

THE SCREEN AND MORALITY

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CHURCH, State and so-called ethical culture groups are frequently and vehemently protesting against the degrading influence of the screen. From the pulpit, assembly-hall and drawing-room issue forth condemnations reprobating the immoral and evil themes which characterize the majority of current movies. Criticisms are hurled against the bold subversion of Christian ideals, against the advocacy of paganism, against the corruption of youth. Reams of paper have been literally spattered with ink; whirlwinds of words have spent themselves upon an apparently inattentive world; boards of censors and civic welfare leagues have been established, all pledged to counteract the menacing evil of what is commonly termed, "the immorality of the movies."

Yet the evil persists as it did ten or twenty years ago. These censorious attacks have, from all appearances, been accompanied by little or no results, and in view of the gravity of the situation, we are forced to ask ourselves two very pertinent questions. Can it be that our nation has become so depraved that it has no regard whatever for morality or virtue or the proprieties of Christian decency? Or has the nation failed to realize the devastating effects of these questionable movies?

Regardless of the public attitude, the position of Catholics is quite definite. To be consistent, they cannot disregard morality in any phase of life. To them it should be apparent that the chaotic moral predicament existing in the movies is not an emotional slump nor a popular fad, but rather a vital, moral influence which is affecting doctrinal and moral principles and even threatening the substratum of Christian society. Consequently, each individual Catholic should advert to his duty to participate in a strenuous movement toward improvement of this important element in the nation's recreational program.

In the consideration of this question, the present calamitous condition is quite plain to us all. The cause is equally clear but

the solution to the problem is not so obvious. However, since it is a matter which concerns every individual Catholic, a cure for the ailment can be effective only through the concentrated efforts of all. For this reason, then, we will consider what is meant by the morality of the screen and what we, as Catholics, can do to help the situation.

Many people, sometimes those well-intentioned, are fearful of the word "moral." To them it seems to breathe the spirit of the blue laws, of gloom and melancholy. Such an attitude towards morality, in the true Catholic sense, is absurd. The morality counseled by the Church is not stiff-necked or harsh. On the contrary it proceeds from the Spirit of Love. It is, moreover, a positive guarantee for a happy and wholesome life. By the Catholic norms of morality, man is raised from the bondage of sensuality and materialism through spiritual values which help him to grasp the hopelessness and instability of temporal goods. Only by a constant adherence to the spiritual life can the true and lasting happiness be obtained, for this mode of living enables us to keep all earthly possessions subordinated to our ultimate end.

Morality is the agreement or disagreement of human acts with the rules which regulate human conduct with reference to man's last end. We use the term "human actions" in its strict philosophical sense which indicates only those actions which are performed under the control of the will. These are the acts which must measure up to certain norms or standards because this conformity or non-conformity makes them good or bad. At this point it is natural to inquire the origin of these norms or standards. Are they something merely subjective, that is, each individual's ideas, wishes and opinions? No, we have only one authoritative standard powerful enough to demand obedience under the penalty of eternal judgment; it embraces God as our last End and the external and positive law as a means to that End. In other words, union with the Creator in heaven is the goal established for all rational creatures and hence all their good actions pave the way to it.

Revelation and reason prove that God's Eternal Law was promulgated at the creation of the world. God, in accordance with His Divine Wisdom, constituted a definite purpose for His work. Being an intelligent Agent, all-wise and omnipotent, He gave to each species of creation a certain nature with a determined end, and to each individual He gave a capacity or power

to accomplish the purpose of its existence. As is evident to us from the wonderful order of the universe, every being operates in an harmonious inclination toward its respective end. This is due to an innate law, an impulse inherent in all creatures called the Natural Law, which is nothing more than a participation in the Eternal Law. Hence the activity of every creature is directed in accord with the eternal designs of Providence. Created things lacking free will act necessarily in compliance with Natural Law. Man, however, is a rational free agent. Thus we say that the Natural Law does not force or interfere with man's free will but it inclines it, nevertheless, towards the real good. This law habitually disposes man to know and will the end of his rational nature and whatever conduces to it; likewise to discern and reject anything contrary to it. Therefore, there is implanted within the very nature of the human race the desire to do good and avoid evil. In other words, man naturally wills the attainment of his last end because he wills the consummation of all natural desires.

Since the fall of Adam, man has been prone to evil because of the disorder between his higher and lower appetites. By reason of his emotions or passions, he is naturally drawn to those things to which a sensible delight is attached. Catholic philosophy has always taught that the faculties of the soul, the intellect and will, must dominate and control the passions in order that they may function harmoniously. Knowledge and moral strength are prerequisites. The Church unceasingly teaches the necessity of checking unruly passions, pointing out the temporal and eternal wealth of spiritual values. Since man is morally weak, he needs an uninterrupted stimulus, influence or good example—call it what you will—to remain ever faithful to God's commands.

It is beyond doubt that the screen has taken a permanent place in the social life of the nation; its predominance in the world of amusement is undisputed; its influence upon the moral conduct of the country is undeniable. The screen has become a most potent moral force for teaching and, as such, it must teach either truth or error, good or evil. It represents life and character under varied aspects and, in doing so, it portrays human activities, consciously or unconsciously, in relation to some code of morality. While the screen, in part, is destined to amuse and to afford relaxation, this endeavor must be accompanied by the regulation of right reason. Man can be admirably enter-

tained without diversion from his higher duties and obligations. Let the screen then do its work with proper motives by adhering to morality's true code. Thereby its mission will be enhanced and ennobled, whether we view it in its rôle of teacher, as the portrayer of life and character or simply as a means or occasion for amusement.

To enjoy a rightful place in society, to have a sufficient reason for being, it is essential that the screen offer something worthwhile to man. It must aid him to push forward toward the God-given vocation called perfection, recognizing that advancement in spiritual beauty is the purpose of life. The materialistic viewpoint must be ever subordinated, and the screen must be prevented from becoming primarily a commercial proposition. Man's moral integrity must be preserved at all costs. The obligations we have mentioned, namely, to teach, to portray and to amuse, flow from the nature of the screen and in fulfilling these assigned tasks, the true standard of morality must be the measure and the rule.

When any institution becomes puffed-up, deserts its niche in the scheme of things and sets out to glorify vicious habits and immoral practices which cater to man's lower nature, the time for its renovation or annihilation is close at hand. For should such a menace persist, it would not be long before even the natural virtues would be foreign to our land.

Why are we so insistent that the screen pay heed to the basic principles of morality? The reason is because the screen exists for man and it has the power of influencing him morally. It is the screen's objective in every noteworthy production to produce an impression, to move and to incite. Thus power may be exercised to stimulate the profound dispositions of the soul to love that which is true, honest and elevated; it may arouse in man the noblest emotions, purify his mind and heart and assist him in working out his destiny. Then only is the screen good, progressive and honorable. On the other hand, the screen has also the power to instill in men the germ of all that is false, degrading and evil. To do this it may take all the ugly and sordid things of life, all the cheap wit, paltry egotism and sophisticated life, the immorality, grossness and ornamented evil, giving to them the cast of reality by presenting them to mankind as the true ideals of life. When the screen does this, it then becomes malicious and a deadly enemy of society.

However, we do not wish to give a false impression. It is not, after all, the duty of the screen to preach, although it has the obligation to give truth to mankind. Just as science and the arts, so the screen should join forces with God, render homage to Him—in short, it should be religious. This is the most exalted end the screen could possibly attain. Even though not fully accomplishing so sublime a mission, the screen may still fulfill its purpose of existence by aspiring to a less noble end in supplying mankind with opportunities of legitimate recreation through clean, honest and cheerful presentations; clean, in being free from suggestion and smut; honest, in picturing life in its true perspective; cheerful, in telling its story smilingly. The producer who does this is more the champion of, than the traitor to, the ideals of the screen. The real debasers of the screen are those who employ it to pander to the passions of its debauched devotees, or who make of it an instrument for the satisfaction of greed.

We see, then, that the screen must assist man in attaining his last end. It can do this only by conforming to the true norms of morality. Christian morals, as we know, do not fluctuate because they are based on universal and immutable principles. Since the advent of Christianity, the Church has promulgated, interpreted and defended the true code of morality, proclaiming, as truly as she is the voice of Christ on earth, her right to pass judgment on all questions pertaining to faith and morals. This fact is never disputed by practical Catholics and consequently for them guidance in such a vital issue as "screen morality" is unquestioned. Those within the Fold know that the Church's mission is to instruct, guide and protect her children from all spiritual pitfalls. As the custodian of all that is sublime, the Mystical Body of Christ diffuses the rarest gifts impartially to those who seek them. Arms of love and compassion are stretched forth to lift up unfortunates, who, blinded by sensuality, have fallen by the wayside. For nineteen hundred years she has defended her present laws which govern marriage, family life, virtue and duty; laws which regulate the relationship between God, the Creator, and man, the creature.

The themes of many present-day movies oppose the teaching of the Church by their flippant treatment of the sacred realities of life, by their thinly-veiled ridicule of Christian virtue, by their idealization of vice and the exploitation of degrading principles. The Church cannot and does not approve or remain

silent in the face of this opposition to her teaching. Neither can any Catholic rightfully countenance this situation even by a tacit indorsement. Truly, all practical Catholics are opposed to the false ethical principles, themes, scenes, and action contrary to true norms of Christian conduct which the screen portrays. Yet they seem to deem it quite proper to give their patronage to such productions. Their self-justification seems to rest on the assumption that since they go to the movies only to abstract the good therefrom, their mere patronage gives no indication of a sanction of the production which they attend. However, it is to this very attitude that we can ascribe the reason of the futility of all the censorious harangues which are being leveled against the movies.

Now if men are to be rational and logical in their procedure, they are bound to act in compliance with the conclusions drawn from true and irrefutable arguments. Criticism and disapproval, no matter how well founded or strongly presented, will never avail if contrary actions give the lie to words. This is precisely what is done when one censures or criticises and, at the same time, supports by his patronage an immoral picture. This affirmation is based, not on our own authority but on the actual statements of producers, exhibitors and authorities in the industry. Mr. W. H. Hays, in a recent radio speech affirmed: "The producers nominate the pictures. The people elect them. Every ticket bought at the box office is a ballot cast in favor of a picture." When we consider these words on their face value, we are forced to concede that, generally speaking, they are true because producers, as a rule, are not interested in the moral aspect of their offerings. Their primary concern is profit. If a smutty, risqué sort of picture will promote pecuniary compensation, then the surety of the enterprise makes them unwilling to take a chance on something which probably will be a financial loss.

The reports of the majority of the nation's movie exhibitors supply ample proof that the immoral "snappy movie" is popularly patronized, while many decent, moral pictures play to sparsely occupied theatres. A prominent periodical, *Motion Picture Herald*, edited especially to acquaint the movie-house owners and exhibitors with a resume of the plot, characters, popularity and selling power of current productions, gives us an accurate account of the success and approval which every picture has received. After reading hundreds of these reports the only con-

clusion that can be reached is that the "spicy" picture seems to receive an undeserved amount of support. Here is a quotation which adequately summarizes the general opinion of men who are able to judge public reaction by the pulse beat of the movie industry as recorded in the box office: "The Church people clamor for clean pictures but they come out to see Mae West and stay away from a clean picture like 'The Cradle Song'."¹ Suppose we say that this may be an exaggeration of fact insofar as Catholics are concerned. Even then the weight of the quotation is sustained because it outlines the course which Catholics must follow, namely, to give support to good productions and to refuse to attend theatres where pictures contrary to Christian morality are being presented.

We have here only striven to state the basic principles of morality which should govern the screen. We could not follow a clearer, more practical or authoritative guide, for the application of these principles, than the "Adopted Code to Govern the Production of Motion Pictures" by the Most Rev. John J. Cantwell, D.D., Bishop of Los Angeles and San Diego.²

So we conclude with an appeal to face the facts, not as we would wish them to be, but precisely as they are. In doing so, our duties as Catholics become most clear. By the concentrated efforts of Catholics, the screen industry can be brought to realize how invigorating, yet temperate, how stimulating, yet sober, can be the influence of virtue and spiritual ideals. The result will not only effect the excellence of productions but the box-office receipts as well. When the producers realize the truth of this fact, then can the screen begin to fulfill a noble mission that of assisting man on the difficult journey to God.

¹ Motion Picture Herald, Jan. 20, p. 67.

² See the Jan. 20, 1934 and Feb. 3, 1934 issues of the *Acolyte*.