

The Catholic Priest on the Road to ‘Calvary’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on August 11, 2014 - 4:37pm

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The title of the film, “Calvary,” should have resonance to any guilty Catholic out there, and yet the loaded word can’t deliver the truth that the film seeks. Brendan Gleeson gives an astonishing performance as a conflicted priest, but the material he has to work with is not up to his portrayal.

Essentially the territory mined is nothing new, as the sins of humanity are on display while the priest makes his journey. Even the intriguing twists – like the priest having a daughter from his former life – don’t really pay off. The writer/director John Michael McDonagh gets points for conceiving the thesis of the narrative, but the points are subtracted one by one as the story fleshed out from this thesis is revealed. While it might be more substantial to people who have wondered about the strange and Irish meanderings of the Catholic Church, to insiders it might feel like either an indictment or I’ve-heard-that-song-before.

Father James (Brendan Gleeson) is hearing confessions at his church in a small Irish town. A parishioner enters the confessional, and tells the priest that in one week’s time he is going to kill him, for the sins of another priest’s sexual abuse perpetuated on the confessor when he was a child. He recommends that James gets his affairs in order.



Father James (Brendan Gleeson) in ‘Calvary’

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

Not knowing exactly what to do, James goes through with a planned visit from his daughter (Kelly Reilly) – he joined the priesthood as a widower – who has just attempted suicide. Their visit is a reconciliation of sorts, but James doesn't find comfort with it, even as he consults his Bishop on the situation. The priest spends the week on the road to his own Calvary (the designation where Jesus was crucified), leading to the identity of his perpetrator.

The film can be viewed as highly symbolic, which gives it more meat than what is on the surface. The sins that Father James encounters – priest abuse, suicide, homosexuality, adultery and greed – are the sins that the Catholic Church has historically had the most problems justifying and resolving. The title alone is symbolic, for Jesus Christ's Road to Calvary is venerated in the Stations of the Cross ("Jesus Falls," "Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus," etc.), and Father James goes through his own "stations."

It is the surface elements that let the story down a bit. There is an inevitability regarding the path James is threading, paved with the townspeople who either tolerate him or despise him. Trials are given to him as the deadline draws closer, but it doesn't feel like those trials were necessary, except perhaps to clear his personal life before the final climb to his own Calvary. The sins he encounters along the way have been explored in better ways and in better art forms. Here it seems like a laundry list of what we've known all along.

That doesn't take away from the performance of Brendan Gleeson (probably best known in the Harry Potter films as Mad-Eye Moody) as Father James. It's a special piece of portrayal, fraught with the weight of the Catholic world. As in many instances when viewing that Church, there are complex reasons as to why it does what it does, or why it condemns some sins while politically allowing others. But Gleeson's performance is not hypocritical, it is human, expressing the difficulties of divinity – and the so-called divine right of the Church.



The Priest's Daughter (Kelly Reilly) in 'Calvary'

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

The supporting players are hit and miss. Leo (Owen Sharpe), the homosexual friend of Father James, is a bit much, but provides a sharp wildness to his character that is memorable – and neatly condemns the Church. Kelly Reilly, fresh off of "Heaven is for Real," is an incomplete character as the priest's daughter. Her suicide attempt is not only never explained, but dismissed, and her redemption has no reasoning behind it. It's an intriguing circumstance to introduce, but as a subplot it was wasted. However, veteran character actor M. Emmet Walsh was so perfect as a dying Irish writer, it makes you weep.

As a recovering Catholic, I detect a bit of lingering anger in this review, yet I fully wanted to embrace an interesting treatise of faith and divinity. "Calvary" wasn't it, but at least it allowed for the indulgence of what sins the Church has, and how far in the journey it needs to go before it reaches its own Calvary.

"Calvary" continued its limited release in Chicago on August 8th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Brendan Gleeson, Chris O'Dowd, Kelly Reilly, Aidan Gillen, Dylan Moran, Owen Sharpe and M. Emmet Walsh. Written and directed by John Michael McDonough. Rated "R"



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