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Review of "There Be Dragons," by Juan Manuel de Prada

A well-known writer in Spain reveals Roland Joffé's recent film "There Be Dragons."

04/26/2011

Roland Joffé may be the “last of the Mohicans” in a school of film-making that’s been practically extinct for some time, a school whose greatest representative was David Lean. It’s a kind of cinema that, while deploying all the sumptuous resources and

typical thrills of a blockbuster, is thoroughly engrossed in the spiritual vicissitudes of its characters. We're talking about films of epic substance, attentive to the geography of the soul, to those secret corners of the heart where a symphony of contrapuntal passions is composed, full of heartrending conflicts of conscience, fierce loyalties and festering betrayals, that show us an x-ray of the contradictory essence of humanity, capable of the vilest acts, but also of the noblest and most superhuman plans and enterprises. *There Be Dragons*, in fact, deals with just such a noble and superhuman plan. Joffé's movie brings back the epic spirit of *The Killing Fields* and *The Mission*. As he did in those two films, Joffé leads us to the very core of suffering, where the darkest shadows have free rein. Then we discover - just as in those two memorable films - that even there, where everything seems lost, the

light that illumines the journey of man on earth can still shine out.

The bearer of that light is, in this case, a young priest from Barbastro, who, in a place where atavistic hatreds are triumphing, sows a seed of forgiveness and reconciliation whose fruits will spread over the generations, crossing frontiers, healing wounds that seemed incurable. The priest who carried that light is Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, founder of Opus Dei, and the source of that light is, of course, divine. It's surprising that a director who calls himself an agnostic should be able to penetrate so sincerely and without prejudices into the heart of a religious vocation; that he should capture perfectly the ultimate meaning of that vocation: that by embracing the Cross one achieves an intimate union with human suffering.

There Be Dragons takes place, for the most part, against the backdrop of our Civil War, which Saint Josemaría experienced in his own flesh. Despite a few errors in the historical setting, the vision that Joffé offers of that fratricidal conflict contains a refreshing message: apart from the wicked or misguided causes that men may serve, there reside, in each man, the embers that make him valuable in himself. In *There Be Dragons*, the despicable deeds and chaos unleashed in “Red Madrid” are not hidden; but, in the midst of the storm of blood, Joffé prefers to set his gaze on a handful of people – the ticket-collector on the Metro who saves Escrivá from being beaten, the Republican army captain who hides him in his house, the anarchist leader who nobly loves a Hungarian soldier - who, like flowers among the rubble, resist the hegemony of hate. As the seed contains the tree, each of these characters carries within a rich

vein of unconquered humanity that neither obtuse ideologies nor a reign of crime can completely obscure. And that vein, illuminated by divine grace, is what the protagonist of the film (magnificently portrayed by Charlie Cox) struggles to save, to put back together and to nourish, certain that in the end it will bear fruit.

There Be Dragons is a moving parable about forgiveness, that purifying force – so scandalous today when so many apostles of resentment are making a killing – that washes faults away and restores to men the courage needed to face the truth. Joffé manages to dive into the depths of this force that exorcises the powers of hatred through the figure of Escrivá, presenting the religious faith that animates him as a faith incarnated in each suffering human being. When the child Josemaría, in his native Barbastro, decides to become a priest he

understands that there can be no imitation of Christ if there isn't, beforehand, an acceptance of sacrifice, if one doesn't take on one's own shoulders the burden of human faults and failings (Joffé shows this to us in a disquieting and memorable sequence, in which a pair of unshod feet walk through the snow); that the carrying of one's own suffering and that of others is what, in fact, can lay the foundation for reconciliation. Joffé has managed, once again, to shed light in the realm of shadows.

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