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Corpus Christi

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Corpus Christi

Abstract

This is a film review of *Corpus Christi* (2019), directed by Jan Komasa.

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Author Notes

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***Corpus Christi* (2019), dir. Jan Komasa**

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dnOJnJVjyk>

“Each of us is the priest of Christ. Me, you. Each and every one of you.”
— prison priest in *Corpus Christi*

Early in the first scenes of Jan Komasa’s riveting *Corpus Christi*, we gaze out from the point of view of a prison priest on a gathering of inmates assembled for mass. In the middle space, in his own column of light between the altar and the inmates, is Daniel, a young juvenile offender who lives in the liminal space between the past and the future, a life of disappointment and a vision of hope. Having found a deep Christian faith in prison, he is listening attentively and with something of a spiritual glow, as the priest unconventionally encourages the men to talk to God.

“Each of us is a priest,” says the priest. The kingdom of God, he says, is not “up there, distant in time and space. It’s right here, right now.” Soon after, we see Daniel sing Psalm 23 solo with a radiating spirit while over his shoulder another inmate — who will play a role in Daniel’s undoing much later in the film — snickers.

This tension between the human capacity for good and for brokenness, and the call to us all to embolden ourselves to serve others, vibrates through every scene of Komasa’s third feature film, now established as Poland’s official entry in the Academy Awards foreign film race.¹ Daniel, who is about to be paroled, begs the priest for a chance to go to seminary and is told his record will prevent his entrance. Instead, he is shipped across the country to a routine post-prison job at a sawmill. Arriving at the mill, he hesitates, and the call of church bells distracts him into a different path. Having taken a clerical shirt and collar from the prison chapel, he declares himself a Catholic priest who is traveling through. Initially skeptical, the young woman who takes him to meet the current Vicar (and who will eventually become a love interest) accepts him not only because of his collar, but because of his clear and vivid personal conviction.

Identity is complexly interwoven with spirituality at every moment of Komasa’s film and Polish actor Bartosz Bielenia works hard to keep us always alert to the possibility of failure. As his belief deepens and as he finds a voice, Daniel offers a welcome new energy to the needs of the parish. Hearing about a tragedy at the heart of the town’s fractured community, he immediately dives into its chaos of anger and estrangements, encouraging healing and conversation and in one memorable moment leading the mourners in the exercise of externalizing vocally their rage. He googles the confession rite on his phone while he hears people’s deepest griefs, but the penances he offers are life-giving rather than punitive. To a woman who admits she has been harsh with her

son, Daniel (known to the parishioners as Father Tomasz) suggests they go for a bicycle ride. Soon, the parish is growing.

Doubt about him, however, is never far away, and here Komasa masterfully keeps us on edge, wondering who will be the betrayer and what will be the consequence. Daniel also struggles internally with his ruse: as he is given more and more responsibility, he chafes uncertainly, torn by a desire to do good on the one hand, and on the other hand a fear of the truth that will *not*, in his case, set him free. He attends at the deathbed of a woman for whom he only clutches her hand and says, “you will not die.” Is he invoking the afterlife? The promise of the resurrection? Or is he searching for a way of keeping a doomed life going? And is he talking to her, or to himself? Komasa never foreshadows or leads us to conclusions. We are always with Daniel in the moment, reacting as he does to each turn of events.

The Vicar’s assistant, a woman who is listed in the film’s credits only as Sacristan Woman (and who lost a son in the town tragedy) is never quite convinced. When Daniel gets carried away at a baptism and tosses water jubilantly over all the congregation, she is the only one who is unimpressed. Taking his alb from him later, she notes that it must now be dried properly, or the cloth will rot. The staid aspects of church tradition are also hemming him in — he is increasingly at odds with liturgical order and ritual. The implication of the Sacristan Woman and others is that tradition itself will rot, if it is not upheld. Daniel is rocking more than just his own boat, but the very foundations of how the church works. The edginess of a man who was not too long ago in “juvie” is used here brilliantly: we sometimes can’t tell if Daniel is resisting the expectations of others from his deep faith or his rebellious nature. In the end it is both, but always in the pursuit of deeper meaning, even if he is often unable to put that meaning into words.

As his actions on behalf of those affected by the tragedy start to become political, the local powermongers close in on Daniel, looking for ways to bring him under their control. Now that he has tasted freedom and spiritual advocacy, however, Daniel has none of it. At a critical moment when the sawmill owner reveals what he knows, Daniel has the opportunity to become complicit with them and keep his new life — at a price. In the greatest expression of his spiritual growth, he resists. The harrowing events which lead to his exposure turn like efficient plot points, and are gut-wrenching. We realize that we have become his parishioners also — and our heart breaks.

The ‘priesthood of all believers’ is not a Catholic theological principle, but screenwriter Mateusz Pacewicz was inspired by real events in fashioning his story,² as well as the life of the sixteenth century martyr Menocchio, who was burned at the stake for calling out the church’s practices and for suggesting that we are all capable of serving God in the world as faith-filled servants of Christ. As Daniel’s fate unfolds, he becomes increasingly Christ-like, and Komasa, Pacewicz and Bielenia are careful not to let that aspect of their story succumb to easy expectations. The revelations of Daniel’s past include something we have not known before but helps us understand him better. The “slam” violence perpetrated on a man at the start of the movie in prison, becomes a framing device near the end, when Daniel is returned to the facility and the inmates close in. The conclusion is a surprise turn, and the movie leaves us in a deeply ambiguous place. It challenges our acceptance of a punitive system that recriminates and condemns people over and over, while also illustrating how easy it is to become victims of our own darkness.

At one point in better times, during a mass, Daniel extemporizes a collective prayer to God that galvanizes his new following: “How am I supposed to act on your behalf [Jesus], if I can’t handle my own life?,” he says, arms raised, talking to heaven. *Corpus Christi* offers all of us a way to reflect on that question within our own lives, while looking outward into the world around us.

¹ “Holy Moly”: Komasa’s Corpus Christi chosen for Oscars”, by Marzanna Robinson, published by The First News on 20 September, 2019. <https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/holy-moly-komasas-corpus-christi-chosen-for-oscars-7619>

² “Corpus Christi, Interview,” by Stephen Porzio, published by Europa Cinemas on 18 September, 2019. <https://www.europa-cinemas.org/en/news/network-highlights/corpus-christi-interview>.