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Agnus Dei

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Agnus Dei

Abstract

This is a film review of *Agnus Dei* (2016) directed by Anne Fontaine.



Agnus Dei
(2016)
Directed by Anne Fontaine

The narrative feature, which evokes stylistic shades of the 2013 Polish film, *Ida*, is based on a true story taken from the diaries of a French female physician in 1945. *Agnus Dei* is a story about the violence of war and the moral quandaries imposed on the people who lived through it and those who were left behind. It intricately examines the notion of shame and the crisis of faith that follows such feelings.

The film follows a young female intern, who is part of a French Red Cross medical mission sent to Poland in search for, to save, and to repatriate French citizens who were in the German concentration camps. By the winter of 1945, the Germans are gone, and small units of the Russian Army act as roving bandits, after being left to fend for themselves by their military leaders. The only Polish citizens left are the sick, the aged, orphans, and those who couldn't or wouldn't be able to move away.

The medical clinic is a busy one, and one day in the middle of a shift a Polish-speaking nun comes to the clinic begging, without any success, for help. The day passes,

and the intern, Dr. Mathilde Beaulieu, looks through a window and notices the nun praying in the snow. After driving the nun back to the convent in a Red Cross ambulance, the doctor discovers several traumatized nuns in the advanced stages of pregnancy, with no one amongst them skilled at midwifery. The nuns were raped by the Soviet soldiers, who not only impregnated them, but also spread venereal diseases. So traumatized are they, that they struggle and scream when the doctor tries to examine them. “You must respect their chastity!” says one of the nuns to the doctor, as she reaches for the hem of a pregnant nun’s habit.

The nuns’ personal internal struggle is that their pregnancies are proof of their having been being unchaste, and that the pure love they have for God is now tainted. To add to their dilemma, the birth of a child at the convent will be proof to the outside world of their failure. They fear the appearance of a baby will open them up to ridicule to the community beyond their walls. While they are not to blame for being victims of rape, their pregnancies cause several of them to question God’s plan for them to be nuns. Their spiritual lives have all been upended by both the violence against them, and now, the unwanted birth of a child.

The moral dilemma faced by Doctor Beaulieu is whether or not to tell the medical commander of her unit, including her fellow surgeon and lover, about the nuns, given that she’s pledged her secrecy to them. With the mission coming to an end, and the nuns ready to give birth, the young doctor’s quandary is deepened: does she stay behind, ask for help to deliver the many babies that will probably be born close together, or does she simply stay quiet and leave?

Agnus Dei is a Polish-French and Belgian production, filmed in Poland. Fine performances by this ensemble cast bring the viewer into the drama quickly. While the genesis of the story is based on the diaries left behind by the French doctor, the characters and interactions were envisioned and written by Anne Fontaine. Perhaps the one thing that didn't ring true was the filmmaker's decision to provide an ending that was a bit too pat. In reality, the rape of women during the liberation of Poland is well documented, and the sheer numbers of those raped by troops from all countries throughout Europe is a shocking and dark piece of history. The systematic rape, and often murder, of women and girls during wartime continues to the present day. Given this, a little more darkness and a bit more ambiguity might have given *Agnus Dei* the more plausible ending it was seeking.