

'Priest' fails to reflect realistic portrayal of clergy

EDITORS' NOTE: Amid plans for local and national protests, the controversial movie "Priest" is scheduled to open nationally on April 19 (it is scheduled to begin showing in Rochester at the Little Theatre on that date). The following is a review by Henry Herx, director of the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting.

NEW YORK— Probing the struggle between religious ideals and human frailties is the provocative but seriously flawed British drama, "Priest" (Miramax).

It takes a decidedly unsentimental, at times morally jarring, journey into the troubled heart and mind of a Catholic priest assigned to a working-class parish in the north of England.

It is not an easy journey and many will prefer to pass it up since it is less concerned with what a good priest should be than with the pain and difficulty for some in trying to achieve it.

The obstacle confronting the movie's young curate, Father Greg Pilkington (Linus Roache), is that as convinced as he is of his vocation and its requirement of celibacy, he is drawn to occasional homosexual encounters.

As a priest, therefore, he is obviously living a lie and — though the movie sympathizes with the pain of his unresolved conflict — it objectively depicts his double life as self-deception and damaging.

Clearly such a subject is anything but casual entertainment and some may find it disturbing even to consider.

Father Greg's interior torment is played out in a story which turns on his hearing the confession of a 14-year-old schoolgirl who reveals that she is being sexually abused by her father.

But she refuses to give the priest permission to talk to her mother or the authorities.

Bound by the seal of confession and frustrated in his attempts to help the child, Father Greg prays in despair for Christ to do something to save the girl.

This is the most deeply spiritual mo-



Linus Roache portrays Father Greg Pilkington in Antonia Bird's 'Priest.'

Miramax Films

ment in the movie as the scene cross-cuts to the mother's discovery of her husband in bed with their daughter.

The prayer in a way has been answered, but the mother can't forgive the priest for not acting on what he knew.

With the mother's chastisement ringing in his ears, Father Greg visits a homosexual friend, the two are arrested, the case becomes public and the bishop tells the priest to leave the diocese.

Father Greg goes off to a country parish to mull his future, but his pastor, Father Matthew Thomas (Tom Wilkinson), shows up and persuades him to return to the parish to say Mass together.

When he appears at the altar, half the congregation walks out and, at Communion, those who have remained line up to receive from Father Matthew.

Seeing Father Greg standing painfully alone, the girl whom he had tried to help comes forward to receive the host

from him and the two embrace in tears.

Ending with this ambiguous but emotionally satisfying scene of reconciliation, the movie resolves nothing and is open to various interpretations.

Some will find the experience deepening their understanding of the difficulties of a celibate life and more compassionate in judging those who fail.

Others will dismiss it as unedifying, if not patently offensive in attempting to treat such a subject.

While there may be disagreement among Catholics about this, any movie which treats the Catholic faith as seriously as this one does can hardly be said

to be anti-Catholic, let alone irreligious.

In creating this fictional Catholic parish, scriptwriter Jimmy McGovern is clearly not interested in the model of an ideal priest but in the human drama of someone struggling to attain it.

McGovern's problem dramatically was to find a way to give this specialized Catholic subject some universal appeal.

This he achieves by making the priest characters become the good little guys against the big bad institution.

It's an old formula but it works reasonably well here, though mainly dependent on stereotypes, such as the social-Gospel pastor who shares his bed with the housekeeper, the mean-spirited bishop and the dour country priest.

Among the flaws in this treatment of Catholic life is its failure to reflect on the concept of sin and the consolation of confession.

While it does much better in conveying such Christian virtues as love, compassion and reconciliation, its notion of spirituality is largely superficial.

The biggest problem "Priest" presents, however, is that viewers may see it as being generally representative of the Catholic clergy rather than a tortured example of an abnormal situation.

Catholic audiences know better, though that doesn't make the movie any less painful and distressing. Also, many will find the depiction of the same-sex physical relationship offensive.

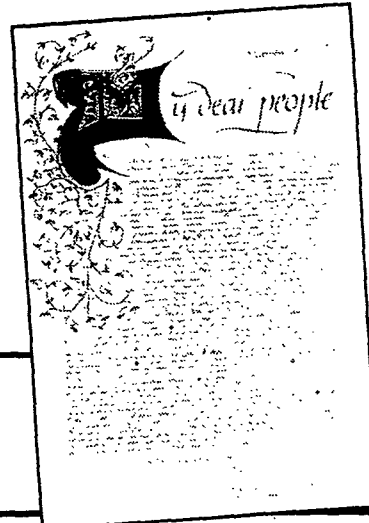
Because of its serious treatment of a very troubling subject, depictions of homosexual acts and occasional crude language, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

With regard to the motion picture, "Priest," the Media Relations Office of the U.S. Catholic Conference has released the following statement:

"The usual way the USCC offers Catholics advice on motion pictures is through the reviews and ratings of its Office of Film and Broadcasting. That Office has rated the movie A-IV — for adults, but with reservations. As the review states, 'The biggest problem "Priest" presents, however, is that view-

ers may see it as being generally representative of the Catholic clergy rather than a tortured example of an abnormal situation. This is not an unfamiliar problem with movies in relation to many professions. Nor is this the first instance of a controversial movie about the priesthood. The Conference sees no need for further comment on what seems to be a flawed attempt to portray serious conflicts in the lives of the priests in its story."

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