PRAISE FOR *POPCORN WITH THE POPE*

"You know *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Wizard of Oz*, but what's *Nazarín* or *The Burmese Harp*—and why should you care? That's where this accessible, informative book comes in. Going film by film, the authors illuminate why the Vatican Film List remains an important landmark in Catholic engagement with the arts in general and cinema in particular, and how movies of all kinds reveal God speaking through beauty as well as truth and goodness."

—**Deacon Steven D. Greydanus**, creator of DecentFilms.com

"Can feature films be catechetical tools, leading viewers into a deeper appreciation of what's really important in life? *Popcorn with the Pope* suggests that the answer to that question is a resounding yes, and that the path to truth and goodness in twenty-first-century culture often begins with an experience of beauty."

—**George Weigel,** Distinguished Senior Fellow and William E. Simon Chair in Catholic Studies, Ethics and Public Policy Center

"Like the featured meal in *Babette's Feast*, this book is a sumptuous dinner for the mind and heart. Easily accessible to seasoned cinephiles and casual moviegoers alike, it is a fantastic introduction to the Vatican's Film List. Read, reflect, relish, and repeat."

—**Nick Olszyk**, film critic, *Catholic World Report*

"So many movies, so little time! How do we decide what to watch next on Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, or other movie platforms? What should be on our 'must-see' list? *Popcorn with the Pope* tackles the Vatican's list of forty-five recommended titles, showing how each contributes to our understanding of religion, values, and art. All the titles on the Vatican's list date to 1995 or earlier; but movie fans can apply the same principles to find great films from the current era. So start popping the popcorn and grab a seat. The fun's about to start!"

—**Kathy Schiffer**, blogger, *National Catholic Register*

POPCORN WITH THE POPE

A GUIDE TO THE VATICAN FILM LIST

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WORD on FIRE

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Introduction

THE VATICAN FILM LIST

It was not always a good thing to find yourself on a Vatican list.

From the sixteenth century onward, popes have drawn up lists of books deemed heretical or a danger to the conscience, which the faithful were forbidden to read. If a work found its way onto this *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of Prohibited Books), it was because it had been judged harmful to faith or morals.

So when the Index was dissolved in 1966, it was not because the faith had changed, or because the moral law had changed, but because the Church had resolved, largely for evangelistic reasons, to adopt a more hospitable attitude toward the wider culture. Critical evaluation remained essential, of course, and the Church remained committed to promoting a healthy culture in opposition to an insidious one, but the "finger-wagging" approach, typified in the public mind by the Index, was let go. In its place, the decision was made to spread the Good News less through frowning and forbidding and more through encouraging and celebrating, even if this meant interacting with works of culture that only partially overlapped with Christian conviction.

Eventually, this new approach led to the compilation of a list that, far from banning works, positively recommended them. This time the works in question were films, not books, and it was definitely a good thing to be put on *this* index.

This is the list to which *Popcorn with the Pope* serves as a guide.

One hundred years after the Lumière brothers held the first paid public screening of a motion picture in Paris (an occasion that is generally held to mark the birth of film as an art form), the Vatican marked the centenary of cinema by releasing a list of "some important films." In 1995, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications and the Vatican Film Library appointed a commission of a dozen international experts to compile a roll of films deemed notable in various ways and deserving of attention. The result was a list of forty-five titles organized according to three categories: religious values, human and social values, and artistic values. (In this volume, these categories are referred to as Religion, Values, and Art, and the films are ordered alphabetically within each section.)

The list was originally distributed to all the bishops' conferences in the world as part of a larger packet on discernment in film appreciation. It was not intended, as is commonly misreported, as a kind of "best-ever" register or an "Oscars of the Vatican," nor was it meant to provide an exhaustive anthology of approved works. Rather, the aim was to indicate a few examples to help educate the faithful about cinema as a kind of language and as a bearer of messages.

The entries vary widely, ranging from popular, lighthearted favorites such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Fantasia* (1940), and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), to rigorous documentary-like works of Italian neorealism and challenging arthouse features such as *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and *Andrei Rublev* (1966). Some films—*Nosferatu* (1922), *Stagecoach* (1939), and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), for example—appear to have been chosen as milestones in the development of a given style or genre. Others, including *Rome, Open City* (1945) and *Dersu Uzala* (1975), are relatively obscure and will probably only be recognized by cinephiles and scholars.

But a good number of titles on the list are just as enjoyable as they are substantial. In the Religion category, for instance, *A Man for All Seasons* (1966), *The Mission* (1986), and *Babette's Feast* (1987) are at once pleasurable and meaningful. Likewise, under "Values" and "Art," *On the Waterfront* (1954), *The Leopard* (1963), and *Chariots of Fire* (1981) would be great places to start easing into the list, whether out of individual interest or for viewing among family and friends or in film clubs.

The list makes no claims to be universally representative. In fact, the compilers took pains to mention in a short preface that it was based on "the informed personal taste of experts, on opinion polls, and also on plain evidence," adding the important qualification that "not all that deserve mention are included."

It is worth noting, therefore, that the films chosen do reflect the sensibilities of critics of a certain frame of mind, who hail from a specific part of the world and belong to a particular generation. Many of the selections are tragic in tone—a common predilection of intellectuals. Roughly one-in-five was produced in Italy. And about one-in-six comments more or less directly upon the most catastrophic experiences of the twentieth century: the First and Second World Wars.

As a consequence, the pleasure to be had from many of these movies often comes more from reflection afterward than immediately upon first viewing. They are frequently rigorous and challenging, sometimes understated and initially underwhelming, and as a rule ask more from viewers than the average big-budget cineplex blockbuster or new release on Netflix. That said, the phenomenon of streaming means that the films on the list are now available to everyone to watch at any time (many are on YouTube), a level of accessibility that would not have been possible in the days when a large number of titles on the list were confined to arthouse theaters, film festivals, and specialty video stores.

Many of us have been brought up almost exclusively on the cinematic equivalent of junk food, but approaching every movie merely for entertainment is like treating every meal like a ballpark hotdog or every book like an airport paperback. There are, in fact, as many kinds of movies as there are types of books: superhero adventures, romance stories, and murder mysteries, to be sure, but also histories and biographies, philosophical manifestos and spiritual reflections, documentaries and gently fictionalized examinations of pressing world affairs, and so on. The Vatican Film List presents something like an exotic taster menu in the sensibilities, emotions, and beliefs of human beings from other eras and locales: some might be strange and forbidding at first, but after discovering them, sitting with them, and learning what it is they are trying to do, they become increasingly engaging, even compelling.

So, how are we supposed to know what each film is trying to do? Helping with that task is a large part of the purpose of this book. Each chapter builds a ramp for easier access to the rewards of watching a given film, illuminating what is difficult and recontextualizing what is familiar in order to make for a more comprehensible and enjoyable watching experience. Broad and suggestive in approach rather than encyclopedic or scholarly in a specialized way, *Popcorn with the Pope* offers an introductory "first pass" at these films, intended not for experts but for anyone who is interested in delving deeper into a Christian approach to movies. Each chapter offers a theologically informed reading of the film at hand, situating it in its historical context and providing questions for further reflection and discussion. Our hope is that readers will come away better equipped to appreciate the aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual qualities in these films that the Vatican considered important enough to highlight as exemplary works from cinema's first hundred years.

But perhaps it still seems like an odd pairing, the Vatican and the movies? If so, this would be a good place to say something about the "bigger picture" of the Catholic Church's interactions with cinema, and in particular the stances taken by different popes since that first momentous Paris screening in 1895.

Admittedly, the bishops of Rome have enjoyed a rocky, back-and-forth relationship with the cinema. This is perhaps unsurprising given the immense influence for good and ill that the medium has exerted upon the tastes, opinions, and habits of people the world over. Three decades after Pope Leo XIII was filmed offering his blessing into the lens of a movie camera in 1896 (and in so doing becoming the first pontiff to appear on screen), Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical on Christian education, *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929), likened the twentieth-century appetite for cinematic diversions to "the passion for the shows of the circus which possessed even some Christians" in St. Augustine's time (a passion the saint deplored). In a follow-up encyclical specially dedicated to the motion picture, *Vigilanti Cura* (1936), Pius XI lamented the film industry's failure to police its own moral content and commended the now notorious Legion of Decency, which passed judgment on the morality of films in the United States for almost fifty years.

By the 1950s and 1960s, however, the Church's official engagement with film grew into something more complex (and arguably more important) than simply playing the part of moral referee. In a 1955 apostolic exhortation to representatives of the cinema industry and press in Italy, Pope Pius XII laid out principles for "an ideal film," which should first of all always contain "respect for man" and aim for a "loving understanding" in depicting man's condition. He also noted the longing for relief within people's souls and described film as uniquely suited to be a "respite from the pressure of real

existence." Accordingly, the filmmaker, like the preacher, has a duty to offer spiritual sustenance—to point beyond this world without totally ignoring its harsh reality. The pope concluded by describing the "lofty and positive mission" of everyone who stands behind the camera: to shun easy material that appeals to base desires and "to rise to worthy ideals."

In his encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* (1957), Pius XII returned to the question of moral responsibility, focusing this time not only on filmmakers but on critics. He wrote:

> Catholic film critics can have much influence; they ought to set the moral issue of the plots in its proper light, defending those judgments which will act as a safeguard against falling into so-called "relative morality," or the overthrow of that right order in which the lesser issues yield place to the more important. . . . Quite wrong, therefore, is the action of writers in daily papers and in reviews, claiming to be Catholic, if, when dealing with shows of this kind, they do not instruct their readers concerning the moral position to be adopted.

An example of how tricky this critical evaluation can be is seen in the reception of Federico Fellini's 1963 film *8½.* One of the most famous films about filmmaking, it contains within itself the very debate about the moral and spiritual significance of cinema that Pius XI and Pius XII were wrestling with. It may not be surprising, therefore, that officials in the Church both hated and loved *8½*. More remarkable, though, is how they *first* hated it, and *then* loved it.

The Legion of Decency originally gave *8½* a C rating (condemned) and put it on the list that eventually added up to 148 films deemed unacceptable viewing for Catholics. (The condemned list, which ran from 1933 to 1980, is a hodgepodge of mediocrity, debauchery, and brilliance, ranging from gritty

gangster films to two Alfred Hitchcock movies, *Psycho* and *Torn Curtain*. Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns are on there, along with supernatural films like *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby*. There are also a few complete headscratchers, including the Christmas movie *Miracle on 34th Street*.) But the extraordinary thing about *8½* is that it was the one and only film on the Legion of Decency's list that would later appear on that other list—we might even say, the opposite list—which is the subject of this book.

The 1995 Vatican Film List includes *8½* under the heading "Art" rather than "Values" or "Religion," and in some ways it is readily apparent why. The film is not obscene, but it is erotic. It does not denigrate humanity or depict people unlovingly *per se*, but everyone in the picture is lost and broken. On the surface, Fellini did not follow Pius XII's advice about making an ideal film, and it was low-hanging fruit for the Legion of Decency. Yet at the same time, it is visually stunning, provokes deep contemplation about the nature of art and human existence, and contains embedded within virtually every frame the message that divine power still creates new things through broken creatures. As with Michelangelo and Mozart—imperfect men who were able to generate glimmers of perfection—so with Guido Anselmi, the fictional director in *8½*, and with Fellini himself.

The inclusion of *8½* on the Vatican Film List—as well as other titles containing potentially subversive elements—says a lot about the sophistication of the sensibility underlying its selection. Neither doctrinaire nor moralistic, this choice of films implicitly recognizes that works of art can be appreciated from various angles, and that beauty, goodness, and truth can be found among people living outside the boundaries of visible unity with the Church.

We might even identify the Vatican Film List as the opening of the gates to the kind of cultural evangelization that

Bishop Robert Barron and the Word on Fire movement carries forward today: a friendly, inquisitive, optimistic engagement with the wider culture that seeks not merely to instruct and correct but to "consolidate, complete, and raise up the truth and the goodness that God has distributed among men and nations . . . for the glory of God, the confusion of the demon, and the happiness of man."

The Vatican List was issued during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, and four years later the poet and former theater actor released his landmark "Letter to Artists." The document does not mention cinema by name, but its general encouragement of art of all kinds might remind us of the powerful role film can play in the New Evangelization. Preoccupied less by decency and ideals than by a desire to engage and employ whatever cultural tools are available to help spread the Gospel, the Polish pope emphasizes the Church's long history as an active participant in culture. Such participation includes the biblical writings of St. Paul and St. John and the theology of St. Justin Martyr and St. Cyril of Alexandria, all of which expound eternal truth in the light of pre-Christian poetry and philosophy. It includes the medieval monks who preserved the myths of pagan peoples and the early modern Jesuit missionaries who couched the Gospel in the cultural trappings of Asia. More recently, it includes the Second Vatican Council's endorsement of a more constructive, bridge-building approach to non-Catholic traditions and cultures in order to bring the light of the Gospel to all parts of the world. In short, receiving, reflecting upon, and, where need be, reinterpreting the most beautiful products of the human imagination has long been central to the mission of Christianity.

Art needs the Church, John Paul II stresses in "Letter to Artists," but the Church also needs art. Far from being opposed to each other, the two enjoy "a relationship offered in

friendship, openness, and dialogue." But how do we go about this relationship? How do we approach works of culture like the films on this list in an open, generous way, while also heeding St. Paul's exhortation, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rom. 12:2)?

One answer to this question is to take an interest in these films as studies of humanity—of those creatures whom God made and loves, indeed, loves so profoundly that he *became* human himself. However odd or unfamiliar the works of art may be—and the human lives and circumstances they represent—an honest engagement with them will grant insights into the questions and convictions that occupy the minds and hearts of our neighbors, friends, and family members.

Another answer is to engage with these films as exercises in compassion, as opportunities to expand our perspectives and stretch our sympathies in a way that prepares the natural soil of our affections for supernatural charity. With the changeless doctrines of the faith as a bedrock, we can enjoy the freedom and confidence to "go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries," as Pope Francis encourages us, sharing (and discovering as we go) the light of life even amidst "the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all forms of misery."

In addition to informing our minds and enlarging our hearts, there is a third reason to immerse ourselves in films like those on the Vatican List. Simply knowing about these works of culture can generate opportunities for conversation and offer points of contact and caches of shared experience that are the immemorial grounds of friendship. Of course, watching movies together with other people is also a great way to strengthen social bonds and build community.

Finally, the exercise of imagination that is required in order to enter into a fictional world, a "subcreation" as Tolkien called it, is itself a profoundly human activity and one that has an analogue in the realm of religious commitment. Willingly to "suspend disbelief"—in Coleridge's words—and freely accept the paradigm of the story being presented on screen requires a viewer to step back from his own ego and entertain another perspective. It is a kind of surrender or abdication, even a conversion—at least for the duration of the movie—to a different perspective upon reality. As John Paul II put it, "Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience."

As seen in this short survey of the Church's engagement with cinema, we have come a long way from approaching films from the vantage point of either naïve approval or blanket condemnation. Rather, as John Paul II encourages us all, the Christian filmgoer today is called "to follow the path of the fruitful dialogue between the Church and artists which has gone on unbroken through two thousand years of history, and which still, at the threshold of the Third Millennium, offers rich promise for the future." It is our hope that *Popcorn with the Pope* will aid you in this dialogue.

Note: To indicate who has written what, we append our initials at the foot of each piece: DPB (David Paul Baird), AP (Andrew Petiprin), MW (Michael Ward).

PART I

Religion

Andrei Rublev

1966

A series of entrancing, loosely related vignettes inspired by the life and times of the late medieval painter of icons.

A masterpiece of spiritual filmmaking that has been described as the *War and Peace* of Russian cinema and the best art house film of all time, *Andrei Rublev* offers an impressionistic reflection upon art, morality, and faith in the context of Russia's historically Orthodox Christian past. Divided into several poetically arranged episodes, the narrative follows the historical (albeit artistically reimagined) figure of Rublev as he moves across a medieval landscape peopled by fellow monks, feudal patrons, Tartar invaders, profligate pagans, and holy fools. Across this extended, meditative film,

he walks, he ponders, he talks to a few people, and then the film ends with a visual survey of some of his most celebrated works of art. This might not sound like much of a story, and in a certain sense it isn't: the character of Rublev, who ties the project together, does not even appear in every vignette. It is nonetheless a powerfully suggestive piece of filmmaking.

It is so powerful, in fact, that it was initially banned from cinemas. As the state-sponsored production of an officially atheistic regime, *Andrei Rublev* immediately came under fire by Soviet-era Goskino censors and was proscribed after only one screening. What explains such an explosive reaction to a movie that some viewers today will likely regard as a slow-moving, relatively uneventful art piece?

The answer almost certainly has to do with the film's perceived political implications, and some of its elements do, indeed, lend themselves to such interpretation. There is a prince, for instance, who, in a fit of petty jealousy, gouges out the eyes of a group of artisans to prevent them from creating something more beautiful for their next patron. If understood as a symbol of short-sighted and worldly governing authorities in general, this could be understood as offering a comment on contemporary times. A leader of the East German Communist Party apparently understood the film along these lines, asking how a picture could be made that showed the Russian people living under such abuse and neglect. It is an ironic comment, of course, given the film's fifteenth-century (rather than twentieth-century) setting, but such extrapolation from past to present is not as far-fetched as it might seem. The film's director, Andrei Tarkovsky, spoke

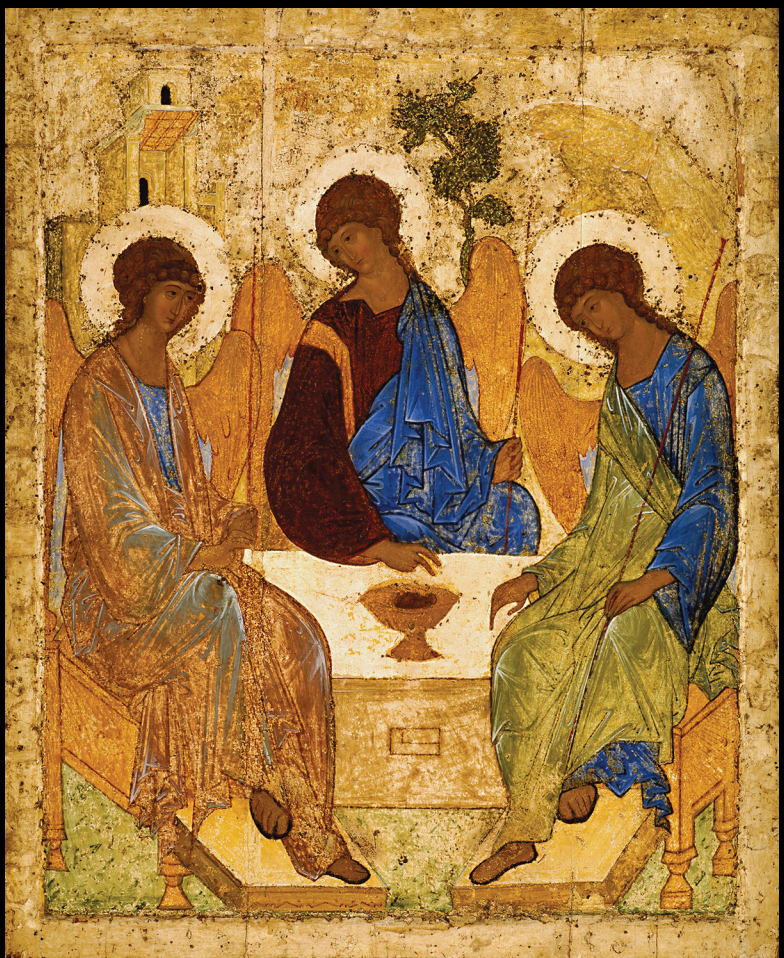
> Paint, paint, paint! . . .
> It is an awful sin to deny the divine spark.
> —KIRILL

> But haven't we the same faith, the same land, the same blood?
>
> —ANDREI RUBLEV

openly about using the film's historical material as an excuse to express his own ideas and address the issues of his age, and some of its first viewers seem to have taken this as the artistic equivalent of political dissidents demonstrating in Red Square.

The real political heft of *Andrei Rublev*, though, is probably more oblique than such reactions suggest. According to intimates of Tarkovsky, the film is not fundamentally an expression of the director's political opinions (apparently, he held almost none) but his lifelong search after a true spirituality—and it was this that, in a deep way, put the director at odds with the authorities and the established materialistic ideology of the Soviet regime. Speaking about his aim in *Andrei Rublev*, Tarkovsky describes wishing to trace how the artist overcame the moral (rather than political) difficulties of his epoch. He describes Rublev's art as striving to express a "noble peace, eternity, and harmony of the soul . . . [that] made it possible for him to create masterpieces, which will always remain relevant . . . [even] at a time when the life of the people was hopeless, when they were oppressed

As late as the Second World War, many of Rublev's icons were kept locked away in the Soviet Union, inaccessible to the public, but in Tarkovsky's day they enjoyed a revival of civic interest. In 1960, a museum was opened in Moscow to celebrate the 600th anniversary of Rublev's birth, promoting him as the Russian Leonardo da Vinci.



by a foreign yoke, by injustice, poverty." Such comments apply just as readily to Tarkovsky's own work, and it is very likely this aesthetic sensibility that tripped the censors' alarm. *Andrei Rublev* is not a direct, thinly veiled critique of contemporaneous politics but a more profound, indirect, yet perhaps ultimately more powerful commentary on real beauty, which, as the radiance of goodness and truth, censures wrongdoing and falsehood wherever found.

Actor Anatoly Solonitsyn's leading role in *Andrei Rublev* was his first appearance in a feature film. He went on to play major parts in each of Tarkovsky's subsequent movies. He was also intended for the lead roles in *Nostalgia* (1983) and *The Sacrifice* (1986) but died of cancer in 1982 at age forty-seven.

The film's opening spectacle of a primitive hot air balloon ride *could* be understood merely as setting the tone for an imaginative foray into times past, but given Tarkovsky's metaphysical sensibility, it more plausibly suggests a launch away from strictly earthbound concerns. Such a heavenward trajectory continues across the trials of the artist-monk, then reaches a climax in a final extended meditation upon several of Rublev's actual icons, in particular his most famous, a depiction of the Trinity modeled after the Old Testament story of the three supernatural visitors to Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 18). This survey finishes, penultimately, with an icon of Jesus Christ, and then cuts, ultimately and surprisingly, to photographic footage of horses standing in the rain.

This might seem like an odd, discontinuous ending, but it takes on a rich significance when considered in a wider cultural context. Whereas most of the religious art in the Latin West since the Renaissance has been secular in character, for Orthodox Christians, icons remain sacred; that is,

> You live in fear because you know no love
> but bestial love. Carnality without soul.
> But love should be brotherly.
> —ANDREI RUBLEV

they are regarded as visual analogues to Sacred Scripture. Unlike profane images designed merely to communicate at the level of information, the icon in this tradition prompts the weightier kind of consideration appropriate to divine revelation, which invites viewers to discern traces of transcendence in and beyond physical matter. Accordingly, while this kind of art can be appreciated from a nonreligious point of view, icons are "written" (not painted) with the intention of inviting viewers into an experience of adoration. This is worship not of the image in itself, but, in accordance with the distinction set out by the Second Council of Nicaea, worship that passes from the image to its prototype—namely, the Divine persons.

By following up the iconic meditation upon the Trinity with photographic footage of four horses—animals that play an important symbolic role in the film and are arranged here in a suggestive cluster of three and one—*Andrei Rublev* seems to conclude by asking whether such a naturalistic image, too, might be regarded iconologically. Does only sacred art facilitate this kind of contemplation of the Creator? Or might the creatures before our eyes also be perceived like icons, radiating timeless beauty in and through the stuff of earth?

If *Andrei Rublev* concludes by quietly encouraging such a world-transfiguring shift in perspective, the same kind of gaze can be directed retroactively to the other images in the film. Like Rublev's iconic image of the Trinity, which adheres to the ancient custom of only depicting God the Father indirectly, so too this film's images of a man on the road to holiness

might be transformed into moving-picture-meditations upon eternity in time. Viewed in this light, Andrei Rublev himself becomes the fitting subject of spiritual meditation, a sanctified life that after much strain and trial has become luminous of the divine.

A striking echo of this perspective can be discerned in the film's next-to-last sequence, which centers upon the casting of a monumental church bell. In this vignette, the stupendous physical exertions of a teenage bellmaker—digging the hole for a massive cast, erecting the primitive furnaces, smelting the enormous bell itself—become outward, concrete reflections of the spiritual tumult Rublev undergoes on the way to creating his own masterwork. They also represent the transformation of the artist himself. "In the beginning, Rublev's belief was purely intellectual. It was the ideal he had been taught in the monastery," Tarkovsky reflects. But "towards the end he believed more in the ideals of love and the brotherhood of men, only because he had been able to suffer for this ideal alongside his people. And from that moment on, which is the end of our film, this ideal becomes unshakeable for him. Nothing can tear him away from it."

An iconological reading of *Andrei Rublev* adds a deeper layer of meaning to its slow, sometimes almost plodding pace. Even though the "long take" was part of the general language of cinema at the time, in this film, the style takes on a profound resonance with the still, patient, focused gaze encountered in and encouraged by icons.

In *Andrei Rublev*, the artist who faithfully perfects his art—whether bellmaker, iconmaker, or, metacritically, filmmaker—becomes in the process a more perfect work of art himself, laboring and suffering to fashion ever more luminous images of the Artist

beyond all artists, here in the midst of his most glorious work, creation.

From a holy human life to icons and horses standing in the rain, can we discover hints of divinity in the world around us? Is God's splendor still detectable amidst our squalor and our repeated, at times programmatic, efforts to suppress and obscure it? These are some of the questions raised, quietly yet forcefully, by this film, which, as slowly as a river, carves grandeur out of the wasteland of an allegedly materialistic universe.

In an appendix to *War and Peace*, Tolstoy remarks how the sprawling shape of his novel comes directly from the decision to subordinate artistic form to the vision the book exists to communicate. Likewise, in *Andrei Rublev*, narrative becomes servant to a more urgent purpose, offering to audiences a cinematic pedagogy in a sanctified way of seeing. Such a marriage of form and function—an iconic depiction of a maker of icons—makes *Andrei Rublev* not only one of Russia's great spiritual films but, indeed, one of humanity's great works of art.

DPB

(Content advisory: contains some nudity and violence)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Is there a work of sacred art that has provided you with a special insight into eternal things? Or has something else beautiful done so?
- Have you ever encountered a beauty that challenged your view of the world or called you to become a better human being? If so, how have you responded?
- "It is an awful sin to deny the divine spark." What special ability or desire have you been given? How have you cultivated it?

Babette's Feast

1987

In nineteenth-century Denmark, two elderly sisters welcome into their strict religious sect a refugee Parisian widow, who thanks them with a display of amazing culinary artistry.

Of all the movies discussed in *Popcorn with the Pope*, it is *Babette's Feast* that one could most easily imagine watching while eating popcorn with the pope. Pope Francis has named it his favorite film and even referred to it in his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), making *Babette's Feast* probably the only film ever to be mentioned in a magisterial document.

The Supreme Pontiff is not the only religious leader who admires this movie. Rowan Williams, who as the 104th

> Through all the world there goes one long cry from the heart of the artist: give me leave to do my utmost.
> —BABETTE, QUOTING ACHILLE PAPIN

Archbishop of Canterbury was for a decade the foremost cleric in the Anglican Communion, has also cited it as his favorite film. What is it about this small-scale Danish drama, in which little appears to happen beyond the preparation and eating of a meal, that makes it so appealing to senior ecclesiastical figures?

A superficial answer to that question might be that it is simply a reimagining of the Eucharist. Just as Jesus gives himself under the appearances of bread and wine to his twelve disciples, so Babette lavishes everything she has, all her money and skill, on a dozen dinner guests. Just as the Eucharist is a communion that brings life and peace to those who partake, so Babette's meal inspires her neighbors to forgive one another and revivify their community. And just as the priest at Mass confects the sacrament while dressed in special robes, so Babette acts as a kind of celebrant, wearing a pectoral cross and a white band around her neck that resembles a clerical collar.

The first Danish movie to win the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, *Babette's Feast* is based on a 1958 short story by Karen Blixen who wrote under the name Isak Dinesen and is probably best known for her memoir *Out of Africa*, which was made into a film with Robert Redford and Meryl Streep.

We might be tempted to press the Eucharistic imagery further. In Catholic theology, the Body of the Lord Jesus fulfills what had been prefigured by the manna given to the people

> Babette can cook.
> —ACHILLE PAPIN

of Israel after the quails visited their camp (Exod. 16:13–15), while in the movie, Babette's specialty dish is "Cailles en Sarcophage," quails entombed in pastry. The very word sarcophage (literally, "flesh-eater") brings to mind Christ's statement "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life" (John 6:54).

While there may be some intellectual satisfaction to be derived from drawing these Eucharistic parallels, they only take one so far, for *Babette's Feast* is much more than an allegory; and, in any case, such an approach ignores almost the entire first half of the story, where we are introduced to the main characters and their setting. It is in this larger context that the feast acquires its real significance.

The protagonists are two sisters, Martine and Filippa, so named by their father, a Protestant pastor, after the sixteenth-century Reformers Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, whose piety he holds in high esteem. This pastor is a "good man" who has founded a Puritan assembly in a coastal hamlet, and his daughters dutifully tread the austere path he has laid down for them. They, like him, are full of good works. They spend much of their time and almost all their little money taking food to the poor and tending the sick.

The sisters had been great beauties in their day, and each had had a suitor. Martine was wooed by a young officer, the dissolute, debt-ridden Lorens Löwenhielm. Sent by his military superiors to rehabilitate himself for three months in Jutland with his aunt (a faithful member of the pastor's flock), Löwenhielm encounters Martine and is spellbound by her loveliness. He has a vision of a future life lived alongside

this gentle angel, but the pastor is opposed to any such notion, and Löwenhielm regretfully rejoins the army. He marries a lady-in-waiting to the queen and proceeds to climb the ranks.

Filippa's youthful suitor was a genial opera singer, Achille Papin, who came from Paris to perform in Stockholm and then sought solitude in Jutland to restore his energies. He hears Filippa singing like an angel in church and imagines packed concert houses applauding her as a diva. He provides music lessons in the hope of wooing her but stands no chance of gaining the permission of Filippa's father, who views earthly love as an illusion. The fact that Papin is a papist only makes it worse, and he returns home, disconsolate.

Nevertheless, Papin does not forget the peaceful refuge in Denmark. Thirty-five years later, with civil strife raging in Paris, he directs to the sisters' household a poor woman who has lost her family during the unrest and dares not stay in France. Babette Hersant was once a famous chef at the Café Anglais, but all that Papin tells the sisters—in the greatest understatement ever—is "Babette can cook." They take her in and give her a home, and she learns how to prepare their meager, unappetizing meals. Fourteen years pass.

The pastor is now long dead, and his disciples are becoming testy and querulous. Martine and Filippa are grieved by the quarrels but hope to restore unity by celebrating the centenary of their father's birth. A modest supper and a cup of coffee will suffice to mark the occasion.

Orson Welles, who made *Citizen Kane*, named Blixen his favorite contemporary writer and attempted to adapt several of her stories for the big screen.

At this point, Babette receives astonishing news from Paris: she has won the French lottery and is suddenly fantastically rich. The sisters congratulate her on her ten thousand

francs and resign themselves to her impending departure: "The Lord gave," says Martine, referencing Job 1:21—"and the Lord took away" adds Filippa. Babette, however, volunteers to prepare for the anniversary celebration "a true French meal," and they accept her offer, little imagining what she has in mind.

Birgitte Federspiel, who plays the part of the older Martine, appears in another title on the Vatican Film List, *Ordet*.

When they see how extravagant the meal will be—with turtle soup, caviar, and, worst of all, wine—they fear for their souls. It would ruin their late father's name if they indulged their bodily appetites. On the other hand, it would offend their housekeeper if they declined to partake. The safest option, they conclude, will be to eat in silence and "just as if we never had a sense of taste."

But they have not reckoned with Babette's artistry, nor with the insights of Lorens Löwenhielm, who is back visiting his aged aunt and is a last-minute addition to the guest list. As a man of means who has in the past enjoyed many a fine meal at the Café Anglais, he alone recognizes the superb quality of the banquet spread before them.

In another great drama set in Denmark, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare coins the phrase "caviar to the general," meaning a fine thing unappreciated by the masses. Babette's haute cuisine proves to be a superlative example of this—but it is also "caviar to the General," for Löwenhielm has attained that military rank. (Did this pun generate the whole story, one wonders?) Gradually, the General opens the eyes of his fellow diners to the fact that they are consuming food and wine that is almost impossibly wonderful. Led by his enraptured example, they learn to savor, relish, and relax. They taste and see that the feast is good.

> Righteousness and truth have had a lover.
> —GENERAL LÖWENHIELM

In terms of the film's Eucharistic parallels, the General's role at this point provides an interesting contrast with, rather than similarity to, the Last Supper. Löwenhielm is the odd one out, a Judas figure, but Judas in reverse, a positive version of Judas, the one diner among the twelve not betraying his God-given senses.

This is not to suggest that the other eleven diners are reprobates—and indeed, it is precisely in its handling of this question that the deep gentleness of the story comes to the fore. Martine and Filippa are genuinely good people, and so are the others at table. They are God-fearing, law-abiding, humble folk, trying to follow the light that has been granted to them. Admittedly, that light is somewhat dim, a point reflected in the muted color scheme, the Vilhelm Hammershøi palette, which pervades the film's cinematography. These simple Christians know too little about the value of their God-given senses. It takes them long to learn that wine gladdens the heart (Ps. 104:15). But their limitations are depicted with quiet humor, not savage satire.

The relatively unlimited world inhabited by Löwenhielm and Papin also receives a critique. Each of these outsiders perceives the vanity of the life he has chosen and longs for the purity of heart exhibited by the golden-haired sisters. Papin, in particular, who is preoccupied with thoughts of the grave, tells Filippa (in a letter) that by renouncing worldly ambition she has chosen the better path, and that after death she will become the great artist God intended her to be, and will enchant the angels in heaven with her singing.

Babette, however, has a different view about the timeline for artistic fulfillment. She will not deny her senses or

postpone her hopes: she trusts the goodness of creation, takes joy in the here and now, and transforms a mere meal into a kind of love affair. In one glorious action, she supplies both the physical and spiritual needs of those she serves, giving of her all, as in the story of the widow's mite (Mark 12:41–44).

Löwenhielm's verdict on the feast is simple: "Righteousness and truth have had a lover." He understands what has happened as an act of worship: the chef has humbly reached up toward the transcendent, forging a link between God and man. Replete with Babette's exquisite fare, the diners leave the house, hold hands, and dance around the well in the middle of the hamlet under the night sky as the stars rotate in their courses above. The circle, perfection's symbol, has become visible on earth as it is in heaven.

In the final exchange, Babette tells the sisters that the "one long cry from the heart" of every artist throughout the world is "Give me the chance to do my very best." Filippa responds through tears (echoing Papin's words), "In paradise you will be the truly great artist God meant you to be. How you will delight all the angels!" But Babette is wiser: she knows she needn't wait till then. She has already delighted the angels, both the myriads in heaven and the two angelic sisters she has come to know on earth. And of her lottery jackpot there is not one single franc left over.

MW

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The film shows that eating together can have a healing effect in human relationships. How realistic is this? If so, why?
- Babette treats her feast as an act both of love and of artistry. How often, if ever, have you taken a similar view of the meals you make?
- What are the chief similarities and dissimilarities between the feast portrayed in the film and the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples?

Ben-Hur

1959

An epic adaptation of Lew Wallace's historical novel, set during the time of Christ, in which Prince Judah Ben-Hur is betrayed by a Roman friend and enslaved, then finds freedom and returns seeking revenge.

Ben-Hur was a massive gamble—and a rip-roaring success. It was a gamble because it was the most expensive movie ever made up to that point, costing over $15 million. It was a success because it won an unprecedented number of Academy Awards and became the second highest grossing movie to date after *Gone with the Wind*. It would also go on to be the only Hollywood movie included in the "Religion" category of the

Vatican Film List; its religious power, or possible lack thereof, is a question we will return to at the end of this commentary.

The commercial triumph of *Ben-Hur* was especially welcome to the production studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer at that point in its history. They were suffering severe financial pressure, even possible bankruptcy, because of increasing competition from television and the impact of the Hollywood Antitrust Case of 1948, which prevented studios from owning theater chains that exclusively showed their own movies. It is not going too far to say that *Ben-Hur* was a wager laid to save the studio from collapse.

MGM knew well that religious subject matter could be a profitable vein to mine. Back in 1925, they had had huge success with a silent adaptation of the best-selling American novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* by Lew Wallace. It now seemed due for a remake, not least because other Bible-adjacent stories such as *Quo Vadis* (1951) and *The Robe* (1953) had recently confirmed the continuing public appetite for such material. Academy Award–winner William Wyler, who had assisted with the 1925 version, was appointed director. Charlton Heston, who had recently starred as Moses in *The Ten Commandments* (1956), was cast in the lead role as Judah Ben-Hur, a prince of Judea.

In order to establish a reverential atmosphere and indicate respect for this popular "tale of the Christ," Wyler took the extraordinary step of silencing Leo, the famous lion in the company's logo. Normally, an MGM movie would be introduced by Leo's roars, but for this film a still and silent shot of the customary masthead was deemed a more appropriate way to usher in the opening peaceful scene, set in Bethlehem, where shepherds and three wise men kneel worshipfully on a star-lit night before a newborn child.

The film that thus begins with Christmas Day ends nearly four hours later with Good Friday. In the interim,

Ben-Hur was the first film ever to win eleven Academy Awards, a tally equalled by *Titanic* (1997) and *The Return of the King* (2003). No film has ever won more.

Jesus appears only occasionally, is shown usually from behind, and never speaks. This "tale of the Christ" is not a retelling of the Gospels but focuses instead on the fictional character of Ben-Hur and his intermittent encounters with the long-prophesied Redeemer.

The story is set mostly in Jerusalem and centers on the Judean prince's relationship with a Roman named Messala, who had been his boyhood friend but is now an officer of the occupying imperial force. Messala, anxious to make a name for himself as a commander, wants Ben-Hur to help him suppress the Judean rebels, but his former playmate refuses to be a turncoat: "I would do anything for you, Messala, except betray my own people." Enraged, Messala consigns him to slavery in the Roman navy ("By condemning without hesitation an old friend, I shall be feared"). Marched in a chain gang to the galleys and desperate with thirst, Ben-Hur is given water to drink by a mysterious stranger who emerges from a carpenter's shop in Nazareth. Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, his mother, Miriam, and sister, Tirzah, are imprisoned, as is his household steward, whose daughter, Esther, is in love with the banished prince.

Three years elapse. In a battle with Macedonian pirates, Ben-Hur's ship is destroyed, but he escapes and saves the life of the Roman consul, Quintus Arrius, who, in gratitude, frees him from slavery and adopts him as his son.

Sextus, you ask how to fight an idea.
Well, I'll tell you how . . . with another idea!
—MESSALA

The Roman decurion's command to his men about Ben-Hur—"No water for him!"—became the on-set catchphrase whenever anyone in the cast or crew made a mistake.

Ben-Hur becomes an expert charioteer and returns to Judea where Esther tells him that his mother and sister are dead, whereas in fact (as she well knows) they have contracted leprosy. An Arab sheik, Ilderim, persuades Ben-Hur to drive his chariot in a race against Messala and thus exact his revenge: "There is no law in the arena. Many are killed." In the chariot race (one of the most thrilling live action sequences ever shot for the silver screen) Messala falls and is fatally trampled by horses. Before he dies, he informs Ben-Hur that he should look for Miriam and Tirzah in the Valley of the Lepers, "if you can recognize them."

Relieved to know that they still live but grieved to know of their condition, Ben-Hur locates his mother and sister and takes them to see a Jewish rabbi who, according to Esther, has the gifts of a healer. But this rabbi turns out to be under arrest and is shortly thereafter condemned to death by crucifixion. Carrying his cross to the place of execution, he falls in front of Ben-Hur, who suddenly recognizes the man from Nazareth who years earlier had given him water to drink. Returning that display of pity, Ben-Hur lifts a cup of water to the lips of Jesus before Roman soldiers intervene.

The climax soon follows with a thunderstorm and cloudburst as Jesus dies on the cross, the rain miraculously washing clean the leprous faces of Miriam and Tirzah. Ben-Hur embraces them and, with them, Esther, who still loves him, a love he reciprocates. The final shot of the movie, accompanied by an invisible choir singing "Hallelujah," shows three empty crosses on a distant hillside and, in the foreground, a shepherd leading a flock of sheep.

This brings us back to the question of religion. Does the final shot imply that Ben-Hur is now among the flock of those whom Christ, the Good Shepherd, has chosen? It is difficult to tell because Jesus is portrayed as such an elusive figure. His role in the story is little more than that of a roving silhouette. He is played by Claude Heater, an American opera singer, whose performance in this his only feature film went uncredited because it was a nonspeaking part.

But although Jesus never speaks, we are repeatedly told *about* things he is reported to have said. Ester informs Ben-Hur at one point: "He said, 'Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.'" And again: "I've heard of a young rabbi who says that forgiveness is greater and love more powerful than hatred. I believe it." From an evangelistic point of view, Esther is to be lauded for her willingness to spread the word and share her faith. From an artistic point of view, however, her lines are more questionable. They are the sort of thing that a "Basil Exposition" character would say by way of providing needful background information, while not advancing the dramatic trajectory of the current scene. Esther's lines indicate the importance of being open to mercy and forgiveness, but by directly stating the issues at stake rather than suggesting them, the dialogue comes dangerously close to being didactic. And this is somewhat ironic given how indirect is the presentation of Jesus himself. The writers of the screenplay keep Jesus offstage, but then make (their distillation of) his message rather too obviously center stage. It is perhaps appropriate that the one Academy Award this

> One God, that I can understand; but one wife?
> That is not civilized.
> —SHEIK ILDERIM

Catherine Wyler, speaking of her father, the director of *Ben-Hur*, William Wyler, said, "He wanted to make a movie that a broad audience would like, irrespective of their religious beliefs."

film was nominated for and did *not* win was Best Screenplay.

Ben-Hur finally accepts the message of forgiveness as he witnesses Christ's Crucifixion. He confesses to Esther that, "almost at the moment [Jesus] died, I heard him say, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' . . . And I felt his voice take the sword out of my hand." The "sword" no doubt represents his hatred of Messala and his passionate desire to rid the world of Roman tyranny, by bloodshed if necessary. In the grip of that passion, Ben-Hur had earlier told Esther that it would be better if she did not love him, and she had effectively agreed: "Hatred is turning you to stone. . . . It is as though you have become Messala. I've lost you, Judah." But now, in the wake of Christ's death, she has found him again because he has found his better self. Through the shed blood of this "man who is more than a man," Ben-Hur has been cleansed from his hatred, just as his mother and sister have been cleansed from their leprosy.

His change of heart is morally admirable, but to what extent is it dramatically appreciable or, for that matter, doctrinally comprehensible? We only know that such a conversion has occurred because Ben-Hur tells Esther about it after the fact. We don't see it actually happening, at least not in any very discernible fashion. True, while witnessing the events at Calvary, Ben-Hur looks thoughtful when told that Christ's imminent death will be a "beginning," not an end, and his eyes become large and wet as he emerges out of the shadows in order to gaze upon the crucified figure more intently. These signifiers of a changing internal state may prove sufficient

> I heard him say, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' . . . And I felt his voice take the sword out of my hand.
>
> —JUDAH BEN-HUR

for many viewers. Others may find it hard to perceive that anything psychologically significant or theologically coherent is going on. What could this predicted "beginning" mean to Ben-Hur? Has he been vouchsafed foreknowledge of the empty tomb that surprised even Christ's own disciples? The Resurrection is essential to Christian faith, but Christ is never shown rising from the dead, so it is difficult to understand the spiritual logic of the protagonist's transformation. The surging music makes it clear that something life-changing is taking place, but when one reflects upon it afterward, it feels somehow insubstantial and unsatisfactory—more *religiose* than truly religious.

Ben-Hur proved to be the salvation of MGM; Ben-Hur's own salvation is more debatable. It occurs in a tale of the Christ, yet Christ is hardly in the tale, and its telling does not extend to the events of Easter Day. In the end, William Wyler's Lion of Judah, like MGM's Leo, is a lion who doesn't get to roar.

MW

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Would *Ben-Hur* have been better, worse, or no different if the face of Jesus Christ had been shown and his voice heard?
- If you didn't know the story of Christ, how much would your enjoyment of *Ben-Hur* be affected?
- Charlton Heston, in his autobiography *In the Arena*, wrote that he would probably not have been cast as Ben-Hur in the modern age because he was not Jewish. How important is it that an actor's real-life identity reflects that of the character being portrayed?