



October 2016

## Almost Holy

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### Recommended Citation

Blizek, William L. (2016) "Almost Holy," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 20: Iss. 3, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.20.03.18>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss3/18>

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## Almost Holy

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Almost Holy* (2015), directed by Steve Hoover.

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### Author Notes

William Blizek is the Founding Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film, and is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is also the editor of the Continuum Companion to Religion and Film (2009).

*Almost Holy* is a documentary about the work of Pastor Gennadiy Mockhnenko of Mariupol, Ukraine. He is called Crocodile Gennadiy because of a famous Soviet cartoon that features a crocodile that, like Mockhnenko, tries to help people.

Crocodile Gennadiy's project is to "rescue" children from the streets of Mariupol, children addicted to drugs. He has established the Pilgrim Republic, a rehabilitation center where he brings the children in an effort to help them escape the influences that perpetuate their drug use. In the larger scheme of things Gennadiy's efforts are a drop in the bucket, but for those children he reaches he has a life transforming effect.

All of this seems to be holy work, but the movie is called *Almost Holy*, because Gennadiy's "rescue" of the children might be considered kidnapping. Mariupol is in many ways a lawless city that fails to provide services for young people caught up in the world of drugs. Under these conditions, something has to be done by people outside of the official system, like Gennadiy, and this means going beyond what would be required, or permitted, in a civil society. Since many of the children do not want to be taken to the Pilgrim Republic, Gennadiy is forced to operate outside of the law. The question posed by the film is whether it is morally permissible to abduct young people in order to help them. Is it morally or religiously permissible to be "almost" holy?

But the story is bigger than just that of Gennadiy and his addicted children. The Russians are moving into the area and the rule of law is now lost altogether. So, the larger question of the movie is: Who will save Mariupol and the region from the Russians, as Gennadiy has been saving the children from the streets? Or, are the Russians saving Mariupol and the region by means of kidnapping, just as Gennadiy has been doing to save so many children addicted to drugs? From this view, Gennadiy's actions look far less noble.