



February 2021

## Mass

John C. Lyden  
*University of Nebraska-Omaha*, johnclyden@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

### Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2021) "Mass," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol25/iss1/10>

This Sundance Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

## Mass

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Mass* (2021), directed by Fran Kranz.

### Keywords

Reconciliation, School shootings, Forgiveness

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

### 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).



**Mass (2021), dir. Fran Kranz**

Fran Kranz has made a remarkable film for his directorial debut, set in a small Episcopal church in Idaho. A meeting is being prepared in the church basement, with just four chairs. After the church workers anxiously set up the room, it is soon left to four adults, who are not to be disturbed. The movie unfolds as the real time encounter of these four, as we gradually learn the purpose is to allow for reconciliation between the parents of a school shooter and the parents of a victim.

Richard (Reed Birney) and Linda (Ann Dowd) meet Jay (Jason Isaacs) and Gail (Martha Plimpton), awkwardly but politely exchanging pleasantries. They know each other, but have not seen each other for years. Much of the film passes before we even know what has happened, or the names of their children. As the story is revealed, we can feel every emotion of these four characters. Jay and Gail express their anger at Richard and Linda: Why didn't they prevent their son from becoming a killer? How could they not know? In turn, Richard and Linda become

defensive. The men seek rational explanations, and even devolve into an abstract argument about whether school shootings are to be blamed more on the easy availability of guns or the lack of proper mental health counseling. Gail becomes annoyed and says, “I didn’t come here to discuss politics.” Indeed they did not, and there is no explanation that can satisfy them in any case. But why then are they there? Jay wants to see their regret: “I regret everything,” says Richard, but this is not enough. Gail wants to see them suffer. Have they not suffered? Richard and Linda could hardly find a church to bury their son, as no one could allow that he was also a victim. “Should I believe that my son’s life had no value?,” says Linda.

The dialogue and pacing are so realistic that one can picture this as an actual encounter. Kranz studied reconciliation meetings of this sort to try to reproduce the experience, and he has achieved something miraculous. It avoids feeling like a play due to the creation of the setting outside the room, a multi-camera set up, and skilled editing and shot composition. We witness the drama of forgiveness and grace as the two sets of parents come to really see each other for the first time, to realize the extent of their shared loss. As Gail states it, she knows she will lose her son’s memory if she hangs onto anger and refuses to forgive. The two mothers bond over the pain of being unable to sacrifice themselves in place of their children. Before the end, peace descends on the gathering.

A summary of the film cannot do justice to the seamless development of these themes in the film, which is a thing of beauty and grace. There are also theological clues dropped throughout the film, never heavy handed in the conversation, but found in the background. The setting is the real Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Hailey, Idaho, and as Emmanuel means “God With Us,” we see a banner with just those words in one shot. The choir sings, “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds Our Hearts in Christian Love” in the sanctuary as the film ends, and this deeply affects the

characters. The film's title is also a clue. The Mass is the term for Holy Communion in the Roman Catholic Church, although it is rarely used in Episcopal churches. The word comes from "sending," implying that the Mass recreates and shares the reconciling work of Christ who was sent to Earth for this purpose, and that those who partake in this event are likewise sent into the world to share this work. And this work of reconciliation does indeed appear in this meeting.

The four central actors in this film give amazingly powerful performances that live up to the power of the screenplay. It is a wonderful thing to see forgiveness appear so realistically in a film, especially in a time when so many films revel in revenge, anger, and violence. It is both healing and hopeful to watch a film filled with such promise of communal connection, for as the aforementioned hymn puts it:

We share each other's woes  
Our mutual burdens bear  
And often for each other flows  
The sympathizing tear.