

## ‘Novitiate’ Goes Inside the 1960s Catholic Church

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on November 3, 2017 - 1:08pm

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – In a “mystery of faith” narrative disguised as a feminist statement, the new film “Novitiate” goes inside a nunnery in 1964 America, just as the Catholic Church was about to make some radical changes to their procedures. How it affected the church is how it affected the nuns, and the intriguing insider story is full of back room shocks.

The title refers to being a “novice” nun, as the main character is, and it follows her journey through her calling – and the background in her life that led to it – all the way to the point when she lives her vows. This film goes deep, both into the methods of the novice years and the backlash to them. It is anchored by one of the best actors working today, Melissa Leo as the Reverend Mother. The tics and anger she puts into this character are both insane and justified (at least in the universe of the character’s soul). This is a must-see for those practicing the Catholic faith, as a history lesson, and for outsiders it provides a glimpse into the strange and ritualistic mannerisms of an ancient rite of passage.

Cathleen Harris (Margaret Qualley) is a 17 year old girl in 1964. In flashbacks, her problematic childhood is shown – her father abandons the family, her mother (Julianne Nicholson) is bewildered and depressed, plus by happenstance her younger self ends up in a Catholic school, although she isn’t Catholic. Within those gates, she finds her “calling,” and decides to become a nun, much to the horror of her mother.



Sister Cathleen (Margaret Qualley) Gets to a Nunnery in ‘Novitiate’

*Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics*

The type of nunnery Cathleen joins is one where the participants worship God and Jesus all day, and have radical silence and punishment techniques. It is controlled with an iron ruler by the Reverend Mother (Melissa Leo), who demands perfect obedience, but is distressed by the news of Vatican II changes. Meanwhile, the class of novices are having issues, which includes the now Sister Cathleen, who is feeling a pull of something else besides her vows.

The indoctrination of human beings into extreme faith and obedience is what makes this movie so fascinating. Writer/director Margaret Betts goes inside this last gasp era of isolation for nuns, creating a metaphor for the world at large, so changed by the revolutions of the 1960s. It also stands to reason that nuns were feminists... they lived within their matriarchal society, obeying their sense of deity rather than earthly dogmas of the church patriarchy. When this collapsed under Vatican II, it emphasizes how unreasonable papal leadership was towards women, especially their women.

The girls of the Novitiate class are interesting to observe as well. They are too young, without any life experience, making decisions about the isolating meditation of absolute acquiescence. Director Betts wisely shows the breakdown of this hasty youthful decision. Sexual urges, without anywhere to act on them, start to emerge. Misunderstandings, including a wrong look, could get an extreme punishment from Reverend Mother, which also ends up a bit kinky. There are some funky and consequential elements to this nunnery, and the story never blinks in exposing them.



Melissa Leo as Reverend Mother in 'Novitiate'

*Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics*

But by going on the inside, there is a distance between the machinations of the girl's training and their humanity, which caused a disconnect for me. Also the setting of the 1960s, based on the atmosphere of the nunnery and the flashbacks, didn't feel authentic. But Melissa Leo was an Oscar worthy revelation, injecting a vulnerability into the toughness of the Reverend Mother, where even in her cruelty there is an understanding to her motives.

I am a recovering Catholic, but even all these years later the sense of the church still torments me, which made "Novitiate" that much more of a required viewing. You can declare, as I did within an inner decision making process, that the indoctrination received is no longer a factor in life, but at times it still can't be shook from consciousness. THAT is the real mystery of the faith.

*"Novitiate" continues its nationwide release in Chicago on November 3rd. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Melissa Leo, Margaret Qualley, Julianne Nicholson, Eline Powell and Denis O'Hare. Written and directed by Margaret Betts. Rated "R"*



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