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Telling the Good News

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TELLING THE GOOD NEWS

BY ALLYSON ESCOBAR

“If you allow me, in the place of a regular homily today, I would like to talk about the elephant in the room—or, better, the elephant in the Church.”

This was how Father Todd Riebe, the pastor at Christ the King Catholic Church in Indianapolis, began his [homily](#) during Mass on August 20, 2018—just days after a Pennsylvania grand jury released a 1,400-page [report](#) revealing the names of 300 Catholic priests accused of child molestation over the last seven decades, in multiple dioceses in Pennsylvania.

“Good and faithful Catholics have been scandalized by what should be unthinkable...that some priests have acted as wolves, rather than shepherds, weighs heavily on all priests,” Fr. Todd said, noting the “anger, disappointment, and betrayal” many active Catholics—priests included—felt in the wake of the report’s release.

The pastor was frank about how the news would change the way the Catholic Church and its people—both laypersons, or members of the church, and leaders in the clergy—are viewed forever.

In light of the report and other [global clergy abuse scandals](#)—many of which have ongoing investigations—it has been a very divided time in the Roman Catholic Church.

The way Catholicism is portrayed in mainstream media, particularly in secular news coverage and entertainment, can put forth a negative public image of the faith. From seemingly endless clergy abuse stories in the news, to vilifying portrayals of Catholic icons and figures in entertainment, a cloud of scourging negativity weighs over the church hierarchy entirely.

But beyond the lingering cloud are headlines of hope, examples of steadfast faith, especially among religious men and women, and widespread calls for lasting, actionable change.

Over the past two decades in the United States, headlines tell a harrowing story: from *The Boston Globe* Spotlight investigation team’s award-winning report, “[Church allowed abuse by priest for years](#),” to the *New York Times*’ “[Pope Francis Long Knew of Cardinal’s Abuse and Must Resign, Archbishop Says](#).”

When covering these issues, the media does two important things: prompt [widespread, immediate action](#) for a problem that should have never taken root, and holds religious leaders and institutions accountable for covering up the story.

The *Globe*’s [in-depth investigation](#) resulted in church documents being released, a “[zero tolerance](#)” [policy](#) for abusers, the prosecutions of five former priests, and the coming-forward of victims and [organizations](#) dedicated to purging the Church of corruption and cover-ups.

“Prosecutors, judges, and politicians who once looked the other way when it came to the church’s dirty laundry are now holding the cardinal and other church leaders to a higher standard,” Spotlight team’s Kevin Cullen [wrote](#) in 2002, noting how “deference traditionally shown the Catholic Church has eroded.”

“Here is the U.S., the Catholic Church has been in turmoil,” *NPR* [said](#) on its December 26, 2018 Morning Edition. Other headlines are more pointed, using phrases like “[still getting worse](#)” and even “[worldwide conspiracy](#)” to describe the centuries-old church.

When “Catholic Church” is [searched](#) on Google Trends, “scandal” is the number one related topic around the world.

The church’s active membership and attendance teeters between steady and declining; though [not quite growing either](#). Like any institution headlined by humans, it is nowhere near perfect, but the level of scrutiny in the mainstream media does not tell the whole story.

According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University, the number of [former Catholics](#)—those raised in the faith, but who no longer self-identify—increased to 30 million. Though there cannot be a way to know why people are leaving the church, perhaps reading all of the negativity in headlines can influence.

Fair, objective analysis is necessary to protect not only the roughly [1.3 billion active Catholics](#) in the world, but to inform all who agree that intolerance can no longer be tolerated.

While the rest of the world is seeing Catholicism through a negative lens, particularly in mainstream and entertainment media; meanwhile, the Church itself is having her own conversations on representation, among the different ranks of leadership, media, and active Catholics.

When people see the same TV images, headlines, and stories flashing constantly, it influences how and what they think.

“Mainstream coverage is usually always relegated to scandal, particularly when it involves pedophilia and the priesthood. That has a negative affect on how Americans of all faiths view Catholics,” said Clemente Lisi, a Catholic journalist and professor at The King’s College. “Catholic media has often failed to be critical enough, while the mainstream press has gone the other way.”

But among Catholic media, which is often associated with being “fluff” or uncritical of itself, the conversation is changing. It’s more than just “improving one’s image” or being weighed down by the headlines.

Catholic reporters and publications are daring to be more critical of church hierarchy, especially of bishops and Pope Francis, and upholding accountability as the highest priority.

By endorsing action and accountability (beyond the standard “thoughts and prayers”), media can maintain that better representation matters. It’s all about making informed and diverse choices.

2018’s crop of U.S. clergy abuse stories are [harrowing](#) and [tough to swallow](#), starting with the church [settling multiple cases of sexual harassment](#) against former [Cardinal Theodore McCarrick](#), who reportedly abused of multiple teenage boys and seminarians while he was a priest.

Because of the investigations and in-depth reporting of both mainstream and religious press, those in higher ranks—who once willfully protected predatory priests—are being accused, [stepping down](#) from positions of power. Abusers are, finally, being held accountable for their actions. Church leaders are reportedly [taking action](#), looking more closely into how individual dioceses handle with these crimes, and how history seems to keep repeating itself.

At least 16 states, from California to New Jersey, have begun their own in-depth probes into their local archdioceses. Since 2003, an ongoing ["abuse tracker"](#) has kept track of ongoing worldwide media coverage of the abuse crisis, and seems to be updated daily—in multiple languages.

Crushed by the stink of headlines, many within the church also stand on divided lines. Betrayed, disappointed Catholics are demanding immediate action from the “powers-that-be” at the Vatican.

Lisi, who [writes](#) often about the holes in Catholic coverage, emphasized the importance of conservative [websites](#) and people who have been “unafraid to go after Pope Francis, and what they see as his inability to lead the church.”

“The internal battle between conservatives and liberals within the church has been exposed publicly through media coverage. That is why conservative blogs have done a lot of good work being critical of the Pope, whom they view as progressive.”

In late August, a former Vatican diplomat and one of Pope Francis’s staunch critics, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, published a scathing 7,000-word [letter](#) claiming the Vatican was complicit in covering up knowledge of McCarrick’s abuse since 2013, and [calling for Francis to resign](#).

“I had always believed and hoped that the hierarchy of the Church could find within itself the spiritual resources and strength to tell the whole truth, to amend and to renew itself,” Viganò wrote.

After renewed news of clergy abuse broke, some [bishops](#) and conservative outlets blamed the crisis on homosexuality, adding more fuel to the fire. In Atlanta, thousands signed a [petition](#) demanding the Archbishop purge priests “who promote the L.G.B.T. agenda.” In Chicago, a local priest [burned a rainbow flag](#) in defiance, then led parishioners in a prayer of exorcism against gays.

Furthermore, Catholics were disappointed after the Vatican [delayed a crucial action vote](#) in November by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), the episcopal governing body of America's bishops.

Concrete action against predatory priests and nasty corruption in an otherwise beautiful, centuries-old worldwide faith tradition has yet to happen.

"While it is important and necessary on every journey of conversion to acknowledge the truth of what has happened, in itself this is not enough," Pope Francis [wrote](#) in a letter addressing the issue, days the Pennsylvania grand jury report was released.

Omission and silence is not the pastoral response the Church needs, Francis said. She needs solidarity from within: between both its "progressive liberals" and traditional conservatives.

"Every American Catholic I know is angry—with good reason," [wrote](#) Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit priest and editor-at-large of the Jesuit-run *America Magazine*. "Chief among those enraged are victims and their families...whose lives have been destroyed by sexual violence....I have been deluged with emails from Catholics saying, 'I don't know how I can stay in the church.'"

Fr. Martin adds that many Catholics—priests included—have had their faith shaken to the core, "poleaxed" by these new stories and [ongoing investigations](#).

American Catholics are in an era that "feels understandably like another death," [wrote](#) *NY Times* Catholic columnist Ross Douthat, "in which the saints seem hidden, the would-be prophets don't agree with one another, the reformers keep losing. And it's all-too understandable that people would choose to leave a dying church. But it is the season's promise, and in the long run its testable hypothesis, that those who stay and pray and fight will see it improbably reborn."

At the end of a grueling year, [hope](#) in the darkness is what keeps Catholics going, especially those in media working to uphold truth and bring the faith back to light.

One nation, united, under...God? Religion in the News

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press..."

[First Amendment, U.S. Constitution]

Conversations happening within the Catholic Church are essential in bringing about lasting change to its negative public image. Yet mainstream media is only telling part of a larger, more complicated story.

Religion—and the free exercise of it—comes first of the Five Freedoms in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Yet organized religion remains one of the least covered beats in U.S. mainstream media today.

What are millions of Americans doing on Sundays? How are they living out their respected faith traditions? The holes are too far to count.

Reports show that religion stories have declined dramatically since the mid-20th century, and in 2010, religion coverage [topped](#) at 2 percent of all mainstream media coverage, coming in fourth after politics, foreign affairs, and the economy.

“As crucial as religion has been and is to the life of the nation, America's unifying force has never been a specific faith, but a commitment to freedom—not least freedom of conscience,” wrote former *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham in his controversial April 2009 [cover story](#). “At our best, we single religion out for neither particular help nor particular harm; we have historically treated faith-based arguments as one element among many, in the republican sphere of debate and decision.”

In the last five years, 7 in 10 Americans [have said](#) that religion is overall losing its influence in American life. Despite this, most Americans (about three-quarters of adults) still believe in God, according to a 2017 [Gallup poll](#).

But the “nones”—those who don't identify with a religion, including those who have fallen out—also rose 15 to 21 percent.

Only 42 percent of the public reported having a “great deal” of confidence in organized religion, the lowest Gallup finding in over 40 years. In contrast, more than two-thirds (68 percent) expressed confidence in organized religion, [reported](#) the Public Religion Research Institute.

Though [annual surveys](#) exist regarding racial and gender diversity in the newsroom, which also has a ways to go, there is little data on religion coverage and representation.

Terry Mattingly, who runs [GetReligion.org](#), a blog that analyzes the way religion is covered in the mainstream, says that there's no easy answer to the puzzle of why don't editors want to cover, or even talk about, America's ever-changing religious landscape.

As newsrooms become more and more secularized and religion desks are [shrinking](#), less than [a quarter of Americans](#) are talking about God.

“I do think journalism tends to attract pretty highly secular, progressive kind of person,” Mattingly said. “I believe is that there are huge divides in America, from big urban swaths to middle America, and that translates a lot into the way religion is largely portrayed.”

Mattingly says the issue also has to do with an outlet's budget, as well as its lack of practicing *religious* reporters. There is a significant lack of recent data regarding religious affiliation and representation in the newsroom.

In 2007, [The Poynter Institute](#) pointed out that only 8 percent of journalists surveyed at national publications—such as the *NY Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *CNN*—attended worship services regularly.

“Editors don’t think it’s ‘important enough’ news,” said Mattingly. “Why? This is the subject I’ve been trying to answer my whole life.”

In 2011, stories about faith accounted for less than 1 percent (0.7 percent) of all mainstream media coverage—including print, online and broadcast publications—[reported](#) Pew Research Center in its last “Religion in the News” analysis.

Religion is too often misconstrued as “radical,” even other-worldly. “The faithful” are often lumped into the same basket as the bad seeds.

“When religion did make news, it was often because of accusations about extremism or intolerance,” wrote researcher Jesse Holcolmb, citing examples of Islamic terrorist stories or extremist cults mistakenly confused for religious traditions. “An analysis of the past five years of religion coverage suggests that interest in religion tends to be heavily event-driven, at least at the top of the media agenda.”

Religion reporters at secular publications are also generally overstretched, expected to cover a beat of too much breadth. It impedes their ability to understand basic traditions within the church, to develop proper contacts within, and to understand the nuances of religion.

“As a consequence, many religion writers rely, often unknowingly, on cultural tropes to present a stereotype of what’s happening, without understanding or presenting fairly the details and subtlety—and those things matter. That has serious impact on how the Catholic Church is perceived,” said JD Flynn, editor-in-chief of *Catholic News Agency*, by email.

Flynn added that there are exceptions, especially with the way many secular publications and journalists covered the recent abuse scandals. But, he says, the whole story isn’t being told.

Catholic journalists play a crucial role in finding, reporting, and making sure other stories beyond the negative are told.

“Even there, there is a great deal of context that’s lost or unappreciated,” he continued. “The Catholic Church is an organization of one billion people. It is extraordinarily diverse. While the recent sex scandals have put the focus on the hierarchy, there are many stories not being told, or told intelligently.”

Language, as well as context, also matters when it comes to the “sell,” or what editors decide will get the most clicks in a publication. It’s ultimately a choice of including both the good with bad news.

There are hundreds of other stories that go beyond abuse and leadership scandal: for example, the way Catholic organizations, laity, religious men and women [mobilized](#) to help separated immigrant families at the U.S.-Mexico border, or how [a group of Dominican nuns are helping to save an endangered salamander species](#).

But these kinds of stories aren't as acknowledged, simply because editors—who are focused at numbers, and care less and less about religious coverage—don't know about it.

“Religion has a very negative connotation, that everything's just bad...but there are also so many beautiful stories of coping, human interest, service, of sanctity, having faith and searching for the divine,” said David Gibson, director of the [Center on Religion and Culture](#) at Fordham University, which “seeks to enrich and elevate the public conversation about religion.”

Gibson says these tales of faith and human interest are very appealing to people, not just Catholics or those who follow a religion. “These stories are also very big part of the church's story.”

But the bad news isn't to be forsaken. Catholic journalists covering the clergy abuse scandal, and other tough issues within the church (including abortion, women in the priesthood, and how leaders treat the LGBTQ community) hold it to an even higher standard.

“We should not blame the people of God for the sins of the hierarchy,” [wrote](#) Jesuit priest Thomas in *Religion News Service*, calling on newspaper editors to quit substituting the term “church” for “bishops” and leaders who are responsible for the sex abuse crisis. “If the hierarchy had been open with the laity about the [crisis], if the bishops had listened to the people, we would not be in the mess we are today.”

“Investigative journalists have become a real counter-power and advocate for the Catholic laity especially. Journalists are playing a huge theological and ecclesiological role,” [tweeted](#) historian and journalist Massimo Faggioli on Dec. 20.

Catholic journalism plays an important role in “demonstrating, not just talking about, transparency,” Greg Erlandson, who has served as editor-in-chief of *Catholic News Service* since 2016, [wrote](#). “It is a way of demonstrating, and not just talking about, accountability...Catholic journalists serve the church by not ducking the bad news and not forgetting the good news.”

An iconic [TIME magazine cover story from 1966](#) angered thousands of conservative and religious readers when its author, then religion editor John Elson, asked the question, “*Is God Dead?*”

Over 50 years later, those concerned with the state of religion in the United states are asking the same thing.

“A journalism that ignores or dismisses the role of religion in our common life misses the greatest stories of our time,” writes columnist and speechwriter Michael J. Gerson in the foreword of *Blind*

Spot: When Journalists Don't Get Religion. “This is quite a story—the voice of God, urging persistence in a movement of social reform that transformed America. And it is not uncommon in our history, because dissent often requires courage, and courage is often rooted in faith. Any journalist who cares about dissent and reform must take religion seriously.”

Religion journalists who cover this beat play a role in observing, sharing and even shaping the narrative. Few reporters are aware of the limited scope of religion coverage in mainstream, secular publications—and some trying to change that.

Since the early '90s, journalist David Gonzalez has written about the Catholic Church for *The New York Times*. He's reported on everything from [patron saints](#) and New York Catholic school closures, to religious education and the faithfulness of immigrants, and says his Catholic upbringing has helped him get closer to the story.

Around the time Gonzalez first started at the *Times*, his editor assigned him to cover a local homicide, dismissing a story he had pitched regarding Catholics and the environment.

“It always struck me that they would be willing to pull you off your religion story to do something else, and it's never like, let's pull somebody off something else off to do a religion story—unless it's about a Pope,” he shared on an [episode](#) of *Jesuitical*, a Catholic podcast for young adults from America Media. “I'm trying to write religion stories about people's lives. I wanted to present a view of Catholicism that portrayed us as real people, not these cutouts.”

Gonzalez says religion coverage today “waxes and wanes” in the mainstream. He has since covered other religious traditions, earning national recognition and even awards for several of his religion stories.

His approach to covering Catholic news is to “avoid sweeping generalizations,” and to always have a wide range of sources—both from the hierarchy to the opinion of the faithful, and not “lapsed Catholics who feel entitled to opine, despite not having participated in the Church or local parish for decades.”

“I have tried to show the role of faith in daily life, as well as the Church as a mediating institution that has helped the larger good through its works,” he said by email.

Many Catholic journalists call on mainstream outlets to recruit more journalists who practice faith, and to cover the Catholic Church fairly—beyond its long-standing, monolithic stereotypes—and to stop considering faith-based, human interest stories as “soft news.”

Journalists who practice a faith “tend to recognize, in a way that the larger culture does not, that there can be a gap between one's religious belief, and one's day-to-day practice of them,” said *America Magazine* editor James Keane, citing the many Catholics who remain good neighbors with divorcees and members of the LGBTQ community, despite the Church's stance.

Cindy Wooden, the Rome bureau chief at *Catholic News Service*, agreed that “faith can increase one’s understanding of the story and provide access to sources. Writing about a religion one does not belong to can give rise to questions essential for understanding the story.”

“Given the turn of events this summer, where sex abuse has taken center stage, I think the Church has been significantly covered. Public perception is definitely shaped by this, as much of Catholic media is focused on inside baseball, whereas mainstream media has the chance to shape the broader narrative,” said Christopher White, who covers church news and trends for [Crux](#) and [The Tablet](#). “The greatest thing readers could better understand is the range of opinions and diversity within the Church, which is far from a homogenous institution.”

Negative portrayals and headlines aren’t limited to news. In the entertainment world, members of the church are often mined for sensationalist entertainment.

While Biblical biopics and dramas with heavy Christian themes are present (ie. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, or *Hacksaw Ridge*), a quick Google search will reveal [hundreds](#) more horror films with supernatural, scandalous or violent—but noticeably Catholic—themes: all compelling, making for some great film and TV, but also quite overdone.

While it’s important the church is being talked about in the mainstream news and movies, it shouldn’t take an evil entity or bloody scandal to do it.

In the opening scene of horror film *The Nun* (2018), directed by Corin Hardy, a frightened nun hangs herself in an abandoned Romanian monastery, compelled by a shadowy figure later to be revealed as a soul-possessing demon. Vulnerable and filled with emotion, the young sister lowers a noose onto her head. Nearby, a crucifix hanging on the wall slowly spins, turns itself upside down, and erupts into flames.

For fans of a certain kind of horror film, these images are familiar and thrilling.

Catholicism’s presence in horror over the last four decades can often be described as supernatural and sinister. The mystery surrounding the centuries-old Catholic Church, with its Gothic architecture and secretive clergy, has inspired legions of horror films. Distorted, visceral representations of church sacraments, iconography and religious figures—from upside-down crosses to demonic nuns—are just some of the clichés in mainstream horror films, which [peaked](#) between the ‘60s and ‘80s.

Some even [called](#) the Catholic Church a “constant lightning rod for controversy,” functioning as a “fertile breeding ground for tales of terror, while others (Catholics included) believe such entertainment is [morally problematic](#), even tiresome and outdone.

While all horror relies on fear (those who follow the [Bible](#) would note that it's the “foundation of all wisdom”), the persistent evil in this subgenre of film can perpetuate institutional stereotypes, even an overall fear of the Catholic Church and its members—even of God Himself. Hollywood's fascination with the occult gets mixed in with ancient history and traditional religious belief.

Within Catholic circles, media representation of the church varies from overall disgust to general acceptance. However, Catholic media critics are weary of the same tiresome, stereotypical and overplayed themes and plotlines that lack actual spiritual knowledge or depth.

“American horror is a God-drenched genre,” [writes](#) Nick Ripatrazone in *America Magazine*. “The culture, theology and symbolism of Catholicism is dramatized, made a source of nostalgia, exaggerated and parodied. Catholics might not go to Mass as much as they used to, but they are still scared of the devil. In Catholicism, evil is real.”

It's no secret that Hollywood measures success in awards and box office sales. Sexy, weird, supernatural, horrific—as long as it sells.

A 2016 [poll](#) commissioned by the directors of Pure Flix's *God's Not Dead 2* indicated that moviegoers had mixed feelings about the way Hollywood treats Christianity as a whole.

“For at least the last 15 years, positive depictions tend to be limited to two categories: a) indie and foreign films, i.e., films made outside the Hollywood mainstream; and b) supernatural horror films,” [wrote](#) Steven Greydanus in *Crux Catholic*. “When the enemy is literally the devil, Catholic characters make a much better showing.”

Greydanus, a Catholic deacon, columnist and [film critic](#), called it Hollywood's “[religion problem](#).” It juxtaposes “religious-themed violence and villainy” with Catholic identity and vocation—like being an active, practicing Catholic is so other-worldly, it warrants an entire movie script. Maybe even a [franchise](#).

How Hollywood deals with religious belief and identity entirely is “disproportionately ignored,” Greydanus says, even within its longstanding [diversity problem](#).

As representation for minorities, females, and the LGBTQ community is slowly gaining ground, accurate, non-stereotypical representation among religious communities is far and few.

“It's true that not all horror films serve as mouthpieces for Christianity—there are even a few examples that condemn church leaders—but nearly any horror film that touches on the supernatural will either condemn the faithless, frame non-Jesus religions as spooky, or claim that Biblical

prophecy is coming to pass,” [wrote](#) evangelical Vice columnist Josiah Hesse, who also called these films “Christian propaganda.”

While most filmmakers won’t outright say their goal is to specifically attack Christianity, some even hope to shed some light on the faith—even in the midst of horrifying darkness.

Hector Avalos, an professor of religious studies at Iowa State University, agreed that “explicitly Christian” horror films are “propaganda with a missionary agenda.”

“Many filmmakers actually believe in the message of their films. They see their jobs as being missionaries for Christianity, and film is their missionary tool,” Prof. Avalos, an atheist, [said](#). “Fear is a missionary tool. The message is that evil is real enough to be feared, and that you should view Christianity or religion as the best answer.”

On the flip side, some Catholics believe that horror movies—even the most grotesque—can steer audiences towards heaven, to become more aware of who God is. For some, religious horror even provides a greater understanding of the Catholic Church as an institution, even when it misrepresented or understated.

In his 1999 [Letter to Artists](#), the late John Paul II pointed out that artists can bring audiences a glimpse of holiness, “even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.”

Professor Avalos said that the church is actually portrayed quite positively in horror, “as the antidote to demonic forces.”

However, it can be at first challenging to find the underlying moral message in a horror film—especially with the anti-Christ or a violent, possessed nun chasing you around. Yet many mainstream, religious-themed films, each with their own unique theology, follow this “faith defeats evil” formula. Good always prevails.

In *The Nun*, a priest summoned by the Vatican joins a young sister in her novitiate—the early stages of becoming a nun—to investigate a cursed remote abbey in 1950s Gothic Romania. They discover a demon entity has been haunting the grounds, taking the form of a vengeance-seeking nun.

Spoiler alert: a lot of the same horror cliches take place, from unseen creepy shadows suddenly grabbing at people, to silent, submissive nuns kneeled in fervent, desperate prayer, warding off the evil before being attacked themselves. *Rolling Stone* [called](#) it a “cheap narrative convenience.” (Rotten Tomatoes gave it a [26 percent rating](#) for “sinning with inconsistent logic and slacking the narrative.”)

Reactions are varied among Catholic religious men and women; priests and nuns whose lives are

solely dedicated to the upholding church, and who are most often represented in these films. (In contrast, a [2007 study from the University of Chicago](#) found the profession with the highest level of fulfillment from serving others is the clergy.)

“Religious life is a mystery of the Catholic Church—so what does Hollywood do? It inverts this mystery and tries to tell the story,” says Joan Patten, a member of the global [Institute of the Apostolic Oblates](#). “I find it not only sacrilegious, but such a stark contrast to who religious sisters are—the nun is a bride of Christ, and they’re turning her into this demon, and that’s the most opposite reaction.”

Not all religious and lay Catholics would critique representation in horror so harshly. Many of them agree that good horror doesn’t actually glorify evil. Instead, it highlights and shows evil for exactly what it is: defeatable, something that good (and God) will always overcome.

“The horror we see on screen should remind us of our need to be saved from the horror we experience in the real world,” [wrote](#) theologian JP Nunez in *Catholic Exchange*.

But in true Hollywood fashion, consistency is never in style. Salvation, the one positive side, doesn’t always play out in religious horror films, but rather, can leave viewers feeling total faithlessness and despair.

In her [review](#) for the *National Catholic Reporter*, film critic and Sister Rose Pacatte, of the Daughters of St. Paul, called *The Nun* “a scare-fest with a very thin plot, one-dimensional characters, and a premise that shows little familiarity with actual Catholicism.”

When asked what many of these films gets “wrong” about the faith, Sr. Rose says it’s largely the lack of research. “That’s the hubris of Hollywood—they don’t know what they don’t know, and they don’t even question what they know, and they don’t hire Catholic consultants.”

As founding director of the [Pauline Center for Media Studies](#), which encourages media mindfulness in the context of culture and faith formation, the sister—who says she loves action and thriller films, when done right—argued that Hollywood needs to dig deeper, rather than following stereotypes and outdated examples.

“They think they know everything from all the other devil movies they saw,” Sr. Rose continued. “And for some reason, [the plot] usually ends with someone leaving the convent.”

Her main critique of *The Nun* was that there was little sign of the film’s directors or actors actually understanding “what the Body of Christ means in the face of real diabolic possession, obsession, oppression, or infestation.”

Instead, Christ’s power is belittled next to the Devil himself.

Both media critics, theologians and Catholics say that this is unfortunately common among the legions of horror films dealing with Catholic icons: failing to ask the right questions—or to even ask questions at all.

Too often these directors—such as *The Nun*'s Corin Hardy—“miss the mark,” being historically and religiously inaccurate. “You never never send a novice to investigate the suicide of a nun, for example, with a priest just picked out of a hat,” Sr. Rose says.

Nuns, for example, have been stereotyped in Hollywood [for decades](#). The portrayal of women in these films is an indicator of ignorance, according to Sr. Rose. As long as a woman wears a habit, there are going to be stereotypes.

“Stereotypes are shortcuts for meaning—if you put a habit or veil on a woman, or a cross, or a rosary on their neck—which is what Hollywood does and it drives me crazy because Catholics don't wear rosaries,” she said. “People don't know better, and they don't think to check with somebody. When white men make movies about women, especially about nuns, they better do their homework.”

Often in mainstream entertainment, faithful Catholics are put to the test as sort of spiritual “saviors,” bringing faith to the faithless.

But in horror—as often in the real world—even Catholic authority is questionable.

“Part of how you know you're in a horror film is knowing which authorities you can trust,” says author Eve Tushnet in her [talk](#) at Doxacon 2017, an annual Christianity in entertainment conference. “Although the Catholic Church does emerge as an authoritative voice, Catholics...are themselves quite divided on the subject of what's going on.”

When characters turn on questions of authority, it's the perfect formula for a horror movie. The emotional drama and intensity comes from religious figures having to work out their own “allegiances” from within.

There's a certain mystery needing to be solved, and an investigation is called by and into the Catholic Church, which Tushnet says is the “in-between” of the everyday and the exotic.

Spiritual authority—priests, nuns, seminarians—are typically called by the Catholic “powers that be” at the Vatican to investigate and defeat an evil entity; often a vengeful, demonic spirit that has taken possession of an innocent person's body. As in *The Nun*, a priest is called in, discovers how horrific the situation is, and a gruesome physical/spiritual warfare takes place before the demon is cast out by fervent prayers.

Tushnet says that religious horror's drama and emotional intensity “comes precisely from people having to work out their own allegiances from within the Church.”

It makes religious men and women—from troubled priests, to ominous, flat-out creepy nuns—feel both familiar and untrustworthy, and that reflects poorly on the real men and women whose lives are dedicated to the church.

A prominent theme in not-so-pious Hollywood is the centuries-old practice of exorcism, a ritual involving heavy prayers and petition, in which a demon is casted out of a person believed to be possessed.

The Catholic Church has its own, Vatican-approved [rites and rituals](#) for performing exorcisms. According to [canon law](#), a true exorcist—almost always a priest—“should possess piety, knowledge, prudence and integrity of life.”

The demand for exorcisms—considered the official “antidote” to demonic possession—have overall increased in the U.S., a recent article in [The Atlantic](#) revealed. [Polls](#) also suggest that over half of Americans believe in the Devil’s existence, including in his power to possess humans.

Exorcisms, in their macabre and ominous nature, are the bread and butter of horror.

“When it comes to fighting vampires and performing exorcisms, the Roman Catholic Church has the heavy artillery,” wrote the late film critic Roger Ebert in a [review](#) of John Carpenter’s *Vampires* (1998), a cult-following movie about a Catholic vampire hunter with a vengeance. “Your other religions are good for everyday theological tasks, like steering their members into heaven, but when the undead lunge up out of their graves, you want a priest on the case.”

Ebert, who was raised Catholic but [struggled constantly](#) with his beliefs, saw the heavy Catholic presence in many horror films as stories of raw human faith and resilience. He said the religious-themed genre—which [peaked](#) in the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s—should “force us to look inside, to experience horror, to confront of human suffering.”

“If movies are, among other things, opportunities for escapism, then *The Exorcist* is one of the most powerful ever made,” Ebert said in his [review](#) of William Friedkin’s “*The Exorcist*” (1973), which is considered a classic, “near perfect” horror film—and a pioneer of the religious-horror subgenre.

Even Deacon Greydanus [called](#) *The Exorcist* “pivotal,” and an “indispensable link between the Catholic-inflected piety of Golden Age Hollywood and the demonic world of latter-day horror.”

Adapted from William Peter Blatty’s 1971 novel, *The Exorcist* tells the story of the demonic possession of 12-year-old Reagan (Oscar-nominated Linda Blair), and Fr. Damien Karras, the Jesuit priest assigned to help perform the bizarre ritual, while grappling with his own inner demons. By the end of the film—spoiler alert—Fr. Karras’ own spiritual weaknesses lead to his inevitable, but somewhat heroic death.

Father Francesco Bamonte, president of the Vatican-approved [International Association of Exorcists](#) in Rome, noted that exorcism films lack a serious element: faith itself.

Fr. Bamonte [said](#) on *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official newspaper of the Vatican, that while portraying exorcisms for the sake of entertainment “could promote greater awareness” about the Catholic Church, he disagreed with “the way in which evil, demonic possession, the prayer of exorcism and liberation” is presented overall, calling such movies “disappointing and unacceptable...ignoring the marvellous, stupendous presence and work of God.”

An example Fr. Bamonte cited is when a relic—a venerated holy object because of direct association with God, a saint or a martyr, such as a rosary—is used in an exorcism, forcing the demon entity to violently react to the power of God’s presence.

Fr. Bamonte said that these films portray the devil as more powerful than God, and religious men and women as “secretive, superior beings”—and this line of thought ultimately drives people further away from the Church.

“While there are many inaccuracies about the faith in films, their most serious error is presenting life as a battle between two equal principles or divinities: light and darkness, good and evil,” he said. Catholic clergy, “who live with trusting abandon in God’s arms are stronger than the devil and all of his minions—these truths do not emerge in the movies.”

Though exorcism films obviously sensationalize the act, films like *The Exorcist* also explore the “inner demons” humans constantly struggle with—from internalized guilt, to personal mortal vices—and how, believers or not, humans strive for eternal salvation.

Some Catholics believe that if horror films bring people closer to a personal, deeper understanding of God—and thus, of salvation—then they are successful.

“To make a real film that is artistic, you have to leave the audience free to create their own meaning. If you’re going to impose meaning on the audience, that’s Sunday school lesson, not entertainment art,” noted Sister Rose. “I want to push films that reveal the human person.”

English critic and documentarian Mark Kermode, who directed the 1998 [“Fear of God” documentary](#) celebrating *The Exorcist*, remembers the effect the film had on both Hollywood and the faithful. He [called](#) it “a staple of cinema...that defined the sub-genre as it exists today. Everybody knows that you cannot use the word exorcist without thinking of that one film.”

“When *The Exorcist* came out, loads of people rushed straight out of the cinema and into the nearest church. I’ve spoken to people within the Catholic Church, who said it was the best advert they’d ever had. Because when was the last film you saw in which priests were the heroes?”

After the international success of *The Exorcist*, other notable films began to emerge in the mainstream subgenre, including *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Devil Inside* (2012), *The Rite* (2011), *Deliver Us From Evil* (2014) *Incarnate* (2016), and *The Conjuring* (2013) franchise.

The Hollywood machine seems to keep churning out exorcism movies—the same old, tired religious horror storyline. Its newest, *The Possession of Hannah Grace* (November 2018), whose title gives away the plot, got a 16 percent approval on Rotten Tomatoes.

Tommy Tighe, an author and host of [Repent & Submit](#), a talk show on CatholicTV, agreed that Catholicism is “most typically portrayed as it is stereotypically understood.”

“It seems to me, the media wants to portray the Church in ways that it will get clicks online and get eyeballs on their shows, which mostly means negative, focusing on the worst aspects of the Church,” Tighe said. “It’s restrictive, oppressive, and a source of guilt in its members.”

Tighe recalled Netflix’s “*The Good Catholic*,” in which a young priest meets and questions his feelings for a woman he befriends while hearing confessions.

“It’s meant to have the audience giving a standing ovation. For me, I say it is as boring and predictable, which was sad, because I think the movie did an overall great job showcasing the priest’s struggle throughout his journey, and I found that to be fascinating. But the choice he made at the film’s end was just boring and not nuanced enough.”

Compelling, not overplayed Catholic horror stories, Sister Rose added, should be “authentically human—or else it’s just another half-scary adrenaline rush.”

Another common trope: weak-willed Catholics who struggle with their faith.

It’s “[Hollywood’s idea of a good Catholic](#),” the Catholic site *Aleteia* said. “Just once, it would be nice if one of these movies would allow its religious characters to make the same choice they usually do in real life. That might not be good drama, but it would ring more true.”

Tighe agreed that showrunners and directors should “delve more deeply” into Catholic tradition, “give us something fresh and interesting, rather than the same old tropes.” He says it commonly presents the church as a scrupulous, “unwelcoming group,” rather than a centuries-old faith tradition.

“That’s sad because I think it perpetuates this myth that we choose being right over being loving, which I think is largely false in the church as a whole. We need more content that makes having faith feel *normal*.”

From troubling exorcisms to suicidal nuns, Catholic tropes in horror films still reveal one commonality: the great mystery of having a strong faith, even in fear.

“If there’s a compelling Catholic horror story told in a compelling way, it’s going to be authentically human—or else it’s just another half-scary adrenaline rush, and then they’ll never come back to it,” added Sr. Rose, who claims she is still a huge horror film fan regardless.

“It’s superficial. We need more films that go deeper into the darkness of human reality and society. You can’t see light unless there’s contrasting darkness; you can’t see grace without sin.”

Sister Nancy Usselman, the new director of the [Pauline Center for Media Studies](#), says she is hopeful about Catholic representation becoming more well-rounded—not just about gruesome demonic possessions—in Hollywood.

But, she says, that depends on how open-minded filmmakers and their (religious and secular) audiences are willing to go.

“Everything can be seen from a sacramental perspective if we have the eyes and the lens to see...Catholicism is subtle, in the sense that we can preach with actions that are redemptive and sacramental—this is what makes for a truly ‘Catholic’ film,” Sister Nancy said. “I think that many faithful people want to tell good stories, and I believe we will be seeing some very profound stories come out of Hollywood in the near future.”

Authentic media representation takes slow, deep work, but it also requires empathy, criticism and curiosity.

Along with the hard news, people want to see stories of humanity and redemption.

Hope beyond the scandal, supernatural and stereotypes is what the Church needs. By analyzing both the positive and negatives, we can better understand how the story of Catholicism, one of the oldest and most active religions in the world, is being told.

Perhaps we can learn by listening to the conversations among Catholic media and critics, increasing religious diversity in the newsroom, and seeking out stories that go beyond the stereotypes.

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