

ROBERT BRESSON'S *DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST* (1950)

Robert Bresson's version of Georges Bernanos' novel of the same name contains a confession scene in which the country priest, played by Claude Laydu,

encounters a young girl, Chantal, played by Nicole Ladmiral. Chantal has asked the priest to promise to remove her governess, with whom her father (the Count, a wealthy man) is having an affair. Chantal's mother tolerates the situation in a hardened despair. The Countess no longer cares for life, or for Chantal, since the death of her son. Chantal, for her part, tortures everyone around her, for she knows the game all too well.

In Bresson's version of this scene, Chantal verbally vents her furious hatred of all family members and her self-destructive aspirations upon the parish priest, who directs her toward the confessional. She walks to the box, but will not enter fully into it. In a tense exchange at the threshold of the confessional then—which culminates in a mind-reading—the country priest challenges Chantal to remove a hateful letter from her pocket. Her hardened face slackens briefly in astonishment, before she runs from the church, calling the prescient priest the devil.

Frederic Tubach's 1969 *Index Exemplorum* lists a medieval exemplum relevant to this scene, number 1199, "Confession with Clairvoyant" appearing in Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogue on Miracles*. A more immediate precedent is the life of St. Jean-Baptist-Marie Vianney, the divinely clairvoyant curé d'Ars, patron saint of parish priests (Wolferstan translation, c. 1924, among many others of Alfred Monnin's French vita). Also relevant here are two motifs of folk literature given in Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature* (1966): G303.3.1.8 (Devil in form of a priest) which appears in Italian, Lithuanian, English, and other sources and perhaps G303.3.1.16 (Devil appears as a child) in the Spanish corpus.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S *I CONFESS* (1953)

The confession scene occurs at the beginning of Hitchcock's film. Father Michael Logan (Montgomery Clift) spies the parish caretaker, Otto Keller, going into the church at a late hour. He goes down to investigate and is promptly framed when he hears Keller's confession. Keller has murdered a man who, as it turns out, is simultaneously blackmailing Logan for an alleged past indiscretion; Keller disguised himself in a priest's cassock when he did the deed. Hitchcock teases the viewer by showing Keller's increasingly guilty agitation as he addresses Logan in the church. They move into the confessional box. In the dim light coming through the grille, we can make out Logan's face registering alarm, as he listens in silence. Gathering his composure with an effort only we can see, he tells Keller to go on. Keller's confession then fades out and into his subsequent confession to his wife, Alma, as if to invite a comparison between canonical confession and confession to a layperson.

It is indeed Alma, in the end, who starts events rolling which eventually break the seal. After Logan is nearly convicted for Keller's crime, Alma rush-

es to tell the police. Her husband shoots her and she dies, asking Logan's forgiveness and, ultimately, helping to clear his name. The priest is silent to the end; only a smart Catholic police detective (played by Karl Malden) asks Keller what happened. Keller assumes the priest talked and thus he breaks the seal all by himself. Here we see the basic theme of the legend of St. John Nepomucene revived: martyrdom for the sake of the seal. Alma loses her life and Logan loses his reputation, at least for a time, in the courtroom. A relevant medieval exemplum number is 1203 (Confessor denounces murderer); relevant folk literary motif is Q224 (Punishment for betraying confessional).

ROLAND JOFFE'S *THE MISSION* (1986)

This film's confession scene is a fictive incident in the realistic history of the Jesuit missions to the Guarani Indians of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil, about the year 1750. In a journal Daniel Berrigan (1986) kept while on the set of this film (working as a consultant and extra), he described the confession as the pivotal scene in the film and said he counseled actor Jeremy Irons to fast in preparation for it. Father Gabriel has been called by a Jesuit superior to hear Roderigo Mendoza's confession. Roderigo, a bloodthirsty slavetrader who traps and kills Guarani, has now killed his own brother in a duel over a woman. Roderigo, who is not necessarily in the mood to confess, sits staring, silent, and sullen in his jail cell, until the priest begins to tease him about his despair. Roderigo rises and pins the priest to the wall in a chokehold. Assuring Roderigo that he is indeed laughing at him because all he sees is Roderigo's love for his dead brother, Father Gabriel brings the scene to a close by suggesting Roderigo choose his penance. Roderigo responds by asking Gabriel if he dares to see him fail.

The result is a celebrated penance performance in a scene that follows. Released, Roderigo leads the Jesuit group up rocky cliffs to the Guarani mission. Testing his confessor's physical endurance as well as his own, he drags a net filled with his former weapons and armor onward and upward, nearly losing his life. The Guarani meet him and nearly murder him at the summit. When they spare his life and forgive him, Roderigo weeps profusely and his confessor orders the burden removed from his back.

There are numerous parallels for this sequence in medieval exempla, according to Tubach's (1969) *Index*: numbers 3682 (Penance on all fours), 3691 (Penance to those losing temper), 3692 (Penance too severe) and 3695 (Penance uninterrupted, II). In the latter, a sinner allows himself to be killed by enemies rather than interrupted. In Thompson's *Motif Index* (1966) one also finds the traditional narrative motifs Q520.1 (Murderer does penance) and Q521.2 (Penance: Carrying bag of stones, one for each murder, on the back until it falls off), associated with Italian novelle and Russian tales.

ANTONIA BIRD'S *PRIEST* (1994)

Of several confession scenes in *Priest*, the most dramatic is the following. The protagonist, Father Greg (Linus Roache), a young gay priest, hears a comical series of grade school children's confessions in his first parish assignment. One of the children, however, confesses that her father is sexually abusing her. We watch her confessor struggle naively with what to say and do. He tells her to tell her father that "it's got to stop" and that she has "seen him," as if this should solve the problem. Later, in great frustration, Father Greg turns to his pastor (Tom Wilkinson) for some indirect advice about the ethics of maintaining the seal at such great cost to a penitent's welfare. The pastor advises him to "drop a hint" if this would relieve someone's suffering. He does. He phones in vague tips to school counselors and visits the child's parents. Perhaps as the result of his desperate prayers, or merely by accident, the child's mother finally walks in on the situation and comes to her daughter's aid. Though her mother curses Father Greg for concealing what he knew, the child later returns to church and encounters him in the communion line, in an emotional reunion. As in the Hitchcock film above, a relevant folk literary motif is Q224 (Punishment for betraying confessional) which appears across a variety of Indo-European tale collections, according to Thompson. However, the cost of the seal to the penitent, rather than to the priest, is the focus here.

STEPHEN GYLLENHAAL'S *A DANGEROUS WOMAN* (1993)

A quite unexpected confession scene occurs at the point in this film where a drunken carpenter, Mr. Mackey (Gabriel Byrne), knocks at the door to speak with Martha (Debra Winger), a slightly retarded woman, known for her inability to tell lies. Martha's sister (a resentful caregiver) has hired Mackey to do some house repairs. Mackey is a wild man who has done it all, but he recognizes in Martha someone who is pure, good, and capable of absolving him. He relates to her very clearly as a penitent does to a priest. He demands her assistance on little notice, asks her to hear his confession, tells her where to sit, shows her how to shield her face with her hand, and proceeds to confess, sitting on the floor at her knees. I did not find medieval exempla or traditional motifs in Tubach (1969) or Thompson (1966) that involved confession of sins to a woman. Hence, *A Dangerous Woman* would seem to be taking its viewers into rather new territory.

TIM ROBBINS' *DEAD MAN WALKING* (1995)

Whereas Hitchcock starts his film with a confession, Robbins saves this most powerful scene in *Dead Man Walking* until the end. The film portrays the real-life ministry of Sister Helen Prejean, a Josephite nun from Louisiana. The confession is the moment she has been praying and working toward

throughout the entire movie: the moment at which Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn), a murderer sentenced to death by lethal injection, drops all pretenses and alibis; admits he committed murder; and takes responsibility for it before God. Poncelet, like other characters in the film with the exception of Prejean herself, is a composite character. Upon hearing this long-awaited admission, Prejean (in the film) declares Poncelet a child of God, sings him a comforting hymn, and fights back tears when she hears him say, at last, "Thank you for loving me." In the background, the prison chaplain can be seen, busy mingling with witnesses arriving to see the execution. Although there is precedent for nuns hearing confessions within canon law and in monastic history, I did not find exempla or folk motifs that specified confession to a female in the absence of a priest (or as in this case, in his presence).

CONCLUSIONS

The six example films sketched reflect sacramental and cultural change in this century. The two earlier films (Bresson and Hitchcock) shroud the faces of confessors and penitents literally and metaphorically in shadow, doubt, perversity, and mystery. The exemplary confessor in both films is passive unto death, not unlike St. John Nepomucene, willing to drown in the consequences of maintaining the seal. As in the legend, priestly "stars" hover metaphorically over troubled water. The priests, rather than the penitents, seem to be the stars during and after the sacramental performance. By contrast, the young confessor in *Priest* kicks water in a puddle up against the night sky, walking along downtown, at the height of his frustration. In the later films, *The Mission*, *Priest*, *A Dangerous Woman*, and *Dead Man Walking*, there is more and more light of day shining upon the interactions between confessor and penitent. This marks a return, in some senses, to the older way: as Tentler (1977) informs us in *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*: "Priests were directed to hear confessions [after 1215] in an open or public place in sight of all (presumably in the church)" (pp. 82-83); a box with a partition was not used, he reports, until the second half of the 16th century. The exemplary priests (using the term inclusively, as the movies require us to do) in the later films are not so much martyrs for the seal but active advocates for life; their struggle with the seal and social justice relates to Canon 1388, which states not only that direct violation of the seal results in excommunication, but also that indirect violations will be punished according to the gravity of the offense (Canon Law Society, 1983).

Surprisingly, confessions in films made before Vatican II (*Diary and I Confess*) depend only partly upon the box as backdrop. This independence is not a byproduct of liturgical change, but is, rather, technically and aesthetically motivated. Nonetheless, it would seem to presage the significant move away from the use of the confessional box in subsequent decades. Chantal

refuses to enter the confessional fully, despite urging from the country priest. He stands below her, listening to her sins, in a reversal of the position advocated before the advent of box and partition—the penitent was to kneel or sit below the confessor, as the 15th- to early 16th-century illustrations indicated (Tentler, 1977).

Hitchcock's *I Confess* portrays only the beginning of Keller's confession inside the box; the second half of the confession fades into his repetition of his confession to his wife. This technique recalls the role of the layperson in confessional situations—a question which Peter Lombard (c.1100-c.1164, working before the decree of 1215 made yearly confession to a priest obligatory) considered in Distinction XVII.III.IV of his Sentences, asking, as follows:

But is it of equal value for any one to confess to a companion or to a neighbor, at least when the priest is away? Certainly it can be said on this point that the examination of a priest should be zealously sought, because God has granted to priests the power of binding and loosing.... If however a priest is lacking, confession is to be made to a neighbor or companion. (Rogers, 1917/1976, pp. 184-185)

Like Peter Lombard does in this passage, the films *I Confess*, *A Dangerous Woman*, and *Dead Man Walking* seem to follow St. Augustine's position in *De Vera et Falsa Poenitentia* 10.25, cited in Rogers, 1917/1976, p. 185:

So great is the power of confession that if the priest is away, he should confess to his neighbor...although he confesses to one who has not the power of loosing, he becomes worthy of pardon from his desire for a priest, when he confesses his sin to his companion. For the lepers were cleansed while they were going to show themselves or their faces to the priests, before they reached them. Wherefore it is clear that God looks within at the heart, when anyone is prevented by necessity from reaching the priests.

All six films comment on the roles of women as penitents or as confessors. In *Diary* Chantal is a childish temptress of sorts, echoing the part of the queen who framed John Nepomucene, whether intentionally or inadvertently. Like the murderous caretaker Keller or Father Logan's wistful former girlfriend in *I Confess*, Chantal sets her confessor and helper up for a fall. *The Mission* gives us a quick glimpse of the nun who is Roderigo's caretaker in jail. Unlike Sr. Helen in *Dead Man Walking*, she scurries away when it is time for Father Gabriel's dramatic care and cure of the prisoner's soul to begin. In *Dead Man Walking*, it is a priest (rather than a nun) who can be seen outside Matthew Poncelet's cell, a priest who is otherwise occupied when care of souls is at a premium, leaving Sr. Helen as the one to hear Matthew's last-

minute acceptance of the responsibility for the murder he did commit and to encourage him toward salvation. She shows him the face of love, the face of mercy, the face of Christ—and so the face is female. If Sr. Helen can be considered a kind of monastic superior to Poncelet, within the institutional setting surrounding his cell on death row, perhaps one could compare her on-the-spot confessional authority to that outlined in several articles of Canon 630, which point out that in “monasteries of cloistered nuns, in houses of formation, and in large lay communities, there are to be ordinary confessors...superiors are not to hear the confessions of their subjects unless the members spontaneously request them to do so” (Canon Law Society, 1983, p. 114).

In conclusion, contemporary films which portray the Sacrament of Penance question the active and passive facets of relationships and roles between clergy and laity, men and women. Movies like these ask how penitents, as well as confessors, must consider the values of privacy alongside the dangers of deception. At what point does sacramental confidentiality amount to the unjustifiable protection of criminal perpetrators at the expense of their victims? Is confession going to, or has it already begun to, expand to include women’s and children’s confessions of the sins committed against them, as well as by them? Should private sins be assigned only private penances, as current canon law still recommends, or should the most grievous offenses, even if committed without a witness, be addressed publicly, or perhaps only once in a lifetime, late in life, if not just before death as was the custom in the canonical penance of the fourth to the sixth centuries? Whether we ask them realistically or somewhat rhetorically, these questions continue to engage students in discussions of the Catholic tradition as a living sacramental system.

Old questions about the Sacrament of Penance are easily raised and new answers can be openly suggested when Catholicism is encountered in cinema. However, some aspects of the sacramental performance seem to hang on longer in Catholicism in the movies than they do in real Catholic time. During an in-class role play at UT designed to tease out students’ experiential knowledge of the sacramental performance, I was amused to notice that non-Catholic students attempted to replicate a confessional box and partition for their performance, through creative use of props. Their Catholic counterparts set their confession scenes up face-to-face. I asked the non-Catholic students where they had acquired their ideas for blocking and acting out the scene with box and partition. Their answer: “In the movies.” For some reason, confessions in confessionals seem more common in contemporary film (with some exceptions among the films discussed here) than they are in parish life, where, since liturgical changes instituted after Vatican II, confessors and penitents frequently face each other as in psychotherapy, and confessionals are in some quarters used as storage closets. New rites of general

absolution seem even less likely to catch on at the box office. However, new stars within the sacramental scene—women, children, and lay people—are emerging in the movies, where they have a chance to play with old penitential formulas and alter traditional scripts, perhaps a bit sooner in art than in life.

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