

THE LOCUTORIUM

SUBSTITUTING THE TRANSCENDENT?

An interview with Dr. Thomas Hibbs by Justin Mary Bolger, O.P.

In founding the Order of Preachers, St. Dominic responded to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and therefore obeyed the Church in the decisions he made concerning the Order's character. But he was also responding to the needs of his time. The heretical Albigensians were rightly scandalized by the neglect of the evangelical counsels they saw among the Catholic clergy. Dominic took the concerns of the heretics seriously by taking the evangelical counsels seriously. He was also aware of the growth of universities as centers of learning in major cities, so he positioned the Order accordingly, sending friars to pursue truth in the intellectual capitals of Europe. St. Dominic exhibited a sensitivity to the movements of culture and the questions that were being asked in his day, and the Order's work of evangelization was the better for it.

This concern with the signs of the times remains central to our mission as Friars Preachers. In the article titled "Preaching to the Whole World" our Dominican Constitutions offer us this exhortation:

The Christian life is affected by change, especially by change brought about by advances in science, the arts or culture. Brothers should do their utmost to discern, among those



CAMILLE COROT - ROME, CASTLE SAINT ANGELO

changes, the values which lead to a more lively awareness of God. And they should endeavour to answer the questions that this evolution raises in the human mind, to the end that the preaching of the gospel will lead to a purer, more mature grasp of the faith. (LCO 30)

The following interview is an attempt to track cultural changes especially through film and television, that we might better discern the signs of the times and respond accordingly.

Dr. Thomas Hibbs earned his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame. He taught at Boston College for 13 years and is now dean of the Honors College at Baylor University. In addition to teaching and producing scholarly works on medieval philosophy and contemporary ethics, Dr. Hibbs is a student of and a commentator on culture. He has written books on popular culture, including *Shows About Nothing* (now in its second edition). He reviews films for *National Review* and is regularly called upon by syndicated radio shows, such as NPR's *All Things Considered*, for his insightful commentary. Dr. Hibbs kindly agreed to offer *Dominicana* some of his time and wisdom.

What can we learn about man's search for the transcendent in film and TV?

I think that engaging too much in film and TV watching can be a way of escaping, a way of substituting for the transcendent. So I'll start out with that possible negative assessment. It seems to me there is that danger, in part because TV and film, in ways that dimly echo ancient drama, have public ritual characteristics to them. Thinking about film in early theatres, when they were first constructed and people were watching moving pictures for the first time, there was some considerable reflection upon the way this had quasi-religious characteristics to it. So there is a possible danger with TV and film becoming substitutes for the religious ways of pursuing the transcendent.

This issue is also double-edged, in that so many of our stories have Christian themes in them, especially if you look at the predominance of fantasy films over the last ten to fifteen years. If you look at the top selling films each year since 2000, you will find a lot of super-hero and fantasy films. Their quality varies quite a bit, but you will find a lot of stories in which Christian themes of sacrifice are prominent. There's a sort of mimicking in these films of the Christian themes of sacrifice and redemption. This is double-edged for us who accept the Gospel as true, because on the one hand these stories provide us with evidence that people are hungry for transcendence. They're hungry for examples and stories of sacrifice and noble struggles against evil. It is a confirmation that this hunger is universal in the human soul and never goes away.

On the other hand, I worry that these stories may be offering tepid satisfaction for that desire, and substitutes for real transcendence, rather than leading people toward it. So I think it's a double-edged opportunity in the culture. On the one hand it reminds us that this desire for transcendence is always with us, that people long for sacrifice, nobility, virtue, and the vindication of goodness over evil. But there's also the danger of people leaving the theatre as satisfied as they're ever going to be in their view and apprehension of life.

Can you talk about portrayals of family life? Hollywood often does a good job of portraying where the modern family goes wrong. The images on screen may lead us to infer problems but it doesn't seem like Hollywood is interested in criticizing the root problem.

I think that's generally true. When it comes to presenting the family I think that Hollywood is typically better at depicting the demise of the family. It's difficult to gauge this stuff—Hollywood certainly doesn't give us a lot of examples of healthy family lives. But they sometimes come close to getting at the sources of the demise or dysfunction in the family. Take *The Ice Storm*, a film not all that well known, where the images show us something of the problem. The ice is symbolic in a Shakespearean way of the frozen souls of the characters. In the film you have some families living in New Canaan, Connecticut, in 1974, and the aftereffects of the sexual revolution are on display. You see the consequences of the infidelity of the parents in the lives of the children—their drinking, experimentation with drugs, very premature experimentation with sex, their penchant for violence, and their general malaise—so a film like that, while it certainly doesn't show us any healthy and happy families, does come close to pinpointing why the family has gone wrong when it has gone wrong.

There are some other exceptions too. A TV show that didn't stay around for very long (but got great ratings) was the series *Friday Night Lights*, which was really about a wife, a husband—a football coach who ends up being principal at a local high school—and their daughter. But there you had an example of a really mature, healthy marriage where adults actually acted like adults. Their primary concern was the raising of the next generation of young people, not just their own daughter, but the young men and women they had in their classes and on their athletic fields. Occasionally Hollywood gives us these views of family life.

Are there films that we might be initially wary of, because they seem to celebrate a vicious life, but are actually good, artful portrayals of unrestrained liberalism?

I think some movies, in terms of violence and sexuality, are just toxic. It's hard to watch them and say, "Well, what am I learning from this?" Take a movie like *The Wolf of Wall Street*, which is up for an Academy Award. Sometimes it's taken to be this great critique of the inordinate appetites of Wall Street, and maybe of America in some sense; other times it's taken to be this gleeful celebration of hedonism. I think it's more of the second view, and pretty tedious at three hours of not much more than pornography and frat boy humor. Some people wanted to draw lessons from that. I think whatever lessons you want to draw can be done in the first four minutes. You don't need three hours.

But then there are other films. Hollywood is occasionally really good at depicting evil. A TV series like *Breaking Bad*, which just finished last year its multi-year run, is a really astonishing, convincing portrait of an ordinary man "breaking bad." And that means gradually becoming comfortable with the capital vices. It's not so much the bodily vices—he wants money and occasionally is gripped by lust—but it's really about pride, envy, and wrath. It's about the spiritual capital vices, and it's a really compelling depiction of the slow, gradual, at times dramatic, decline of a soul into evil. I think it's extremely compelling in that depiction. And I think the folks who made the series realized that's what they were doing.

What's the "culture war"? Should we take part in it and use art as weapons? What would some great Catholic artists like Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy say?

Both O'Connor and Percy are instructive here—O'Connor is always instructive and Percy positively and negatively. I

think that O'Connor was really clear about the importance of the Aristotelian claim she learned from Maritain (who learned it from St. Thomas) that the good of the work of art is the work of art. She took this to be liberating, because she just had to practice her craft. It meant she didn't have to worry about blue-haired ladies in parishes writing her notes that they didn't find her work edifying or morally appropriate. But for her, what you have to do is learn the craft and make great art. And for O'Connor that is going to involve how you see the world, who you are, how your imagination has been fed and formed, and how your soul is ordered—that is going to affect what you can see and depict in your art. So the primary thing for the artist is to develop his craft. But again, how you see that craft is going to be informed by what kind of examples you've been exposed to and by the ways your imagination has been fed. For O'Connor it was the Christian tradition that fed her art, but also the liturgical life of the Church that formed her imagination, along with her astute observations of the world around her. But it's hard to see what she's doing in those short stories as fighting a culture war. And I think she would describe that as a very odd way of describing what she's doing.

Now, I don't think there's just one culture *war*: there are culture *wars*. Culture is the domestic site of war—the battleground of meaning and symbols and purpose. It would be wrong to say that culture is not a site of war because, especially in democracies where these things fluctuate quite a bit, it's a site of contested visions of the good. As much as we might think we can bracket those questions, culture is the place where those things get fought out.

It seems to me Percy found himself, much more than O'Connor did, trying to fight a culture war through his books. I think he did this more in the late works. *Thanatos Syndrome* is maybe his worst work of fiction just as a work of fiction. Part of the problem there is that he's too didactic: he's trying to fight the culture war. He's very much worried about what John Paul II would come to call the culture of death. He adopted the Kierkegaardian view of

indirection early on in the *Moviegoer*. Like a lot of his work, the *Moviegoer* is an absolutely magnificent novel, and it's also brilliant on the Christian message, but it's so subtle and indirect. It's not so subtle and indirect that you can't get it, but you're sort of surprised by it when it emerges.

In the *Thanatos Syndrome* he's heavy-handed. It's too direct. So I think the danger for art that wants to fight a culture war is that it can become bad art. And I think this is a problem with Christian moviemaking today. We end up with a lot of really well intentioned people making films that are pretty crappy. So they're well intentioned but saccharine, predictable, with no range of human emotion, no real drama, and so it's not real art. That does a disservice. Consider that St. Thomas says a bad argument on behalf of the faith does it discredit and disservice. Well, bad art on behalf of the faith does it discredit and disservice. So cheap apologetics, whether in pseudo-philosophy or film, doesn't do the faith much good.

But I'm a little torn on this question still. I just got out of a class teaching *Crime and Punishment*. You know, Dostoyevsky really managed somehow to be a great novelist and also be immediately involved in the culture wars in Russia. And I think Percy, who was also heavily influenced by Dostoyevsky (as well as Kierkegaard), was hoping for this. But Percy's late stuff is not capacious enough. It's not rich enough in terms of its drama. You have to invent characters as complex as Raskolnikov or Dimitri, Ivan, and Alyosha to pull this off. The culture war stuff has got to just pop up here and there. But Dostoyevsky is clearly a polemical writer and a great artist at the same time. It's just very difficult to do both.

What can we reasonably expect, given our fragmented social order, from art that attempts a "good message"?

Flannery O'Connor says that the best we can expect today from art is a partial vision. We're not living in a time where a Dante



VASILY SURIKOV - COLOSSEUM

could flourish, because as you've mentioned, things are fragmented and splintered and superficial, so the best you can expect are these partial insights from our artists. We shouldn't expect more, though I believe there is a hunger for more. I think the popularity of something like *The Lord of the Rings*—and a renewed popularity of the books, not just the films—indicates that people want these grand visions of things. But the very fact that we produce very few *Lord of the Rings* sagas and more *Stars Wars*-type films indicates that we're not living in times or a culture that is propitious for these large-scale visions.

I think at least part of the task for us is to learn to appreciate and critically engage the various narratives that are put before us. It's not surprising that in our time the most compelling narratives and the ones that are significant as quasi-art—I don't know if I want to call *Breaking Bad* full scale art, but it's pretty well done—have a pretty good insight into the ways life goes astray. They give us a pretty good depiction of the gradual decline into evil. But it's not surprising that we get a lot more Dante's *Inferno* and not so much

Purgatorio and *Paradiso*. Of course the problem is that just taking contemporary narratives on their own terms, they don't have a sense that there is anything else. Even where they are instructive about evil, they're ultimately not instructive about evil because the full-scale view of evil needs to be judged against a full-scale view of goodness. They don't have that. So as impressive as they are at times, to just give us versions of how we end up at some level or another of the *Inferno* is a very truncated view. And Dante's *Inferno* is not instructive if it's separated from the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*.

Contemporary film and TV give us a pretty robust vision of the Inferno, but how do we nurture the moral imagination so that we can depict the complete vision?

What I think we need to do is have cultures that go deeper. We really need to return to the root sense of culture, which has to do with cultivation and with *cultus*, the practice of worship. So it has to be the practice of worship combined with an education in the moral imagination which ranges from the reading of great literature to the actual participation in communities where there are virtuous people trying to live decent and holy lives. That's the culture of life, right? That's the culture that's really going to make a difference in the formation of souls. And it's always to some extent going to be lived out on the margins. Not that we all have to go out and be Wendell Berry farmers, but it is probably not going to be the thing that will take over popular culture. And yet it can be lived right in the midst of very modern lives, just as the mendicant orders went right into the middle of the new trading cities and made their home there. It seems that instead of a kind of retreat we need to bring these cultures of life, this cultivation through reading and living and worship, right to the middle of our own civilization. Just by living it, it will exercise an influence.

Will that always mean maintaining some kind of distance from popular culture?

Yes, and it's saying that our culture, whatever it is now—superficial, pervasive, combative, with lots of Christian and anti-Christian strains in it—does not define us. The culture war doesn't even define us, because the culture war is often about what we dislike, what we want to negate. What we have to be primarily about is what we're affirming, what we're living for.

Justin Mary Bolger entered the Order of Preachers in 2012 and hails from Frederick, MD. He studied business at the University of Baltimore and earned a masters degree in philosophical studies from Mount Saint Mary's University in Emmitsburg, MD. He also wrote, recorded, and performed as a singer/songwriter which led to an interest in faith and culture.