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The Crime of Father Amaro (El crimen del Padre Amaro)

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Abstract
This is a review of The Crime of Father Amaro (El crimen del Padre Amaro) (2002).

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The Crime of Father Amaro (El Crimen del Padre Amaro) is a beautiful, ethically rich yet tragic story based on the book written by Jose Maria Ecade Queiroz in 1875. The movie focuses primarily on the character of Fr. Amaro, a young newly ordained priest whose first assignment is in the small rural town of Los Reyes, Mexico, where he is under the supervision of Fr. Benito. The latter is an older priest with questionable character, demonstrated partly by his illicit sexual affair but more especially by his involvement in money laundering with the local drug dealers. In this setting, Fr. Amaro falls prey to temptation and becomes sexually involved with a young woman in the town who ultimately becomes pregnant and eventually seeks an abortion, with Fr. Amaro's assistance. Although rated as "morally offensive" by the United States Catholic Bishops, primarily because of what they deem its sacrilegious nature and in particular its negative portrayal of priests, these very features are what make the film morally complex, deep, worthy of serious discussion, and a must-see.

The film raises a number of theological and ethical questions, some of which are more explicit than others. Obviously, the film touches on the issue of celibacy within the Catholic Church, given the fact that two of the principal characters in the film are priests who are not faithful to their vows of celibacy and are instead having sexual relationships with women in their parish (ironically, it is a mother and daughter who serve as the lovers of the respective priests). It raises
the question of vocation and what is necessary in one's ability to serve God and God's people, particularly as a priest. While Fr. Amaro recognizes his moral responsibility to his lover, Amelia, he struggles with having to choose between a life of service to the Church and a personal loving relationship. It is his conclusion that he cannot do both that leads to the tragic ending of this relationship.

Another important issue the film raises is the relationship between spirituality and sexuality. Given the well-established dualistic approach to the human being in the Christian tradition, largely inherited from parts of the Greek tradition, Christianity has historically relegated the bodily and the sexual to the arena of the sinful, a perspective which has only been challenged relatively recently. The connection between spirituality and sexuality--even illicit sexual acts--has not been as widely treated. Although at one point in the film Amelia admits that their love is largely sensual, it is also clear that what predominantly drew them to each other was a deep spiritual relationship. Both Fr. Amaro, in his choice of religious vocation, and Amelia, in her commitment to the Church and instructing of young children in the faith, are individuals who appear to be very serious about their faith and who are at least partly drawn to that aspect in the other. This is true for Fr. Benito and his lover, Sanjuanero, as well. The film also implicitly raises the question of whether sexual sins are more heinous than other kinds of sins. Whereas even Fr. Benito is involved in an illicit affair, it is fair to ask whether that behavior
is worse than his involvement in accommodation to drug dealers in exchange for support of a hospital he wants to have built.

The topic of liberation theology is also addressed in this film, although this phrase is never actually used. Fr. Natalio is a priest working and living with some of the poor in his community, and is apparently actively involved in a resistance movement against the political leaders who oppress his people. Fr. Natalio is warned several times throughout the film by the bishop, via Fr. Amaro, to cease and desist these activities or risk being excommunicated. Fr. Natalio's resolve not to be intimidated and to follow what he believes is his true vocation calls into question issues of authority and to whom one must be ultimately obedient. It also obviously touches on the question specifically of whether priests should be involved in activities that necessitate violence, and more generally, of whether the ends justify the means, in order to bring about justice.

The above issues are the predominant sticky theological concerns and moral dilemmas that the film explores, but there are also a number of subsidiary issues worth mentioning, that could be addressed in light of the following questions. What is the relationship between spirituality and social responsibility? What is/should be the relationship between religion and politics? What should be the response of individuals and the church as an institution in the face of injustice-accommodation, resistance, or something else? What is meant by the concept of the body of Christ.
and in particular communion? Does the end ever justify the means? Is abortion always a moral evil? Are individuals always completely responsible for their moral decisions, or does the social and institutional setting of their lives mitigate this responsibility in some ways? Who are the truly spiritual individuals in this film? What does it mean specifically to be a Catholic, and more generally, to be a Christian?

While much more could be said of this powerfully moving film, the issues explicitly addressed could lead to a fruitful discussion for individuals who do choose to see this film. Whether you agree or disagree with the film's content and/or message, it certainly is difficult to sit through this film and not have one's emotions and spirit deeply touched.