

Screen Priests

The Depiction of Catholic Priests in
Cinema from 1900 - 2018

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Adelaide
2019

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Abbreviation

d	Director
ds	Directors

Foreword About This Book

Best to say first that this is a reference book, with a touch of the encyclopedic. It was not intended to be read from cover to cover, although it could be since it takes the reader through the history of cinema.

This project began long ago but it began to take this form in 2002. This means that it has been seventeen years in writing. This also means that it is not properly an academic or scientific study of its subject. Rather, it is one person's looking at films and searching for the presence of priests on screen. And, it is hoped, when you glance at the Indices, you will find that it serves well in introducing the range of films. Some have been treated at more length, others at shorter length, and others with some basic information. There is also the personal assessment of the author with which the reader can agree or disagree.

Seeing the films over so many years means that the treatment might be considered uneven. This is something inevitable in a project like this. Friends have told the author that he is a 'completist', attempting to cover as much as possible. It is hoped that however long or short the reference to each film, the treatment will lead the reader to further explorations.

One limitation of the book is that it treats, principally, films made in English, films from the US and Canada, from the United Kingdom and Ireland, from Australia. It is hoped that writers familiar with the cinemas of France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and the countries of Latin America continue to take up the challenge and provide overviews of the treatment of priests in the cinemas of their cultures. There will be mention of a number of these films in here—more and more as the years went on—but they will generally be to those films which had release in the English-speaking countries.

Somebody wondered about the focus on priests, although there is an appendix on religious brothers. There have been several books about Screen Nuns, written by authors who knew their subject from the inside and who had lived this kind of religious life.

Two books which considered Catholicism in some detail, including the portrayal of priests, are *Hollywood and the Catholic Church* by Les and Barbara Keyser, subtitled, *the image of roman catholicism in american movies*, published in 1984, and *Christians in the Movies, A Century of Saints and Sinners*, by Peter Dans, published in 2009. It would be helpful for readers of this book to have these two books close at hand for further reference and elaboration on some of the films treated here. The Keyser's book is thematic while Dans' book is thematic and chronological. Discussion material on most of the films considered in this book can be found on the author's website—Google Peter Malone website.

Screen Priests could not have been written without the *Internet Movie Database*, the basic source for screen information. The *AFI, American Film Institute, Catalog* (on-line) supplied the information on the American silent era. *Wikipedia* entries have been useful for synopses details. The book is also indebted to *YouTube* for watching older films, especially from the 1930s and 1940s. The author has also had many opportunities to be present at international film festivals enabling him to cover films not more immediately available.

To facilitate the use of *Screen Priests* for further reference or research, there are three Indices. One index is to list actors who have played priests; a second contains all the film titles with their dates of release; the third lists all the directors

This book is written as a contribution to better understanding and to more informed debate.

Introduction

In his thumbnail review of *The Crime of Father Amaro* (2002), the UK *Guardian* critic referred to its theme of clerical celibacy as ‘rather quaint’. While this may be the perception of many people for whom the Catholic Church and its issues are of only marginal interest, it is nevertheless an important question for millions of people around the world. Many consider it a key issue for the future, whether there will be sufficient priests to meet the demands for ministry, whether there will be an option for priests to marry—and the further issue of the ordination of women. *The Crime of Father Amaro* was in fact just the next release, 2002 version, in a long line of films that have dramatized the lives of priests. There have been celibacy crises on screen for many decades, a tradition that will be referred to later as ‘*The Thorn Birds Syndrome*’.

To understand the way that priests and nuns are portrayed in contemporary films, it is helpful to go back to the early part of the twentieth century to find out how often or not these Catholic issues were depicted and to trace through the ‘standard’ depictions as well as what might also be called the ‘Priest or Nun in crisis’ genre. This can give us the basic data. A further step is to look at the life of the Catholic Church during the twentieth century, to see its traditional stability until the post-World War II period. After that it is necessary to look at indications in the 1940s and 1950s of re-assessment of practices and the way that its teaching was communicated which led to the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s.

Then it is necessary to examine the consequences of the Second Vatican Council’s ‘aggiornamento’ (an ‘updating’ which implies ‘renewal’) and the repercussions for priestly ministry and the religious

vocations of sisters and brothers. What followed were the increasingly publicised departures from priesthood and religious life. And, as if this were not enough, there was the shock of the misconduct and the sexual abuse cases that came to light in the later 1980s and early 1990s and which continue to send their shock waves throughout the Church and beyond. It is true to say that many of the films about priests and nuns reflect the responses to the issues prevalent at the time they were in production and released.

In 2002–2003, there was considerable publicity for and discussion of several films on clerical and religious crises, on abuses in the past and how the official church handled or failed to deal with their problems: *The Magdalene Sisters*, *Sinners*, *Evelyn*, *Song for a Raggy Boy*, *Conspiracy of Silence* (and it is interesting to note that the setting for all these films is Catholic Ireland), *The Crime of Father Amaro*, *Amen*. Critics and journalists trying to research some background for these films found that there was not a great deal written about films and clerical celibacy. There were, of course, reviews, a number of condemnations of some films by Church authority figures as well as more positive statements by Catholic Media associations and offices but very little that contributed to gaining an overall picture of the screen treatment of priests and nuns.

Since those years, there seem to be more and more films with priests as characters whether they be critical, as with *Our Fathers* (2005) and the sex abuse scandals in Boston and Cardinal Bernard Law's handling of the cases or affirming, as with the portrait of the priest in the Rwanda genocide played by John Hurt in *Shooting Dogs* (2006). The topical issues of abuse found their way into popular dramas that often went straight to DVD and to cable and satellite television channels, *Confession* (2006), *The Least of These* (2008). Key films or series on this abuse are *Doubt* (2008) and *Devil's Playground* (2014).

As the decade came to a close and the beginning of a new decade, it seemed that there were more and more priest characters (not nun characters) and that the treatment was more positive or took it for granted that priests should be part of society, especially American society, *Sympathy for Delicious* and *The Sessions* being films with a different perspective on clergy.

As the second decade of the century came, there seemed to more and more priests seen on screen. There was a new proliferation of diabolical possession and exorcism films, some serious, especially *The Rite*, and plenty of potboiling exploitation with titles like *Exorcismus*. There seemed to be an increase of confession sequences, always something of a short cut to Catholic themes.

Spotlight won the Academy Award for Best Film of 2015, internationally spotlighting the clerical sexual abuse crisis.

However, there were a number of striking representations of priests—like John Hurt's counsellor to Jacqueline Kennedy in *Jackie*. Three of the best films were *Des dieux et des hommes/Of Gods and Men* in 2010, a French film dramatizing the life of Trappist monks in Algeria in the 1990s and the deep spirituality that motivated them in their service of local Muslims, in their community life and which prepared them for their martyred deaths. The Irish film, *Calvary*, 2014, took up contemporary themes, the late vocation priest in Ireland, the range of parishioners, practising and hostile, as well as current issues of clerical abuse survivors and their anger against priests. Lastly, there was Scorsese's *Silence*, 2016, the portrait of Jesuit missionaries in seventeenth century Japan, the lay Catholics, persecution, torture and execution and ultimate challenges for belief (and disbelief). And, for the twenty-first century, Jimmy McGovern created *Broken* for television, an ordinary priest in an ordinary parish dealing with ordinary pastoral issues.

To have such a film and series about priests in 2016 provided a good occasion for the completion of this work on *Screen Priests*.

And a reminder. One of the first priests to appear on film was actually Pope Leo XIII. During the first year of international film production and documentation, 1896, he was filmed in the Vatican Gardens, the camera being pointed out to him and his offering a blessing. He is shown going to an audience hall, blessing and waving and (a surprise for clerical decorum, sitting and crossing his legs!). (These sequences can be found by Googling.)

Chapter 1

Priests in the Catholic Church

To appreciate the films about priests and nuns, it is necessary to have some understanding of the history of their role in the Catholic Church.

It is a long-standing tradition to refer to the Twelve Apostles as priests and to Peter as a Pope. This is reading later experience back into history. Jesus chose disciples to continue his mission of preaching the Gospel, the 'good news' of God's love for the world and for 'salvation' for all people. Once a movement is under way, it takes on a life of its own and follows the laws of society with the establishment of structures, some codification of its beliefs and practices, mechanisms to ensure fidelity to origins and orthodoxy to enable the passing on of the authentic traditions to succeeding generations.

By the end of the first century, there was a system of ministers who continued the role of Christ in preaching and celebrating the death and resurrection in the Eucharist (priests), of ministers who cared for the practical needs of communities (deacons) and those who were overseers of the communities (bishops). Since Peter was considered the head of the apostles, his successor assumed a central leadership role and was later called 'Pope'.

The First Millennium

In the early centuries of Christianity, many of the bishops, priests and deacons were unmarried, although celibacy was not set down as a condition for ministry. Peter was married Paul was not. In the Pauline churches, there were some words of advice about the high standards of conduct for bishops and for deacons, including an exhortation to

temperance, not being hot-tempered and not indulging in squalid greed There is a specific reference to marriage, that bishops and deacons are to have been married only once (see I Tim 3:1–13). Since many at the time thought that the second coming of Christ was imminent, leaders being married or unmarried was not an immediate major issue. With the establishment of Christianity as a legitimate religion in the Roman Empire—which did not happen until 311—the traditions began to take a more formal structure.

Besides priests and bishops, there were monks who lived alone as hermits or who lived in communities. In the east, St Basil (died 379) wrote a rule for monasteries. In the west St Benedict (died 547) wrote his rule. St Augustine (died 430), bishop of Hippo in northern Africa also wrote a rule for the clergy who lived in community around his Cathedral. It was the development of monasticism that led to what became the three vows which constituted the commitment in a religious order: vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The clergy who worked in a diocesan structure under the leadership of a local bishop were not required to make these vows. There was a clear distinction between diocesan clergy and religious clergy (clergy who belonged to a religious order).

Current research into the history of the Church is trying to gauge the role of women in ministry in these early centuries, the prevalence and role of deaconesses. However, in a society that was confidently patriarchal, there was little room for women in local church ministry and governance. Where the women found a role was in association with the monasteries and the developing religious orders—and some of the abbesses in countries like Ireland had considerable influence in their day.

This sketch is true of the first thousand years of the Church. The latter centuries of this period have been described as The Dark Ages. The invasion of the Roman Empire by the barbarian tribes, the collapse of the structures of government, the ceding of much authority to the Pope and bishops, the increasing missionary activity for the newly-settled tribes as well as the consequent social upheaval meant that in many areas, Church organisation was rudimentary. With lack of education opportunities, clergy were often not well instructed and had to cope, sometimes in relative isolation, as best they could Monasteries in the feudal system became the backbone for Church survival - and for that of many towns and communities.

The Second Millennium

Many clergy, often supported by their ambitious (and greedy) families, took ownership of their churches, became laws unto themselves and set up fortunes to hand on to their children. While that sentence oversimplifies issues, it does, at least, give some indication why, when the barbarian incursions came to an end and life in Europe turned to more settled ways of trade, freedom of travel and education at the beginning of the Middle Ages (in the eleventh century), ecclesiastical authorities, especially in Rome which had suffered under unscrupulous family dynasties who imposed their Popes on the Church, decided that reform was necessary. One of the major steps in that reform was to require a vow of celibacy of every priest who was ordained in the Roman Rite (the Rite for Western Europe which later became the rite in the new worlds of the Americas, of Africa and of Australia and the Pacific). The Eastern Churches in Europe and what is called the Middle East did not adopt this requirement in its absolute demands for its clergy.

This means that clerical celibacy is a canon of ecclesiastical legislation that has been in place in the western Church since the eleventh century, the last thousand years. During this time, a spirituality to support priests has been developed, a maturely considered spirituality that has sustained priests during this time and continues to do so. It is also clear that it has been too difficult for many priests to live as celibates. The word for a priest living with a woman was ‘concubinage’. Condoned by many communities (as is still the case in some Latin American and African churches), it is still considered an abuse of the priesthood just as with marriages which are judged as not fulfilling the conditions for a full and free consent and are annulled, so a priest can apply for a dispensation from the priesthood and his case for the invalidity of ordination can be heard.

Up to the 1970s, this was something that did not happen very frequently. With so many priests leaving the priesthood in the 1960s and 1970s, Pope Paul VI allowed a great number of cases to be considered. Pope John Paul II required much more lengthy and detailed processes. Of course, not every priest decided to apply for such a dispensation and simply left the priesthood and, frequently, went through a civil service of marriage.

Since the Vatican Council, there has been stronger demand from all around the world for the requirement of celibacy to be dropped—

not that a priest has to marry, but that he have the option to marry or not. At present, Church authorities have reiterated the requirement for celibacy. A recent and current practice in the United Kingdom, Australia and some other English-speaking countries, which to many long-serving celibate priests seems anomalous, is the acceptance of ordained married Anglican priests into the Catholic Church and allowing them to minister and to continue living their married life. This complicates the debate about the absolute requirement of the vow of celibacy.

Further discussion on sexuality issues, especially with the controversy of theory as well as practice in the Anglican communion concerning clergy with homosexual orientation, has led to strongly divided opinion in that communion about the ordination of a gay bishop who lives in a partnership and the repercussions for this sexual behaviour for clergy.

But, this applies to members of the clergy who do not take the vows that members of religious orders do. What is the case of priests who belong to religious orders?

Members of Religious Orders

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, monasteries were flourishing. As the centuries progressed, different social and pastoral needs emerged: for preachers on the move, for the development of spiritual movements, for dealing with social needs. Men and women, usually of saintly reputation like Francis of Assisi or Clare, Dominic, Ignatius Loyola, established new religious orders which combined prayer and meditation with a more flexible and active community life. After the opening up of the Americas and of Asia, these new religious orders travelled widely as missionaries. This was particularly true in the nineteenth century (and this was not just a Catholic phenomenon) as missionaries left Europe for Africa and the Pacific. Religious orders proliferated. They were mainly religious orders of women but there was a substantial number of orders of men both clerical (with priests and non-ordained brothers) and lay (brothers, teachers and hospitaliers who did not want ordination).

However, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries women like Angela Merici in Italy, Mary Ward in England, Louise de Marillac in France, had tried to establish religious orders of women who would

do the same caring, educating and missionary ministry as men. Opposition to women being so outward-going (and threatening the male status quo) delayed the developments but by the nineteenth century, women had succeeded in founding an extraordinary number of congregations. Technically, the contemplative women in the monastic orders were called nuns; members of the active religious congregations were called sisters. However, in common parlance, people do not make the appropriate distinctions and these women are referred to as nuns.

Were the requirement of the vow of celibacy for diocesan priests to be lifted, priests in religious orders would not be affected. They make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. This is the nature of religious life, with chastity as an integral component of the commitment. Obviously, not every religious is able to live up to the commitment and they may apply for a dispensation. Were the celibacy requirement to be lifted for diocesan clergy, it would make clearer the role of the religious order priests (who would always be a small minority) as continuing to live a vow of chastity which included celibacy.

Nuns and sisters take the same vows as the religious priests.

As has been already noted, the male religious orders also accepted men to become members who did not aspire to ordination. In the monasteries, there were often more non-ordained brothers than priests. The brothers in the religious orders were generally not so well educated and did the more practical, even menial, work. One of the dangers of this kind of layering of membership was that it suggested (often literally) a group of second-class religious. Not every man who felt called to a religious order wanted this kind of life.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, religious orders of men were established, especially for the teaching of boys, where the men who joined did not see themselves as having a vocation to priesthood. These brotherhoods took the vows of religious life, like the sisters, including a vow of chastity. In recent media reports of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, many journalists seem not to be aware of these brothers who have not been ordained. Any church man accused of abuse is often reported, erroneously, to be a priest.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, diocesan seminaries were full, religious orders of priests, brothers and sisters had aspirants flocking to their doors. This continued, with peaks in the 1950s, until the early 1960s which saw thousands of Catholic schools, hospitals, missions well staffed by many religious.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this was not the case in Western countries, although the numbers of seminarians and novices in countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America have continued as substantial.

Many members of the religious orders left between 1970 and 1990. Fewer numbers joining have been the norm since the 1980s. Religious orders have had to face the possibility that they will die out. In the meantime, the growing edge in the Catholic church has been the increasing involvement of lay men and women in ministry as well as the development of new groups, often of a more traditional and devout nature, that have attracted many earnest young men and women. It is too early to say whether this is the future for priesthood and community living in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 2

Films from 1900 to 1930

Background

This period sees the end of the reign of Queen Victoria, the Edwardian calm before war, the era of Theodore Roosevelt and a gung-ho American period of 'manifest destiny', of the financiers, the inventor-entrepreneurs like Henry Ford. It is the era of the Boer War in South Africa, the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia (with its White Australia policy) in 1901.

It becomes the era of World War I with death in the trenches, of an Armistice and treaty of Versailles that leaves Germany humiliated and ripe for Hitler. It is the era of the Russian Revolution and Bolshevik leadership that will find worldwide resonance during the Depression, after the flapper, roaring 20s come to an end with the 1929 crash of Wall Street. It is the era of Fascist dictators in Europe, of colonial domination of Asia and Africa including Mussolini's war in Abyssinia. It is the era of Japanese expansion with the invasion of China. The world is on the verge of World War II.

This is the era of the silent film, the coming of sound in 1927, the first decade of sound films and the coming of colour.

In the Catholic Church, the open-minded Pope Leo XIII dies in 1903 at the age of ninety-three. 'Modernist' movements in the Church advocating less literal interpretations of scripture and of doctrinal statements are fiercely denounced and condemned by his successor, Pope Pius X, especially with his list, his 'Syllabus' of errors in 1904 and his Encyclical letter to the whole church in 1907 offering his critical assessment of this changing situation, *Pascendi*. Yet, on the ordinary level of the Church's life in most countries, the Church is peaceful and flourishing. Clergy are numerous as are brothers and nuns. Catholic

institutions like schools and hospitals are growing larger. Nineteenth century sectarian struggles are beginning to recede. Anti-clerical legislation in countries like France will give way to more tolerant laws.

After World War I, there are strong moves for organised Catholic Action and involvement with 'the world'. There is a move towards adult education, especially in book and pamphlet publication. In 1928, the Organisation Catholique Internationale du Cinema, OCIC, and the International Catholic Organisation for Radio (and, later, television), Unda, are established in north-western Europe. Pope Pius XI gives leadership in writing letters to the Churches on a range of social issues, makes a Concordat with Mussolini and denounces Hitler. In 1936, Pius XI writes the first letter to the Church worldwide on cinema, *Vigilanti Cura* (With vigilant care . . .), stating that this kind of storytelling is more effective for communication than abstract thinking. For clergy and members of religious orders, developments in communications and travel mean better education and training. The assumption is that this is how the Church will be for all time to come.

By the late 1920s, many Americans thought that the movies had veered too strongly towards permissiveness in images and themes. The early 1930s saw the writing of the Motion Picture Code and its strict application from 1934 which was relied on for several decades with casuistic strictness. The Catholic Church promoted film reviews, especially by lay women in the early 1930s, but local bishops began to condemn some films. The result was that an official Legion of Decency (1934) was formed to classify films according to their moral suitability and to urge Catholics to take an oath not to see movies considered objectionable or 'condemned'.

The Films

The cinema thrives on conflict. The status quo does not encourage high-powered drama except in the highlighting of significant figures and their heroism or with adversarial tension (which, because charismatic figures do highly contentious things, brings on elements of personality clash or dispute with authority figures). This is an era where there are not so many films about priests or nuns and very little about clerical celibacy. The most significant clerical screen images are those of Spencer Tracy and Pat O'Brien.

Clergy and religious had never been immune from scandalous tales - think Chaucer, Boccaccio, Rabelais. However, anti-Catholic literature, some books but generally scurrilous pamphlets, circulated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some were confessions of priests and nuns who had had relationships (sometimes through alleged tunnels linking monasteries and convents). Others were 'confessions' of people who had escaped a life of servitude in a convent ruled over by a tyrannical mother superior. If it were particularly aggressive, there might be an illegitimate baby.

The surprising thing is how little of this made its way to the screen. In the United States, the Motion Picture Code of the early 1930s ensured that this kind of drama (or melodrama) would not be fit material for the movies and the Legion of Decency would demand loyalty from American Catholics in boycotting anything considered immoral or offensive to religion. While not every country followed the Legion in its actions, the Legion did exercise an influence over the way Catholics thought about films. Some commentators who never lived to hear the phrase 'dumbing down' suggested that the Code and the Legion were partly responsible for Hollywood's avoiding of serious themes in the movies of the 1930s and 1940s and being satisfied with light and inoffensive material only. This promotes the popular belief that the movies are solely for entertainment and engenders a suspicion of serious topics. Combined with the particularly American predilection for happy endings and every problem solved by the final reel, this perspective has been pervasive worldwide and puts serious attempts to make thoughtful cinema at box-office risk. The Code stated:

1. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standard of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be shown on the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

And on representation of ministers of religion and religion itself.

1. No film or episode may *throw ridicule* on any religious faith.
2. *Ministers of religion* in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains.
3. *Ceremonies* of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled.

The Silent Era

The Internet Movie Database notes that in a short film of 1898, *After the Battle*, Sisters of Charity can be seen caring for winter soldiers and that a priest is seen administering the last rites to the soldiers.

As regards what we now call feature films, there is a significant presence of a priest in D.W. Griffith's classic 1916 film, *Intolerance*. The film has four stories intercut through the almost three hour running time: a Babylonian story, The Gospel Story, the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre, a Modern Story, along with a motif seen several times of a mother rocking a cradle, right through the ages.

The modern story concerns a young man and his wife, their hardships and life of poverty, his turning to crime and being framed. Tried, he is condemned to death. While there is breathless drama as a car stops a train so that the man's wife and lawyers hurry to offer documents for his release (made all the more dramatic as the film moves to its climaxes in Babylon, in Paris and in Jesus' passion. A priest arrives as prison chaplain, the Caption reading 'the Last Sacrament' (with practically no dialogue captions, themes and emotions indicated by the silent acting style of mime and posing). The priest is Catholic, wearing surplice and biretta, with a book of prayer. According to the credits, he is Father Fathley, played by the Rev. A.W. McClure. The priest is older, reverent, pious, supportive, seen in close-up, always concerned with the young man. He kisses his stole in the older way before putting it around his neck to hear confession. The young man makes the sign of the cross. The priest, praying, accompanies the young man to the gallows, almost fainting at one moment. He continues his ministry as the young man stands on the gallows, is bound and the hood put on his head—even as the warden is alerted to the arrival of the petitioners. Three executioners hold their knives over the ropes that hold the trapdoor. When the young man is reprieved and united with his wife, the delight of the priest is quite manifest.

Whether this early portrayal of a priest served as a precedent, it is difficult to know. There is a limited number of films including priests (many of them prison or war chaplains). But, Father Fathley is a significant beginning of the presence of priests in feature films.

Since so many of the films from the early decades of film-making have disappeared or are not readily available, there may have been many portrayals of priests and, perhaps, of nuns. This section of *Screen Priests* depends on research rather than viewing (except for the 1920 *Mark of Zorro*, available on Youtube).

Probably the best source for films of this period, as well as for quite detailed description and analyses of later films, is *Hollywood and the Catholic Church, the image of Roman Catholicism in American movies* by Les and Barbara Keyser. It was published in 1984. (Their postscript regrets that they had to stop since *Agnes of God* and *Catholic Boys* were about to be released. They name some of the Irish-themed silent films, pre- and post-Griffith).

Director Sidney Olcott made his career providing Irish immigrant melodramas with ethnic themes, like *The Lad from Ireland* (1910), *Rory O'More* (1911), and *The Gypsies of Old Ireland* (1917). Around the same time, Chauncey Olcott, 'the servant girl's Caruso', made a similar career of being, in the words 'of his biographer David Carroll, *hibernicis ipsis hibenor*' ('more Irish than the Irish'), lifting his glorious tenor in blarneystone renditions of 'My Wild Irish Rose' and 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling'. These ethnic diversions continued for decades, and Irish pastors like Father McGowan (Daniel T Sullivan) in *Cecilia of the Pink Roses* (1918) became stock characters, counselling lovers, soothing disillusioned immigrants, and looking after assorted widows and orphans. All these films about the Irish veered wildly from comedy to pathos, and urban poverty and politics loomed as major issues. In *Little Old New York* (1923), for example, life on the Bowery mixed Irish ballads, fistfights, lost inheritances, and a whipping post. In *The Lights of Old Broadway* (1925), a colour sequence details an Irish uprising put down by police with firehoses. Explicit religious conflicts often played an important role. In *Knights of the Eucharist* (1911), for example, an Irish boy dies defending his church from desecration by the Ku Klux Klan (p 96).

Sealed Lips (1912). Father Hartley Steele, who is a Catholic preacher, is accused of a murder committed by one of his parishioners. The murderer, Jake Smith, a poor laborer, tries to cover up his crime with the priest's cassock. The good Mrs. Smith, who is horrified and appalled at her husband's crime, unable to still her conscience or reconcile herself with her God, goes to the minister to confess. Her confession lightens the weight from her heart and mind. It gives her at last the repose her turbulent mind needs. The priest is soon accused of the crime. His own cassock is the strongest evidence against him. He is tried and convicted. He knows who the real murderer is, his lips are sealed. With angelic sweetness and fortitude he endures the jeers and insults of the mob that is only too ready to assail the sincerity of the church. Without rancor he is willing to go to his execution, but Heaven intervenes in his behalf. *Written by Moving Picture World synopsis*

The IMDb storyline for *Hypocrites* (1915, 54 minutes, d Lois Weber): The parallel stories of a modern preacher and a medieval monk, Gabriel the Ascetic, who is killed by an ignorant mob for making a nude statue representing Truth, which is also represented by a ghostly naked girl who flits throughout the film.

An IMDb blogger notes: Undoubtedly one of the greatest silent films - watch it if you can. 20 April 2006 | by bbbhlthph – See all my reviews

. . . The film is basically an allegorical story of a priest who becomes increasingly aware of the harm caused by the self righteousness of major figures from the past, as well as the members of his own congregation; but who nevertheless remains completely unable to appreciate how in his own life he displays exactly the same failing. Part of the failing of the priest lies in suppressing his natural emotions until he is unable to respond in any meaningful way to the affection one of his congregation shows for him.

However, the AFI (American Film Institute) Catalog of Feature Films indicates that priests were present in quite a number of other films before 1920. We are dependent on their lists and synopses for films not available.

As early as 1915, there is a variation on the *Madame X* plot, with an ominous-sounding title, *Destiny; or the soul of a Woman* (d Edwin Carewe):

When Standish, an artist, discovers that his wife Mary has a 'past', he turns her and their baby boy out. Mary leaves the baby on the steps of a monastery and becomes the proprietress of a resort called "The House of Lost Souls." Seventeen years later, the boy decides to become a priest, but only after he has tasted life outside the church walls. Curiosity brings him to the House of Lost Souls, where he is tempted by Avarice, Lust, Rum, Passion and Beauty. When his mother recognizes the crucifix she had placed around his neck years before, she begs him to leave and then breaks her own associations with the house. Later, the mother, seeking refuge from a raging storm, enters her sons' parish church, and without revealing her identity, dies in his arms. (AFI Catalog synopsis). Howard Truesdell as Father Anthony.

A rather edifying tale, after some disedifying moments, is found in *A Victory of Conscience* (d Frank Reicher), a 1916 World War I story involving priests and a nun:

Dimitri and Louis, two wealthy friends en route to Paris, stop at an inn where they see Rosette, a penniless beauty, dancing. Enthralled by her, the two men decide to take her to Paris with them, causing the inn's impoverished patrons to riot with outrage. Although Rosette favors Louis and spends the night with him, Louis informs her that he will never marry her. Remy, an employee of the inn, follows Rosette and, when he learns of Louis' cruelty, engages him in a fierce fight. Left to bleed, Louis is rescued by a priest and eventually enters the priesthood himself. One night, after Rosette has become a successful dancer at a gangsters' nightclub, Dimitri comes to see her show. By chance, Louis also shows up looking for a man whose wife is deathly ill. Later, the brothers fight with each other over Rosette, and Louis, the winner, convinces Rosette to become a nun. When World War I breaks out, Father Louis tries to rescue Rosette, now called Sister Rose Marie, from the Germans. Although Louis is mortally wounded in the attempt, he and Rosette are united by their pure and selfless spirits. (AFI Catalog synopsis).

The priest is a secondary character to the nun in *Pieces of Silver: A Story of Hearts and Souls* (1914) which is principally a story on nuns in this period (d Charles L Gaskill).

The flourishing Australian cinema of the second decade of the twentieth century did offer some examples of screen crises, religion and sex which are considered in the chapter on Australian cinema.

However, there was a similar kind of plot, though set in the late nineteenth century, early twentieth century, *The Spotted Lily* (d Harry Solter) with a wilful woman and the monk whom she loved and her trying to save her daughter and the ailing monk (Jack Nelson and Charles Hill Maines as the younger and older, Pere Anatole). It was released in 1917, the same month as the two Australian films, *The Church and the Woman* and *The Monk and the Woman*.

There was another 'I Confess' genre film from the United States in 1920, *The Confession*, directed by Bertram Bracken, starring Henry B Walthall as a priest who will not reveal the identity of a killer because he has heard his confession:

When Jimmie Creighton attempts to prevent his sister's fiancé Tom Bartlett from taking another drink, a fight erupts between the two men. In the struggle, Tom drops his gun, which is picked up by Joseph Dumont, who then shoots Creighton. Dumont later goes to Tom's brother, Father Bartlett, the town's priest, to confess. Explaining that he killed Creighton because the man had betrayed his sister, Dumont swears to make reparations if an innocent man is accused of the crime. Even though his own brother, Tom, is arrested for the murder, the priest refuses to reveal Dumont's confession, and as a result, Tom is sentenced to death. Michael Dugan, the sexton, organizes a party to free Tom from jail, but the priest appeals to the men to leave the matter in God's hands. Tom succeeds in escaping on his own and confronts Dumont, but the murderer escapes and Tom flees to the Canadian Northwest. The priest follows, but before he can overtake his brother, Tom is apprehended and returned to the States. Meanwhile, the priest finds Dumont fear-crazed and saves him from an attempted suicide. The man finally promises to tell the truth and the two return to the States just as Tom is being led to the scaffold. Before he can confess, Dumont drops dead, but the warden orders the execution to proceed when two guards find the confession in Dumont's pocket, thus exonerating Tom. (AFI Catalog synopsis)

A similar theme was treated in *The Victim* (1917, d Joseph Levering), where the priest is arrested for murder and cannot identify the killer because of the seal of confession. It was based on a 1898 book by Fr Joseph Spillman, *A Victim to the Seal of Confession*. A production company, Catholic Art Association, is listed in the credits:

Thomas J. Cosgrove, a Catholic priest, dedicates his time to helping his parishioners and keeping his devoted mother company. After Jerry Conners, his brother-in-law and a steel mill foreman, fires Feroni, a drug addict, the former employee swears revenge and murders Conners that night. Unable to locate Feroni, the police close the investigation, but Cosgrove and Parker, the steel mill owner, vow to track down the killer themselves. One night, Parker receives a message to meet Cosgrove at his church and, while waiting outside, is stabbed to death by Feroni. Because his knife is found to be the murder weapon, Cosgrove is convicted of the crime and sentenced to die. All attempts to appeal his conviction fail, but on the eve of Cosgrove's execution, Feroni is struck down by lightning and admits to both murders, explaining that he confessed to Cosgrove after the second, knowing that the priest could not repeat any detail of his deed. With only minutes to spare, Cosgrove is saved from the gallows. (AFI Catalog synopsis).
Robert T Haines as Fr Cosgrove.

Another 1920 film, *When Dawn Came* (d Colin Campbell) offers a variation on the *Magnificent Obsession* plot, with a doctor's moral collapse into violence, alcoholism and atheism but is found by his priest friend (James O. Burrows), recovers his faith, falls in love with a blind woman, operates on her and finds redemption. Campbell had directed a 1915 film, *The Rosary*, which had a theme of Irish migrants to the United States. In the cast is Fr Kelly (Charles Clary), also a Fr Ryan (Frank Clark), Fr Kelly befriended a young man who later builds him a cathedral. There is a combination of love and misunderstanding and the film ends, happily, on the steps of the cathedral.

Yet again, in 1920, a touch more lurid and the theme of assuming the identity of a priest, and with a title to match, *The Sin That Was His* (d Hobart Henley):

Ordered out of town for gambling, Raymond Chapelle, former priest and the scion of a good family, stops to visit his dying pal, Canuck John Blondin, who requests that Raymond deliver a bag of gold to his mother in the village of Marleau. On the train to Marleau, Raymond meets a young priest, Father Aubert. Arriving during a violent storm, Raymond finds his way to the Blondin home where he is met by Canuck John's unscrupulous brother. When he refuses to release the money to the brother, a fight ensues which awakens Madam Blondin from her sleep. In the darkness, she seizes a gun and fires, killing her son. Raymond escapes and, coming upon the prostrate body of the priest, who had been hit by a falling tree, the gambler exchanges clothes and identities with the holy man. Madam Blondin accuses Raymond of the killing, and the priest, who is suffering from amnesia, is mistaken for the gambler and arrested. After taking on the identity of Father Aubert, Raymond begins to feel deep contrition for his sin and finally confesses to the Bishop. They are about to reveal his story to the authorities when Madam Blondin, dying, confesses that she shot her son. (AFI Catalog synopsis). (William Faversham as Chapelle, Pedro de Cordoba as Father Aubert, John Barton the Bishop.)

And yet again in 1920, a pre-*Going my Way* film, *The Parish Priest* (d Joseph Franz):

John Whalen is ordained into the priesthood and assumes the leadership of a small town New Jersey parish. His dying mother's last wish is that young doctor Edward Welsh and his sweetheart be married. Rev. Whalen devotes much time and effort to overcoming the obstacles to the union, managing along the way to solve the problems of other townspeople. (AFI Catalog synopsis) William Desmond as John Whalen.

There is one Hollywood story from this period which raises the celibacy issue, *The Garden of Allah*.

When her mother elopes with a lover and her father dies cursing the name of God, Domini Enfielden attempts to forget her pain in Beni Mora, an oasis in the Sahara. At the desert hotel, she meets and falls in love with Boris Androvsky, a tormented man of mystery. Abruptly announcing his

departure one day, Boris bids farewell to Domini in the Garden of Allah, but passion overwhelms them, and after making love, they are married by Father Roubier. The two are happy until Capt. De Trevignac, a dinner guest, recognizes Boris as the former Father Antoine, a priest whose irrepressible lust forced him to leave the monastery. De Trevignac says nothing, but after his departure, Boris confesses to Domini, who urges him to return to the monastery. The years pass, and Domini rears her son Boris in the Garden of Allah. (Synopsis for the 1916 version, d Colin Campbell, from the AFI Catalog.) Tom Santschi as Boris, Harry Lonsdale as Fr Roubier, Frank Clark as Fr Beret.

Garden of Allah (1927), the second version was made in North Africa and the Nice studios by Rex Ingram with Ivan Petrovich as a Trappist monk who runs away from his African monastery and experiences temptation through the wiles of Alice Terry. Armand Dutertre is the priest.

As the decades went on, westerns and period dramas set in Franciscan missions became very popular.

A significant scene in *The Mark of Zorro*, (d Fred Niblo, 1920) is that of a Franciscan Friar, Walt Whitman, robed, condemned by the decadent governor, then flogged for his beliefs and loyalty to the poor. Zorro himself (Douglas Fairbanks) later praises the integrity of the friar and his suffering.

The Diamond Bandit (1924, d Francis Ford) was another of the earliest appearance by a Franciscan (Arthur George, with friars Harry Dunkinson and the director himself). A friar who cares for his people is murdered A Zorro-type hero rises up, confronts the oppressor, escapes in a friar's robe, eventually to become a benign governor.

Leaping ahead seventy years to *Tombstone* (1993, d George Pan Cosmatos), we find a Mexican wedding with friar (veteran Pedro Amandariz Jr) when a crew of brutal cowboys turn up, start shooting and, when the Friar intervenes, shooting him as well). Times change. Themes don't. (At the end of *El Paso* (1949, d Lewis R. Foster), a Franciscan friar suddenly appears with the townspeople who are prepared to appeal to law and order rather than the vigilante self-protection of the past. It is he who vigorously proclaims the moral of the film.

Priests are useful characters for moralising tales, as in *Wild Oats Lane* (1926, d Marshall Neilan):

Leaving Sing Sing after serving time for theft, The Boy drifts into a small Pennsylvania town and falls in love with Marie, an innocent local girl. The Boy leaves for New York, first obtaining Marie's promise to follow him in a week to become his wife. The Boy runs into some of his former associates in crime, however, and they hold him prisoner until they can pull off a big job. Meanwhile, Marie arrives in the city, and there is no one to meet her. Ashamed to return home, Marie supports herself by prostitution until she is reformed by a kindly priest, who, unknown to her, is also attempting to help The Boy, who has become a dope fiend. The Boy and Marie finally meet and are reconciled. The priest then sends for her parents, and Marie and The Boy are married (AFI catalog synopsis). John MacSweeney as the priest.

There is a kindly priest who guides a safecracker on better paths in *Slippy McGee* (1923, d Wesley Ruggles), *Father De Rance* (Sam de Grasse). In the brief (65 minutes) 1948 version, d Albert H Kelley, he is called Fr Shanley.

Priests and nuns (Jesuits and Sisters of Mercy) appear in what would later have been a mini-series, melodrama and romanticism and ill-fated love, *Evangeline* (1929, d Edwin Carewe).

In the quiet Nova Scotian village of Grand-Pré lives the fair, beloved Evangeline with her father, Benedict Bellefontaine, a prosperous and honored farmer of the Acadian community. Though she admires and is loved by Baptiste, son of the notary, she is pledged to Gabriel, son of Basil, the village smith. Before they can be married, France and England declare war; the Acadians, bound by allegiance to England and by ties of kinship to France, refuse to take up arms against France, and as a result are ordered deported. As the men are herded aboard a British man-o'-war, the governor-general sets fire to the village of Grand-Pré. Suffering from exposure and broken by the sight, Benedict dies in the arms of Evangeline, who then departs for unknown lands with Father Felician. They arrive at Bayou Têche, Louisiana, where former residents of Grand Pré have established a settlement, just missing Gabriel. Through the wilds of the gulf coast, Evangeline suffers many hardships in search of her beloved, refusing the hand of Baptiste, who has meanwhile become a prosperous land owner. Basil offers to aid her in her search for Gabriel, but they are separated by a storm

on the rapids. Traveling alone through unexplored country, Evangeline arrives at a settlement of Jesuits; she becomes a Sister of Mercy, though ever hopeful of finding Gabriel. At the end of the war, Evangeline is sent to Philadelphia to care for the maimed and friendless; there, in an almshouse, she is at last reunited with her long-sought beloved (AFI Catalog synopsis).

There had been a 1914 version of *Evangeline* (d William H. Cavanaugh and Edward P Sullivan) with co-director, Sullivan, playing Father Felician. In the 1929 version, Alec B Francis is Felician.

Priests turn up in this kind of melodrama for their status and its contribution to plot development. *Romola* (1924), whose credentials include Henry King as director with the two Gish sisters in the cast, introduces a priest (symbolically called Savanarola, Herbert Grimwood, Ugo Uccellini as the Bishop) who is killed by the villain, his death inciting the crowds to go after and dispose of the villain.

Towards the end of the 1920s, there is a drama set in Paris, *Seventh Heaven* (1928, d Frank Borzage). A street cleaner saves a young woman exploited by her sister. An abbe (Fr Chevillon, played by Emile Chautard) crosses paths with them several times, supporting the woman, giving the young man some medals even though he does not believe. He intervenes several times to help them both, a traditional picture of a kindly priest. Matters come to a head at the end when the woman is distraught at news of her husband's death in the war, only to find that he has survived—the medals, faith and God. A standard American portrayal of a priest.

In the 1918 *The Church and the Woman*, a key issue was 'mixed marriage' between Catholic and Protestant. The 1929 *Abie Irish Rose* (d Victor Fleming), based on a 1920 Broadway play that ran for five years, raised the issue of interfaith marriage, between Catholic and Jew. It raises the problem but takes a genial path with the priest and the rabbi for some reconciliation (though there would still be problems about the education of the children).

During World War I, Abie Levy, a soldier in the A. E. F., is wounded in combat. While recovering in a hospital, he meets Rosemary Murphy, an entertainer. They fall in love, return to the United States, and get married in an Episcopal church in Jersey City. Abie takes Rosemary to his home and introduces her as his sweetheart, Rosie Murpheski; they are then married by a rabbi. Mr. Murphy

arrives with a priest and, amid discord and discontent, the young people are married again, this time by the priest. Disowned by both families, Rosemary and Abie are befriended only by the Cohens. On Christmas Eve, the Cohens and their rabbi persuade Solomon to see his son and his new grandchildren; the priest urges Mr. Murphy to do the same. This surprise visit begins in acrimony, but ends peacefully as Rosemary presents her newborn twins: Patrick Joseph, named for her father, and Rebecca, named for Abie's dead mother. (AFI Catalog synopsis). Nick Cogley as the priest.

Abie Irish Rose was remade in 1946, director A. Edward Sutherland, staying close to the basic plot, with Emory Parnell as the priest.

1929 saw the first film version of Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (d Charles Brabin), (later versions in 1944 and 2004). Set in the Peruvian Andes in the 18th century, it focuses on a priest, Friar Juniper (Henry B. Walthall), who witnesses the collapse of a bridge, delves into their stories, always asking questions about why this particular group died and what was God's purpose. Questions of faith, God's providence (or not), human and divine responsibility. The setting is Hispanic, a philosophical/theological Catholic tradition in which the priest has been educated and forms his perspective in asking about God's knowledge of what will happen to humans. This is not a trend that is so explicit in American films.

In the 1944 version (d Rowland V. Lee), Friar Juniper is Donald Woods. In the 2004 version (d Mary McGuckian), Juniper is Gabriel Byrne, with Robert de Niro as the Archbishop of Peru who accuses Juniper and his research of heresy and puts him for trial before the Inquisition for questioning God's will and intentions.

And in the Catholic spirit of the US in the 1920s: One of the memories for Charles Lindbergh in *The Spirit of St Louis* (1957, d Billy Wilder) as he flies his epic journey across the Atlantic in 1928, is of a priest (Marc Connelly) urging him to take a St Christopher medal for a safe flight.

Chapter 3

Films from the 1930s

Background

The Depression in the United States and its consequences of unemployment and poverty pervaded the 1930s with carry-on effects in other countries. Then it was the prologue to World War II.

Fascist Benito Mussolini was already in power in Italy. In the discontent in Germany in the aftermath of the Great War, again poverty and unemployment and proud, conquered people ready to follow a leader who showed strength, determination and one of the most potent ambitions for aggression in Adolf Hitler, Chancellor from 1933. In the meantime, Stalin consolidated his power ruthlessly in the Soviet Union, though many American and other intellectuals were attracted to the Communist ideology. Many governments were wary, with Winston Churchill trying to alert the British people and government. Jews were already being persecuted and fleeing.

In 1937 the Japanese invaded Manchuria and war was being waged in Asia years before the bombing of Pearl Harbour.

Film industries were developing all over the world, from the United States, to the cinemas of Europe like Italy and France, to Japan and in Australia. The technical developments which sound brought to cinema after 1927 meant improvements in sound engineering and freeing cameras from tripods for more fluid film-making. Technicolor was introduced in 1935. Looking at the Oscar-winners during the 1930s means looking at pioneering films like *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Cimarron* (1930 and 1931) to the lavish spectacle of *Gone with the Wind* (1939). And, during the 1930s, while local industries had some success, American movies had greater distribution access everywhere.

Mention has already been made about the developments that led to the establishment of the US Motion Picture Code and the Catholic response which led to a tightening of moral stances with *The Legion of Decency* (1934). There is a need for further research into how Catholic organisations and hierarchies in different countries dealt with the ever-popular (and growing) regular movie-going and of the response to Pope Pius XI's encyclical letter, *Vigilanti Cura*.

OCIC, the International Catholic Organisation for Cinema, built on its establishment in 1928, held congresses during the 1930s, encouraged reviewing and distribution, even attempts at film-making in countries like Holland, but the expense was too much. The Vatican Secretary of State, later Pope Pius XII, wrote letters of encouragement for the work of OCIC. However, with the outbreak of World War II and the annexation of Belgium where the Secretariat was based—and the internment of Fr Jean Bernard, the General Secretary from Luxembourg, in Dachau (later the subject of Volker Schlöndorff's 2004, *De Neunte Tage* (*The Ninth Day*))—Catholic cinema activity on the continent came to an end until the end of the war.

The Films

Priests appear as chaplains in World War I. A prominent example is the 1932 version of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (d Frank Borzage). A quiet priest (Jack La Rue), a large cross on his jacket, visits the wounded Frederick in hospital, bringing him gifts, mosquito net, vermouth, British newspapers. He declares his hatred for the war. When Mary comes into the room, he realises Mary and Frederick's love but is aware they are not married. He moves to the wall, turning and reciting quietly the prayers of the marriage ceremony. The couple ask whether this is the marriage service and realise it is, Mary, pleased that she is dressed in white, imagining the smell of orange blossoms and the sound of organ music. They are happy and the priest turns to them, telling them they have made him happy and that he blesses them in God's name. Hemingway himself converted to Catholicism. This is a more gentle, sympathetic pastoral approach to a couple and marriage by an Italian priest, less severe and judgmental than many priests in the Irish tradition.

Alberto Sordi appeared as Fr Galli in the 1957 version of *A Farewell to Arms* (d Charles Vidor), an Italian priest—there was no priest

in *In Love and War* (1996, d Richard Attenborough), the story of Hemingway's personal experience in World War I Italy.

From descriptions, an interesting film to see (for far more than its religious motif) would be *Broken Lullaby* (*The Man I Killed*), directed by Ernst Lubitsch, far from his sparkling witty comedies. Released in 1932 and commercially unsuccessful, it takes up World War I themes of guilt for deaths in war and moves towards pacifism. A French doctor has killed a German soldier (reverse echoes of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930)). Rummaging through his uniform, he finds a connection through the study of music. He decides to visit the dead soldier's family. With his guilt feelings, he consults a priest (Frank Sheridan), confesses, but the priest reassures him that this death in combat does not mean that he is guilty. Dissatisfied with this advice, he goes to visit the dead man's family and bonds with them. In the early 1930s, the priest, confession and counselling are presented straightforwardly, the expected behaviour of a priest.

The confession scene appears in Francois Ozon's free adaptation of *Broken Lullaby*, *Frantz* (2016), a very moving version where the dead German's fiancée goes to confession because she has not told the dead man's parents about what actually happened to their son, leaving them joy in their bonding with the Frenchman. The confessions scene shows the priest (Torsten Michaelis) as a listener, sympathetic, affirming the young woman in 'the purity of her intentions', stating that there is nothing to be gained in telling the parents what really happened.

The Garden of Allah was remade fewer than ten years after its second silent version as one of the earliest of colour films in 1935 (d Richard Boleslawski). This time the popular heartthrob, Charles Boyer, is Boris the monk who encounters a femme fatale, Domini, played by Marlene Dietrich. The film is highly melodramatic, its colour locations exotic and the plot seems a fantasy world far away from ordinary church life let alone life in a monastery. The story was more than a touch sensational at this period of the Catholic Church in the twentieth century—and it ends up, as the Motion Picture Code would have liked, with Boris seeing the error of his ways and returning to the monastery. This is reminiscent of the Australian *The Monk and the Woman* though with a more contemporary setting.

A note on a picture of a priest in 1934, a brief adaptation of GK Chesterton's Father Brown, Father Brown, *Father Brown, Detective*

(d Edward Sedgwick). It is the story, to be filmed in twenty years' time, as Father Brown, with Alec Guinness, 'The Blue Cross'. Walter Connolly, sporting an accent, touches of Irish, touches of American, is the jovial, pipe-smoking Father Brown, intent on helping the police but also intent on saving the soul of the suave a, Flambeau (Paul Lukas). The performance fits into the portrayal of genial priests at the time (even though Chesterton himself was quoted as not liking the performance). A number of Fr Brown films and television series will be considered later.

Fr Brown was not the only sleuth. A mysteries-reading bishop, presumably Episcopalian (Edmund Gwenn) goes on a tour of British Cathedrals with his sister and encounters a young woman who wants to organise a robbery to avenge her father who has suffered through embezzlement. The title, *The Bishop Misbehaves* (1935. d AE Dupont). Engagingly serious and comic, and a very nice bishop.

Poirot and a priest? Not too many priests in Agatha Christie's mysteries. Curiously, one has been interpolated into the 2017 *Murder on the Orient Express* (d Kenneth Branagh). To illustrate the prowess of Hercule Poirot, there is a prologue to the train ride in Jerusalem at the Wailing Wall. A rabbi, a priest and an imam are the suspects in a robbery. Actually, they are innocent—the police chief is the culprit.

Spencer Tracy

While Spencer Tracy and Pat O'Brien were the archetypal Catholic priests of 1930s films, there was another image of a priest, Episcopalian rather than Catholic, who embodied some of the best qualities of a priest, devotion to the church, outreach to people in need, and a sense of humour as well as common sense. He is found, the Rev Hartley, in the small MGM comedy-drama, *Polly of the Circus* (1932, d Alfred Santell). It is Clark Gable in a clerical collar and suit. When posters for the Circus, with Polly in tights, are covered with skirts and dresses, and even a corset, Hartley is blamed. He explains that he is not to blame when Polly comes to the Rectory and accosts him. He says perfectly sensible things, comments about local legislation about posters, and comes to the Circus, clerically dressed, sitting with kids, enjoying the show as he says he always has. When Polly falls from the trapeze, he welcomes her to the Rectory, allows her to recover there for several weeks despite the innuendo and accusations of his alcoholic worker.

So, without any restriction by clerical celibacy, he is able to fall in love with Polly, show general affection, offer the Bible with pictures, listens to her discovery of the book of Ruth which she quotes: “where you go, I will follow”. Hartley’s uncle is the Bishop and thinks it inappropriate for his nephew to marry Polly. They do marry and the difficulty for the church congregation is their inability to accept Polly as the wife of their priest. He gets a job selling bibles, she talks to the Bishop and realises that divorce would be a scandal, so she disappears back to the circus. The Bishop relents, the couple are reunited – a model for several Episcopalian and Protestant minister films to come, Fredrick March in *One Foot in Heaven*, David Niven in *The Bishops Wife*, Richard Todd in *A Man Called Peter*, Don Murray as Norman Vincent Peel in *One Man’s Way*, Denzel Washington in *The Preacher’s Wife*.

Back to the Catholic celibate clergy. In fact, priesthood and celibacy were alive and well and unquestioned in mainstream Hollywood, especially on the MGM lot with Spencer Tracy. Tracy could bring conviction and authentic experience to his performances as a priest as he was a Catholic. In the mid to late 1930s he appeared in *San Francisco* (1936), *Boys’ Town* (1938, for which he won his second Oscar for Best Actor) and its sequel, *Men of Boys’ Town* (1941). His fourth performance as a priest was in 1962 in *The Devil at Four O’Clock*.

Spencer Tracy’s screen image for over thirty years was a rock solid, upright citizen. In *San Francisco* (1936, d WS Van Dyke), he is the 1930s ideal of the American priest. He is Fr Tim Mullen who has a mission in the city. He wears his collar. He is not ashamed of his calling. He is a man’s man, the buddy of Blackie, Clark Gable, friend of Jeanette MacDonald, confident and not afraid of women, taking celibacy for granted. Like Pat O’Brien, he would like to get his buddy back on the straight and narrow, and is more successful than O’Brien is with James Cagney. There is a scene in the gym when Tim and Blackie are sparring and Blackie provokes Tim who knocks him down.

It is reported that the administrator of the Motion Picture Code, Joseph Breen, suggested this scene was ‘to offset a later scene where Gable slugs Tracy. This way, the audience would know that Tracy was the better fighter, and the clergy would not be humiliated’. (Charles Morris in Peter Dans, *Christians in the Movies*, p.51). The 1906 earthquake is the occasion for all kinds of heroism, a search for Mary, find-

ing her singing and comforting a mother, something which moves Blackie to do some good and help as well as fall on his knees.

Tracy had the opportunity for a fuller portrayal of a priest, of real-life Fr Edward Flanagan, the founder of Boys' Town, *Boys Town* (1938, d Norman Taurog). Selfless, completely dedicated, Fr Flanagan embodies the qualities of the traditional saint (and there have been moves to promote his cause for canonization as a saint). Fr Flanagan believed that there was no such thing as a bad boy. Fr Flanagan has no time for himself, he is completely available for the boys, listening to their problems, solving them and taking no exception to whatever they tell him or how they treat him, though he does tell Whitey (Mickey Rooney), after pushing his legs off a table and his cigarette out of his mouth, 'In a pinch, I can be tougher than you are and I guess this is the pinch.'

Fr Flanagan had established a shelter for homeless men, but his experience of boys fighting in the street and being hauled before a judge with no one to speak up for them, he offered to take responsibility for them, to take charge for good education, good conduct. He would provide a caring and practical home as an alternative to government homes or reform schools, or prison.

He gets the bishop's permission and blessing, persuades a local editor to hold off on attacks on his work because he does not believe in the philosophy of good boys and sternly believes that Fr Flanagan's work is a 'criticism of things as they are'. They discuss the case of an eleven-year old boy found guilty of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment without taking account of his witnessing his father's brutality towards his mother. Still, the editor believes that the foundation principle of Boys Town is sentimental nonsense. This comes to a head with Fr Flanagan's taking on a criminal's brother, Whitey, involving a bank robbery and killing which has the potential to destroy Boys Town.

Money is always a problem and Fr Flanagan relies on the power or prayer and a miracle or two. He borrows money (and money and more money) from his pawn shop friend, Dave Morris, who becomes his administrator. 'I have made lies out of figures all my life—I serve my country and my creator.'

Whitey finishes up as the mayor of Boys Town, something that was developed in the sequel.

Commentators note that with the release of the film, audiences thought that Boys Town was prospering and had no need for donations. Better PR was one of the reasons for the sequel, *Men of Boys Town* (1941, d Norman Taurog), reminding audiences of the values of the first film and showing the need for new wings at Boys Town and increasing accommodation instead of reform schools. Fr Flanagan still has financial problems. The screenplay amplifies Fr Flanagan's comment on bad boys and his aims to build character. He has a strong speeches at the end of the film to committees considering the brutality in reform schools and to the Boys Town graduation audience, 'Boys have an inflexible sense of honor and they never betray a trust. Give them confidence and they will return you loyalty. There is no redemption for youth in the lash.' Fr Flanagan is both benefactor, guide and civil reformer. The effect is neatly summarised by a blogger, 'When the music soars over heart-rending scenes and Tracy intones his philosophy of there being no such thing as a bad boy, only the hardest curmudgeon would not be moved to reach for a checkbook.' (IMDb, dglink, 31 July 2006)

The influence of *Boys Town* lasted a long time. Two telemovies took up the themes in the 1980s and 1990s.

In 1988, Art Carney played a successor of Fr Flanagan (with filming at Boys Town in Nebraska), *Miracle of the Heart* (d Georg Stanford Brown). Carney had a more genial screen presence than did Spencer Tracy. His Father O'Halloran has a similar experience to Fr Flanagan's, trying to help a troubled young man (Casey Sziemasko), reluctant at first to be at Boys Town. But, Fr O'Halloran is getting older and there is some conflict with a younger priest who is moving towards being in charge creating some tension in Boys Town.

Best to add another of Art Carney's portrayals of a priest, *Night Friend* (1988, d Peter Gerretsen). He plays Monsignor O'Brien, a compassionate priest's dedication to getting a teenage prostitute off the streets, with some interactions with local priests and his bishop.

Another telemovie comes with a great surprise. A 1996 film has two brothers trying to make their way cross country to get to Boys Town (a plotline in the original). The film is known as *The Road Home*, but also as *Brothers' Destiny* (d Dean Hamilton). That is not the surprise. The real surprise is the casting for Fr Flanagan: Mickey Rooney. Perhaps an interesting idea in theory, but Mickey Rooney? Plus the fact that he was seventy-five years at the time of filming. But,

he emulates his mentor, Spencer Tracy, in speeches about no such thing as a bad boy. Robert Prosky plays a more familiar kind of priest.

Along the same lines is *Hounds of Notre Dame* (1980, d Zale Dalen), not *the* Notre Dame, but a celebrated school in Saskatchewan. Thomas Peacocke plays Fr Athol 'Pere' Murray, a fairly rough and ready priest, not refusing a drink, heavy smoker, disapproving of others smoking (!), outspoken in his views, especially about education of children who it was said could not be educated, conservatively inclined (anti the local socialism of the time), but the builder and head of Notre Dame, bringing the boys around, disciplining them and giving them self-esteem with their success in hockey victories. Barry Morse plays the bishop who did not always see eye to eye with him. There is a strong Catholic atmosphere about the film and quite a lot of detail, images, language, especially of the 1940s.

Two years before *San Francisco*, there had been a role for a priest in the celebrated MGM *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934, d WS Van Dyke), the film John Dillinger before he was killed. On the level of faiths, this film is very interesting in its presentation of three young friends, Catholic, Jewish, Protestant. It is one of the few films of the period to be so explicit concerning Jewish characters, especially the kindly Mr Rosen who looked after the boys. (This Jewish theme appears in the two *Boys Town* films in one of the boys, Mo, who prays his grace before meals, is insulted by Whitey about his 'big schnoz—from sticking it into everyone else's business; Mo features a number of times in the films.) There is a good priest, Father Joe (Leo Carillo) who rescues the boys when they are young and keeps an eye on them. He reappears to support the William Powell character when he stands for governor.

Meanwhile, across town, Mickey Rooney is Gig Stevens whose father is executed for murder. A kindly local priest (John Wray) visits the family to console the wife and family, telling them that the condemned man sent his love but also said that he would know in a few hours what they all guessed at (*The Devil is a Sissy*, 1936, d WS Van Dyke)).

At the same time there was a Spencer Tracy-like priest in *Border-town* (1935, d Archie L Mayo), Robert Barrat as the Padre—stern and solemn, with no trace of Tracy priestly charisma. Johnny Ramirez (Paul Muni) is from a tough area of Los Angeles, the Mexican section, rough in his growing up, putting himself at night through Law

School, with the encouragement of his mother and the priest who are proudly present at his graduation. Things do not go well and he has a heart-to-heart with the Padre, vowing that his main aim in life from now on will be making money, the priest unable to persuade him otherwise. In fact, in a Tijuana-like town, he manages clubs, is trusted by the bosses, builds a glamorous night spot for the elite but is disappointed when he is still looked down on, considered 'savage', by white society. The Padre turns up again for a confession and Johnny's deciding to give money to establish a Law Institute in his neighbourhood. This is the kind of priest that Warner Brothers took for granted in the films of the period Henry B. Walthall plays the imagined ideal of the priest in *The Sin of Nora Moran* (1932, d Paul Goldstone), kindly with an orphan meeting prospective parents, encouraging her in her ambitions after the deaths of her adoptive parents, and his voice heard as Nora is about to be executed for murder reciting with feeling that traditional Catholic prayer for the dead, "Eternal Rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them". There is a priest at an execution in *This is My Affair* (1937, d William A Seiter), a story of secret agents in the McKinley-Roosevelt era, so modern, only thirty years or more after the events. One of the accused is guilty, the other innocent, so not wanting a priest who is sympathetic, offering forgiveness, nonetheless (Joseph Crehan). (There was also a stern priest (uncredited) seen briefly in *Blondie Johnson* (1933, d Ray Enright), urging Blondie to stay on the straight and narrow.)

Pat O'Brien

Over at the Warner Brothers lot, things were always a little bit tougher, not as glossy or finely finished as at MGM. The Warners' priest was Pat O'Brien, American with the Irish heritage and the Irish touch. Here, the priest could come from the wrong side of the American tracks. He is Fr Jerry Connolly, whose boyhood pal, James Cagney, could end up as a gangster in *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938, d Michael Curtiz). This film came out the same year as *Boys Town* and there are many parallels between Fr Flanagan and Fr Connolly, except that the New York Neighbourhoods were far grimmer than the institution in Nebraska. Commentators have noted that this was an era of Catholic social activism, encouraged by the social teaching of Pope Pius XI, especially with his Encyclical Letter, *Quadragesimo Anno*, *In the 40th*

year, 1931, issued on the 40th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's ground-breaking 1891 Encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, *Of New Matters*.

'What earthly good is it for me to teach that honesty is the best policy when all around they see that dishonesty is a better policy . . . that the hoodlum and gangster is looked up to with the same respect as the successful businessman or popular hero?' This is one of the many lines given to Fr Connolly which reinforce this strong image of the priest. ' . . . an isolated playground is not rooting out the crime itself. We must rid ourselves of criminal parasites . . . We must wipe out those we have ignorantly elected and those who control this diseased officialdom behind locked doors.' In the 1940s, these priests would be the courageous war chaplains. Fr Barry, in *On the Water-front*, is the 1950s version.

The film did have a priest adviser but the two Catholic stars offered opinions to the Jewish director, Michael Curtiz, on how ritual scenes should be handled, especially, O'Brien and Cagney confronting each other in the aisles of the church rather than with a confessional sequence with its ritual and the seal of confession (Keyzers, 64) Symbolising good and evil, the priest and the gangster, longtime friends, could come together at the gallows. The priest, praying and accompanying the condemned man to execution became a convention, but here the priest is still a counsellor, drawing on the contacts of the past. The priest could comfort the repentant gangster and look heavenwards with a seraphic gaze at the redemption that had been achieved

Fr Connolly is also a pragmatist and Rocky allows him to tell the kids that he died a coward so that they would be discouraged in the gang ambitions. Interestingly, Fr Connolly was not part of the sequel, *Angels Wash Their Faces* (1939, d Ray Enright). However, there was an echo of the Fr Connolly priest (uncredited) in *They Made Me a Criminal* (1939, d Busby Berkeley), with Dead End kid equivalents as well as a touch of the *Boys Town* kind of priest.

A Key Film of the 1930s: The Fighting 69th

Warner Bros made the World War I action film, *The Fighting 69th* (d William Keighley) just before the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 and released it in January 1940. Its core plot is a variation on the *Angels with Dirty Faces* plot. This time James Cagney is a brash and

self-centred soldier who puts his men in danger. Pat O'Brien is the army chaplain who tries to instil some values into Cagney. At the end, after proving himself a coward, he finally comes to his senses and sees a way to redeem himself.

The Fighting 69th was released prior to America's entering into World War Two. The setting this time is World War One and America's part in the battles in France after 1917.

The Fighting 69th is about a crack Irish regiment from New York City, with a long tradition from the time of the Civil War on. George Brent portrays the real-life Major Wild Bill Donovan. Pat O'Brien portrays the real Father Duffy, chaplain to the Fighting 69th (whose statue is still in Times Square with a tribute).

Many of Warner Bros' character actors contribute to the personnel of the Fighting 69th, especially Alan Hale. Jeffrey Lynn portrays the actual poet, the Catholic Joyce Kilmer, with several of his poems. Kilmer was killed in action in France. Of interest is the portrayal by Sammy Cohen of Mike Murphy, a New York Jew who wanted to fight with the 69th and assumed the Irish name and accent.

The film shows the training in a US camp, the transfer to France, and, in quite some detail, the trench warfare, the loss of men, the difficulties of bombardment as well as a scene in a hospital which is also bombed. These scenes are quite graphic.

The focus of the action, however, is on James Cagney as a loud-mouthed New York type. Always boasting, fighting, alienating everybody, he goes to France continuing to boast but fails under fire, sending up a flare which lights the trenches and causes the death of many of his comrades. He is court-martialled. Later in action, he runs away leaving his gun. He is put under care and is to be executed as a deserter. However, Father Duffy has always had faith in him, urging him along. When the hospital is bombarded, Cagney has a conversion experience and goes out to fight, with Alan Hale, firing mortars on enemy lines, being wounded and finally dying.

Of particular interest is the religious treatment of the war, Father Duffy's work, pastoral care of soldiers. It must be one of the most Catholic films coming from Warner Bros during the 1930s and 40s. Fr Duffy is a great friend with Bill Donovan, with some influence with him about the men and morale. There are scenes of confessions, Midnight Mass, the singing of 'Silent Night', the advice by Father Duffy, seeing him in prayer. He is a strong Irish Catholic priest, traditional, a soldier, mixing with the men, breaking up fights.

His pastoral concern is seen in his relationship with Jerry, trying to encourage him, having faith in him, persuading Bill Donovan to give him another chance. A surprise sequence for 1940 is the death of Mike Murphy. He is wounded, Father Duffy praying with him, the Our Father, but then reciting the Shemah Israel, Father Duffy continuing in Hebrew. Before Jerry's execution, Fr Duffy anoints him and quotes Jesus and the Gospel, the shepherd who searches for the one leaving the ninety-nine behind.

The film ends with a rousing appeal to patriotism in 1940, showing Father Duffy, his statue, hearing his words about America as a beacon for peace—and this must be the only film which ends with the words, 'Through Christ our Lord, Amen.'

In the spirit of the Catholic themes of the 1930s films is *Cinderella Man* (2005, d Ron Howard), the story of 1920s successful boxer and his comeback in the 1930s, James J Broderick is a Catholic, though when he experiences hardships during the Depression, he tells his devout wife he is 'all prayed out'. There is a nice touch at the end when he faces his tough bout against world heavyweight champion, Max Baer. His friends and supporters from his New Jersey neighbourhood gather in the local church and the parish priest, just what Pat O'Brien might have done, sets up the radio there for everyone to listen in.

Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story

This is a useful place and context to consider a 1996 film, *Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story* (d Michael Ray Rhodes). It is another 1990s film that takes audiences back to the 1930s New York, issues of poverty and a Catholic response. However, the central character is activist Dorothy Day, a journalist who belonged to the intellectual left-leaning and Communist sympathiser group (seen in the early sequences of Warren Beatty's *Reds* (1981) including Eugene O'Neill, seen in this film. She had a concern for the poor and for social issues. After her conversion to Catholicism, she established the *Catholic Worker* and housing and shelters for New York's homeless during the Depression and until her death in 1980. Her cause for Beatification has been introduced in Rome.

But, as the film shows, clergy were not always supporters. Initial letters to the *Catholic Worker*, including a priest calling them 'social-

ist psychotics'. After a sequence where she is applauded for her work, with priests in the audience as well as the Cardinal, she has a visit from the Cardinal (Brian Keith). He brings a bagful of mail ('mostly negative'). She is also criticised for denouncing Franco ('who has murdered priests and nuns and burnt churches'), supporting the Communist Seamen's Union and feeding the members' wives and families. She argues that just because Communists are for something that Catholics have to be against it. She notes that Jesus never had a loyalty test from those he fed. The Cardinal and Dorothy have a discussion about the Sermon on the Mount, on loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute Jesus' followers. She is strong on non-violence, that violence never solved anything.

The Cardinal tells her that many Catholics consider she is a Communist infiltrator to destroy the Church. Dorothy makes the famous statement: 'If you feed the poor, you are a saint; if you ask why they are poor, you are a Communist'. The Cardinal's reply is that she threatens people by her whole way of living, that she asks uncomfortable questions. He also suggests that her work is all about ego, playing the great mother saviour of the poor.

He wants her to take out the word 'Catholic' from *Catholic Worker*. She refuses and threatens to move into the archdiocese of Brooklyn. 'You wouldn't.' 'I would.' And the Cardinal tells her that they never told us about people like you in the seminary. He says it will be a hard path for her, telling people things they don't want to hear. 'Giving and getting nothing back. I couldn't do it.'

While Leo XIII and the pope of the time, Pius XI, wrote and taught extensively on social justice, *Entertaining Angels* is a reminder that many, so many, of the clergy had not heard or absorbed this teaching.

This is the same ministry as for Fr Flanagan with his boys but the angels with dirty faces did not always follow good advice in time. As with Tracy, both O'Brien and Cagney were Catholics who could draw on experience to portray these confrontations authentically.

Supporting Role Priests

A priest in *Werewolf of London* (1935, d Stuart Walker) is not an expected character. Botanist, Dr Glendon, is in Tibet in search of a rare and seemingly rapacious flower. When a stranger on a camel rides into view all the local guides fearfully run off. The stranger is a

priest who greets, and farewells, in Latin, says that he has not seen a white man for forty years, is powerful in his warnings for the botanist not to pursue his quest and states that, though a rational man, he does give credence to local superstitions. He then rides off, quite an enigmatic priest.

Henry O'Neill was a popular, generally dignified presence in many films of the 1930s and 1940s. He is a priest in the musical vehicle for child singer, Bobby Breen, *Rainbow on the River* (1936, d Kurt Neumann). The boy is cared for by a former slave who wants the best education for him. It is the priest who discovers the boy has family in New York where he is sent. He is also a priest in Monterey in the film version of John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* (1942, d Victor Fleming), advising an old man, The Pirate (Frank Morgan), who is collecting money to buy a candle for St Francis in remembrance of his old dog.

A touch of the exotic: Indochine, with its French colonial background was Catholic, evident in *Lady of the Tropics* (1939, d Jack Conway), Hedy Lamarr as mixed-race, caught in a story derived from *Manon Lescaut* in difficult relationships and relying on advice from a priest (Ernest Cossart).

Sympathetic priests could turn up in Warner Brothers films of the period. In a small drama with Pat O'Brien, *The Great O'Malley* (1937, d William Dieterle), O'Brien plays a New York cop whose rigid interpretation of city ordinances leads him to harm people. He learns from his mistakes, sometimes with the help of his sympathetic (Irish) parish priest, Fr Patrick (Frank Sheridan) who is also kind to the family who suffers because of his harshness. Pat O'Brien was to have another chance at playing a priest in a 1948 film that would have been at home ten years earlier, *Fighting Father Dunne*. It was based on the story of Fr Peter Dunne, a priest very like Fr Flanagan, who cared for the orphaned newsboys of St Louis.

A priest (Fritz Leiber) is listed in the cast of *Sins of Man* (1936, d Otto Brower, Gregory Ratoff). The brief IMDb synopsis is: Austrian church bell ringer Freyman loves music and wants his two sons (both played by Ameche) to love it too. The first goes to America and the second is born deaf-mute but gains hearing during WWI bombing. Written by Ed Stephan <stephan@cc.wvu.edu> Googling provides no further information.

Brother Orchid (1940, d Lloyd Bacon) is something of an anomaly, a surprise. It begins conventionally enough, like many another Warner Brothers gangster film, with Edward G. Robinson playing Little

John T, Johnny Sarto. He goes to France and returns after trying to get some class in his life and manner. However, he discovers that his second-in-charge, played by a sinister Humphrey Bogart, has taken over his gang. He takes refuge in a monastery – and his life is transformed and he becomes Brother Orchid.

The picture of monastic life is very sympathetic with Donald Crisp as the superior and Cecil Kellaway as one of the monks (who include Charles D Brown, Wilfrid Lucas, Joseph Crehan). The gangster learns class in the monastery, also learns something of self-sacrifice, giving money to the poor (instead of getting watermelon for dessert for the monastic dinner). However, Brother Orchid does return to the world when he reads about his fiancée and her intended marriage to Ralph Bellamy. In the outside world, he puts into practice what he learnt in the monastery, giving his money away—and finally returning to the monastery. This might have acted as a moving vocations film and recruitment for the period! In later decades, it seems a gentle comedy and something of a light parody of the gangster films.

It is surprising how many priests there are in Warner Bros films in the 1930s and the sympathetic presentation. An early glimpse is seen in *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (1932, d Michael Curtiz). Spencer Tracy, doing a Cagney turn as a tough kind of Dead End Kid, is on Death Row. There is the final scene of the priest (uncredited) and prayer which Tracy appreciates but wants to be alone. But, before that, there is an agreeable short sequence where the priest, in soutane, plays handball with Tracy who appreciates the game, then the priest says he wishes he could do something for Tracy's soul.

The Last Mile (1932, d Sam Bischoff) means the steps from death row to gallows. Walter, a young man who is innocent is condemned to die. The main action takes place in the cells with a range of condemned men. One is Jewish and is visited by a Rabbi, praying Psalms in Hebrew. There are other tough guys, especially Killer Mears who scorns religion, who overcome the quite sadistic guards and break out, the young man with them. He has been visited by Fr O'Connor who prays with him, talking very personally with him about his life, his work, his mother. Fr O'Connor is then put in the cell when Killer Mears starts the jailbreak, arguing with Mears about prayer, faith, but finally persuading him to help the wounded Walter. He is given more screen time than most of the prison chaplains in the films of the 1930s. *The Last Mile* was remade in 1959 (d Howard W Koch) with Mickey Rooney and Frank Overton as Fr O'Connors.