



February 2021

Rebel Hearts

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Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2021) "Rebel Hearts," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol25/iss1/8>

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Rebel Hearts* (2021), directed by Pedro Kos.

Keywords

Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Roman Catholic Church, Vatican II, Social Justice

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Author Notes

John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska-Omaha. He was been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Rebel Hearts (2021), dir. Pedro Kos

In Los Angeles in the 1960s, the community of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary included a college, 11 high schools, 68 elementary schools, and two hospitals. The order had been founded as a Roman Catholic teaching institute for women. In the next few years, it would become a hot spot in the developing struggles within the Roman Catholic Church which accompanied the implementation of the Second Vatican Council reforms. This film lovingly documents these struggles and the fate of the Immaculate Heart community up to the present day. It is a portrait of the dedicated women who fought to follow their vision of their faith in the face of significant opposition from a patriarchal church.

I expected to get angry at the way the Church interfered with the ministry of this women, but even moreso I was awed by the mixture of strength and kindness that I heard from the sisters

interviewed for this film. Women might become nuns in that time as an alternative to hierarchical marriages, which were the norm, and in order to have an education, a profession, and a vocation. They brought the world to their young students as they discussed the issues of the day including the civil rights movement, world hunger, poverty, and the Vietnam War. While today social justice movements in the Roman Catholic Church are hardly a rarity, at that time their efforts riled their conservative Cardinal James McIntyre who was more at home with the right-wing John Birch Society than war protesters. He opposed some of the reforms of Vatican II including women assisting with communion and the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, but things came to a head when the sisters advocated for their own rights. As a former stockbroker, McIntyre was above all a businessman, and he saw in the sisters cheap labor for the schools. Class size was routinely over sixty, and nuns might be thrown into teaching without even a college education. On top of that, they were required to wear the traditional habit, engage in set times for prayer and meals, and observe extensive vows of silence. All of this was soon to be questioned as the sisters asked for smaller classes, more educational requirements for teachers, and the right to set their own schedules and dress in modern clothes.

None of these demands was unreasonable or selfishly motivated; they wanted to serve their students and their community better, and to be connected to the changing world in which they lived. It was an exciting time for young women who were being empowered to speak out on important issues and make a contribution to their society, as former students testify in the film. Sadly and predictably, the Vatican backed the Cardinal's efforts against their reforms, which finally led to an ultimatum that the nuns give up their vows if they could not conform. 315 out of 400 nuns gave up their vows and established a secular order, eventually including men and women. Immaculate Heart College closed in 1981.

Although many of the issues that led to the separation no longer exist for the Church, it remains a highly patriarchal institution, and it was this structure that in large part prevented these women from being accepted. The women who are still part of the Immaculate Heart community continue their work against racism, sexism, colonialism, homophobia, and all forms of domination—and they see this as the work of Mary and Jesus. I quite agree; I continue to be amazed at the number of Christians who do *not* embrace these causes as the work of God, and instead seem to view work on behalf of refugees, immigrants, prisoners, or the oppressed as somehow *un-Christian*. One doesn't have to read much of the Bible, however, to know that these nuns were following a genuine calling, and this clearly sustained them even when they were persecuted and shut down. They were and are joyful and humble in their work, giving me hope that all religions can throw off the yoke of oppression and patriarchy that still constricts them. Why would one *not* want to let loose this resource of women seeking to serve the Church and the world they love?

When one young woman towards the end of the film notes that she believes it is necessary to follow your conscience, even if it goes against the Pope, I wondered if she knew that she was quoting Martin Luther. Perhaps the next Luther from the Roman Catholic Church will be a woman, and I hope that she can challenge and change its structures without being thrown out. And I say that as a Lutheran.

This film is a beautiful love story about women who have made and still make a difference, and whether the viewers are religious or not, it will inspire them and help them realize that faith, hope, and charity are alive and well in those whose hearts are infused with the love of God.