

Catholics and the Movies

By BRO. CYPRIAN MEEHAN, O. P.



THE influence of the motion picture upon the lives of our people is greater than the combined influence of all our churches, schools and ethical organizations." It would seem at first sight that Mr. Charles A. McMahon, head of the National Catholic Welfare Conference Motion Picture Bureau, overlooked the influence of the Catholic Church when he made the above statement; but the disastrous truth of the fact and the immediate consideration which it demands of all Catholics become evident when we realize that over fifteen million people attend the motion picture houses of our country every day and among them Catholics comprise a considerable proportion.

Although the influence of the Catholic Church in this country, within the last decade, has been conspicuous and far-reaching, nevertheless it is important to note that the inviting doors of our motion picture houses are attracting a larger proportion of the younger generation than the churches. Recently a committee, through questionnaires distributed among thirty-seven thousand high school students, received the startling information that 83 per cent of the boys and 88 per cent of the girls go at least twice a week to their local movie theatre; and an interested investigator in Columbus, Ohio, advises us that for every ten thousand who are receiving their education in the universities, there are three hundred thousand getting theirs in the movies. The combined churches of America certainly do not secure willing attendance, twice a week, from anything like eighty-five per cent of the nation's students.

So it was not the exaggerated deduction of an over-imaginative brain that has warned us of the dangerous influence of the motion picture. It is not even a paradox to state that the motion pictures can destroy faster than the church can build up. Ordinary observation would acquaint one with the possibilities which any instrument possesses which is capable of placing before an unlimited audience the voiceless expression of human

emotions, national ideals, customs and characteristics. While we boast of the number and proportions of our centres of learning, and the increasing attendance at our public and private schools as well as the swelling crowds at our churches, we are confronted with a medium which continues its influence where that of the printed and spoken word ceases; for certainly there



Columbus Approaches the New Land

"One of the healthiest signs of a revival of interest in our American History is the 'Chronicles of America' series of films which Yale University has had the good sense and patriotism to prepare."—Rev. T. M. Schwertner, O. P.

are thousands who frequent the movies but who never go to church or have passed beyond the age for instruction either in the school or university.

Supposing, not without reason, that twenty per cent of the total daily attendance at the movies is Catholic, the question of what is good and bad in the screen product becomes for each one of us a very serious problem. It contains a question which should interest not only the Catholic public in general, but the

individual Catholic in particular; for it involves a Catholic problem which demands a careful, Catholic consideration and a Catholic solution.

The most disappointing phase of the motion picture situation is the fact that while it has been gradually developing into gigantic proportions, there has been too little time and attention directed toward an intelligent and sympathetic effort to remove its evils or suggest an adequate remedy for them. From the earliest days the motion picture industry has been criticized and condemned; in fact it has been a bone of contention between producers aligned defiantly on one side of the fence and a group of fanatical and ill advised reformers as stubbornly defiant on the other. Unfortunately the bulk of their discussions has been a continued and seemingly endless passing of the lie. Before any real solution to the motion picture problem is possible, it is necessary to know something of its origin, who is responsible for its continuance and what should be done to bring about a better state of affairs.

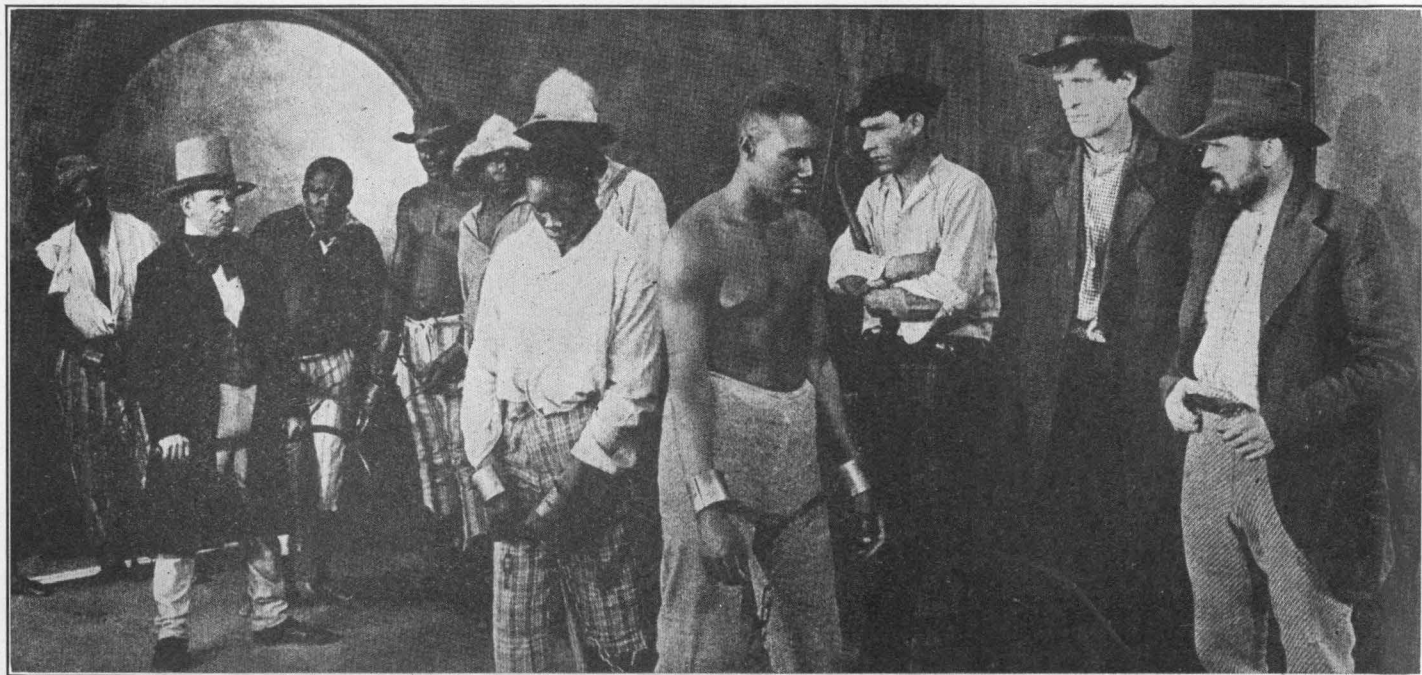
In the very beginning the tolerant attitude which the public displayed toward the movies was such that might easily be interpreted as complete submission to anything that the producers should choose to give them. Because the public was inclined to accept the crudities which the motion picture houses presented, on the ground that the industry was only in its infancy and would probably improve in the course of time, there resulted an attitude of indifference regarding their future. While the people hoped for better things, nevertheless they accepted what was at hand and even demanded more. The tiny voice of the isolated objector was powerless to gain recognition; it seemed almost useless to try to convince the people that they were only encouraging the bad and not demanding the good by patronizing what they themselves admitted was mediocre or worse. In this respect the people were responsible for the continued evils in the movies.

But the entire blame cannot be shifted to the public's shoulders; and, on the other hand, although it is not true that the motion pictures are moving to perdition at a rapid rate with producers and exhibitors supplying the power, still there is this grievance charged against them—that they are travelling at a rapid pace and getting nowhere, either ethically or artistically. Technically, indeed, the motion picture is almost perfect; at least it has reached that stage of development where new inventions

cease to be improvements and are rather novelties. The difficulty which presents itself to interested thinkers is the evil which has resulted from over-attention to the mechanical, and the almost total disregard of the moral tone of the motion picture output during a period of excessively rapid and continued development. The amazing growth of the motion picture industry is not at all phenomenal, because of the simple reason that the interest and energies of those behind it have been consistently concentrated along mechanical and commercial lines. Logically, then, this rapid evolution of the business in the twenty years of its existence is one of the prime contributing causes of the present agitation against the abuses which are now so prevalent. If as much attention had been spent on the improvement of the moral tone of the pictures as was given to the mechanical side of the industry, the vast amount of criticism heaped upon those responsible for the output of movie factories would certainly be confined to that minority composed of the prejudiced and narrow-minded.

Nevertheless criticism was inevitable as long as the nobler purposes of film making were submerged under the sordid aims of commercialism. Quantity was made superior to quality because quantity represented an asset on the profitable side of the ledger, while quality involved expense and a corresponding liability. Each producer was in constant fear of his next door neighbor, lest he place more films on the market in one day than himself. Competition stimulated activity, it is true, but that activity was rooted in a greed for money; the get-rich-quick-spirit which many an incompetent producer made his ideal. More deplorable, however, is the fact that a considerable portion of the producers have viewed with complacency the gradual lowering of standards and morals to a point where the abuse has become a national calamity. While distributors of films are not, in any sense, moralists engaged in the altruistic mission of evangelizing a nation, still they are not exonerated on this score for distributing a poisonous article simply because a meagre portion of the public demands it.

Mediocrity might be pardoned, but a condition which forces decent people to demand the elimination from films of such objectionable features as indecency, sacrilege, inhumanity, obscenity and the corruption of morals is certainly not one that the



The Slave Market

“Without exaggeration it can be stated that ‘The Dramatic Life of Abraham Lincoln’ photoplay stands out as one of the most exceptional achievements, if not the most noteworthy production, of the American screen to date.”—Charles A. McMahan.

producers can brag about; nor is it a state of affairs which the public should tolerate with patience. There is no possible excuse for pictures which permit spectators to see vice glorified, and virtue, sobriety, and the observance of law,—the fundamental attributes of life,—made unattractive. The morals and religious convictions of those responsible for such films are not, for the most part, in consonance with the teachings of the Catholic Church; in fact, not infrequently fail to measure up to the standards of decent minded Americans. If pictures which misrepresent the ideals and family life of Americans, those which abound in sloppy, sentimental romance, marital duplicity, easy divorce and the "high life" of our metropolitan cities, are a disgrace to the American people, certainly they are a menace to our Catholic motion picture fans.

It is gratifying, however, to note that some of the motion picture producers have awakened to a realization of their responsibility, and have made a serious attempt to eliminate criticism by making pictures of a more desirable type. At least one group, that headed by Mr. Will Hays, has carried out its program for bigger and better pictures. These producers have been, as a rule, faithful to their promise to "strive to establish and maintain the highest moral and artistic standards in the production of motion pictures, and to develop the educational as well as the entertainment value of the screen." As evidence that these ambitions are not simply good resolutions, made in the first flush of fervor and soon forgotten, one may point to the past year as an example of what can be done. In the general melange of mediocre stories which has been handed out in huge doses to the public there were a number of features that mark this year as an epochal season and a period of progress. Judging from the past we may reasonably expect that the various producing firms will emulate each other to the advantage of an often disappointed public.

Although the campaign for a higher grade of picture has resulted in many pleasing photoplays of undeniable merit, nevertheless there remains much that is not only offensive to the Catholic audience but which is detrimental to their faith and morals as well. Long years of tolerance on the part of the public have brought about conditions which only patient toil can eliminate; keen business men, who think in terms of profitable dollars, have built up an enterprising industry which can be

altered only when they recognize their profit in their duty to adhere to sound moral principles. Both factors, therefore, should realize that there is a grave responsibility resting on the shoulders of each; the tolerant public that has remained inactive, and the producers who have been profiting by the sleeping attitude of the people.

There is an urgent need for well qualified men and women to study the motion picture field and to direct the flow of patronage to what is worth while and beneficial. Our youth, especially, is too impressionable to be allowed a freedom to view indiscriminately pictures intended for adult and maturer minds. Recognizing the fact that the movies have become one of the greatest sources of amusement and recreation there is need for some organized control that will encourage the good as well as condemn and suppress the evil, keeping in mind that the surest way to advertise the unhealthy film is to brand it publicly as unworthy of a decent person's presence.

Catholics, especially, should be interested in the general movement throughout the country to have "motion pictures thought of and talked of not as a troublesome problem but as one of the chief assets of the community for education and betterment." In view of the fact that Catholics fall under the bad influence of the vicious motion picture; since they are a part, and certainly a prominent part, of that vast multitude which has made the motion picture industry possible, the duty of making it worthy of the unique position which it holds and of preserving the moral standard which it ought to possess, devolves to a great extent upon them. There is one fact that cannot be too often repeated or over-emphasized; namely, that although the problem of reform presents itself in a broad sense to the general public there is a more particular need for action on the part of Catholics. They must even go so far as to withdraw their support and patronage from the movies entirely or give it only when the proper type of picture merits such support. Whatever may be the opinions of those who object to so drastic a course, feeling that religion cannot be judiciously or advantageously associated with matters of a secular import, surely such conduct is justified by the fact that the Catholic Church possesses a real and permanent code of ethics which Catholics may not abandon at any time or in any place, a code that has been frequently and



The Morning After the Eruption of Vesuvius

"I wish to nominate 'The White Sister' for a place high up on the White List of dramatic performances."
—Rev. Francis P. Duffy.

flagrantly violated in the films by distorted or exaggerated versions of life.

Not infrequently Catholics, as individuals, regard their duty towards the motion picture problem with an interest that is negligible or at best exceedingly indifferent. They realize that the existing condition calls for action on their part, but in spite of that, they seem satisfied to sit back in a sort of watchful waiting attitude until some one takes the initiative. If there is to be reform in this field its achievement will depend not alone upon the personal and individual exertion of those with authority to legislate against and correct abuses, but also upon the massed cooperation of all those interested in placing a popular and well established national institution in its proper sphere of social and artistic usefulness. Prominent Catholic organizations have already taken up the work, but their efforts will be in vain if they do not receive the support of our Catholic communities, parish clubs, social organizations, and especially the enthusiastic cooperation and influence of all concerned.

Such, for instance, is the very commendable purpose of the National Catholic Welfare Conference whose Motion Picture Bureau is endeavoring to create an atmosphere healthy enough for Catholics, both old and young, to live in. Affiliated with the Committee on Public Relations, which represents sixty-two national organizations, and an estimated combined membership of sixty million, the N. C. W. C. has set itself to the task of "arousing the conscience of our Catholic people to a sense of their responsibility in the selection of their motion picture entertainment, particularly the entertainment of the Catholic youth of our country, . . . always trying to maintain a constructive viewpoint toward the motion picture industry." The National Council of Catholic Women has likewise understood the urgent need for unified activity to protect the morals of our children. With this purpose in view their members pledged themselves, at the last convention held in Washington, to the following resolution:

Deploring and strongly protesting against the production and display of immoral and unclean pictures, the National Council of Catholic Women pledges itself to use its influence to discourage attendance at theatres showing unclean and objectionable films, . . . and to bring about a higher moral standard in the production of motion pictures.

Here it is well to remember that since the need for reform has been recognized by many producers of motion pictures, by exhibitors of photo-plays, by ethical societies and by Catholic organizations and individuals, a spirit of cooperation among those concerned is essential and necessary. There is no doubt in this matter as to where responsibility ultimately rests, for the people will be the final judges of whether reform takes place or not; because the type of picture they patronize is the type the exhibitor buys from the producer and the latter, in supplying the demand, will not waste time and money on anything else. The exhibitors, however, do not always properly interpret the sentiment of the community and in places where Catholics are not prominent their opinion is completely disregarded in favor of the majority. Only indirectly, then, is there a responsibility for organizations, to give voice to the Catholic protest and take a decisive and emphatic stand, or withdraw the patronage of Catholics.

To be effective, therefore, reform must begin in and with the individual. If among Catholics there are individuals who have been lax enough to allow themselves to be influenced by the increasing crowds at the questionable type of photo-play let them sense the danger to which they are exposing themselves and their children and express their disapproval by withdrawing their patronage. It is their duty to manifest the conviction which the principles of their Faith inculcate in their lives, for they cannot possibly profess a rule of conduct as the right norm of living and at the same time act contrary to it without branding themselves as hypocrites. Catholics know that they must not attend photo-plays that are suggestive, such as those which depict the sordid phases of life or deal salaciously with stories and persons of questionable character. They know, too, that it is folly to permit their children to witness pictures showing the method of committing crime and escaping punishment; pictures which mock the observance of law and order. Besides the scandal which such conduct is apt to give our non-Catholic neighbors it is easy to estimate the evil which must inevitably follow as a result of the misrepresentation of Catholic ideals and principles. In this age when private interpretation of doctrine is being made a license, Catholics should be more zealous to be exponents of the truths which they profess.

Moreover this conviction must arise not only from a sense of duty to their Church but also from the knowledge that they are in conscience bound to protect themselves and their children from the evil effects which are certain to follow from the blighting tendency so prevalent in the motion picture industry toward corrupt ideals and morals. Biting sarcasm from the pens of reformers and moralists will not close the movie palaces; increased attendance at the picture shows will never put them out of business. Only when the people begin to stay away from the pictures in large numbers will the producers change their policy and offer their patrons clean programs, in clean theatres, by clean actors. As long as exhibitors are assured that there is enough demand for the inferior article they will never make especial efforts to improve the tastes of their audience by exploiting the more elevating type of drama. They regulate their policy by the barometer of the box office and it is at that vulnerable spot that Catholics must direct their attention if they wish to secure clean entertainment for themselves and their children; for a defection of attendance will make them realize that the Catholic patronage of twenty per cent is not to be overlooked.

Only the forcible expression of Catholic opinion can compel delinquent producers to take stock of their deficiencies. Until every Catholic recognizes his individual and personal responsibility; until the effort to secure a wholesome screen product for Catholic audiences becomes emphatic, united and persistent, we shall have to suffer what is offered us. Although it may be over-sanguine to anticipate the ultimate result of the universal effort for reform in the movies, still it is not too optimistic to predict that if Catholics will come to the front and demand that clean shows be presented in their local theatres, then the day is not far distant when we can proudly refer to the Motion Picture Industry as one of the most helpful handmaids for educational, social and moral betterment.