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Novitiate

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Novitiate

Abstract

This is a film review of *Novitiate* (2017) directed by Maggie Betts.

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In *Novitiate*, Margaret Betts tells a spiritual coming-of-age story set primarily within a fictitious and disturbingly severe convent, struggling amidst the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Cathleen, the film's protagonist, is introduced to religion and becomes attracted to consecrated life through a chance attendance at a Catholic mass and equally unforeseen enrollment in a parochial school staffed by women religious. At its best, the film offers an authentic and sometimes moving depiction of the protagonist's developing relationship with God. Cathleen's personal prayer life and motivation to attend mass are deftly depicted. Her struggle to describe a seemingly ineffable "feeling" of God's call to become a postulant is believable. A fellow sister tells Cathleen, "Being a nun . . . seems to come so naturally to you," and the viewer is inclined to agree. It is difficult to capture faith on screen and Margaret Qualley deserves full credit for her portrayal of Cathleen as a woman in love with God.

Love is the central theme of *Novitiate*. In an early scene, a sermon announces, "If there's one thing we know, it's that God's love is unconditional." Immediately afterward, Cathleen's father stumbles home: "Daddy! Where were you? We were waiting for so long! Where were you?" After a fight with Cathleen's mother, he leaves as quickly as he came. Later, at the parochial school, a teaching nun distills the essence of Roman Catholicism down to its acknowledgement of the relationship between love and sacrifice. The tortured Reverend Mother of the convent complains to God that she has made "every conceivable kind of sacrifice." One of Cathleen's fellow postulants owes her presence at the convent to her mother's belief that at least one child "should be sacrificed" to God. The film opens with a voiceover from Cathleen offering a problematic but much deeper reflection: "I wanted an ideal love . . . that I would have to sacrifice everything for." Later in the film she describes her decision to enter the convent in similar terms. This is probably the high-water mark for the positive portrayal of women religious in *Novitiate*.

The idea of nuns as the brides of Christ, as women in love with God, is taken seriously but only in conjunction with the idea that this is a love involving extreme sacrifice.

The convent at the center of *Novitiate* is run by an imperious Reverend Mother whose cruel tendencies are heightened by stress from the looming changes of Vatican II. She screams at a postulant for a minor violation and reduces her to crying and crawling along the ground before a summary dismissal. While leading the chapter of faults, an exercise in public confession, the Reverend Mother creates an atmosphere of absolute terror among the young sisters through villainous inquisition. Just as one young nun thinks she is free of this torment, the Reverend Mother calls out, “Did you hear me say you were done? Come back here.” She then forces the other novices to turn on their sister by naming her flaws. As meditations on the use and potential abuse of power within religious communities, these scenes are unnerving and insightful. If there is any sympathy to be had for Reverend Mother, perhaps it is in the realization that she too is a victim of an immovable power, distant and male. Her desk piled with documents and instructions related to Vatican II, she launches herself against the papers in a fit of overwhelming grief and rage. Confronted by the archbishop for her refusal to enact reforms, she argues ineffectually that the sisters had no voice in deliberations that will ultimately destroy the institution of Catholic nuns. The archbishop laughs at the suggestion of giving the sisters a voice. He tells her to smile more because women are “prettier when they smile.” In the immediate frame, this patronizing sexism is also the only force opposing the Reverend Mother’s free reign to abuse her community. But the viewer is never introduced to a Reverend Mother before her entire way of life is under attack. We never meet a Reverend Mother living in some alternate history where women had a full voice in the deliberations of Vatican II (as halfway through the council, 15 and ultimately 23 women auditors were invited to join over 2,500 council fathers). In a sobering scene, the Reverend Mother

concludes the announcement of reforms to her community by saying nuns are no more special or beloved by God than a layperson.

Unlike Anne Fontaine's *Les Innocentes* (2016), *Novitiate* does little to portray the rhythm and joy of life in a religious community. The film lacks the kind of long takes needed to provide a sense of contemplation or sacred time. Silence is presented as a discipline but the film itself is never silent for long. Friendship among the sisters is shown as a distraction from God's love rather than its affirmation. Sacraments are hardly mentioned except in a couple of strange scenes, making it seem as if Cathleen has entered the convent without first becoming a baptized Catholic. This is meant to establish the special character of her individual faith but it is also a further disconnect between the ideas in this film and the actual life and teachings of the Catholic Church. As an ethical principle, those who write and speak about religion should be wary of any depiction that would be unrecognizable to practitioners. These faults are an effect of the film's prevalent if not total condemnation of religious life as excessive sacrifice.

Despite *Novitiate*'s missteps, Cathleen's spiritual and emotional struggles are brilliantly depicted. Her desire to love and be loved in return is honest and profound. The absence of her father is a gaping wound. Her fraught relationship with a mother who seems to be loving her as best she can has a strong resonance with the contemporary film *Lady Bird* (2017). In a harrowing and emotional scene, Cathleen begs another sister to comfort her—to touch, hold and make love to her. As a reflection on love, both as an ideal and raw human need, *Novitiate* is a success. In examining the use of power within religious communities, the film raises many important points even as it runs to extremes. But as a meditation on consecrated life and sacrifice, the results are ambiguous and potentially unfair. In the climactic scene a priest asks Cathleen, "What do you seek?" And the moment punctuates a film adept at asking provocative and powerful questions.

Whether or not Cathleen's answer or any of the answers provided by *Novitiate* are the right answers, or the only right answers, will be for the viewer to decide.