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Sexual abuse of minors by clergy in cinematography: unrecognized signs of the times*

Abstract

Contemporary theologians apply the historic notion of *loci theologici* also to media and film. Films that show the Church in a critical way are also theologically significant. Therefore, one should be aware of the appearance of documentaries and feature films, which raise the issue of sexual abuse against the youngest (*paedophilia*) also in the Church. The article presents the most important films, produced since the end of the 20th century, whose authors present the crime of *paedophilia*, its victims, the mechanisms leading to its concealment and silence not only in the Church, but also in the media and society. Films about *paedophilia*, which are a recognisable voice of victims in the public space, a cry for truth and justice, can also be useful tools for media education.

Keywords

paedophilia – film – Church – *loci theologici*.

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In an essay analysing the importance of art for theology and the Church, Kazimiera Joanna Warzynów states an important thesis: “Since the Spirit of God can and does work everywhere, in the strict sense, not only religious art is able to enable participation in the life-giving self-revelation of God, but also art as such.”¹

One of the areas of art in which the surprising and sometimes unexpected revelation of God can be found is cinematography. It is also films that constitute one of the contemporary areas of *loci theologici*. The historic concept, which theology owes to Spanish theologian Melchor Cano (†1560), has been extended in the last decades: Jerzy Szymik reads belles-lettres as locus theologicus,² while Witold Kawecki points out the possibility of interpreting art – sacred and in general – and the media in the categories of loci theologici, that is, as “a place where human nature is more fully revealed and new paths to the truth are opened, where the voices of contemporaneity are heard and through which the Holy Spirit speaks.”³ Pope John Paul II wrote about such a pursuit of truth, even painful truth, in his Message for the World Communications Day, dedicated in 1995 to the cinema: “It must therefore offer material for reflection on issues such as social commitment, and the condemnation of violence, of all forms of exclusion, of war and of injustice. These concerns, often dealt with by the cinema in its hundred-year history, cannot leave indifferent all those who are worried about the fate of humanity. This means encouraging those values that the Church has at heart and contributing directly to their spread through a medium which so easily and effectively reaches the public.”⁴

One of the injustices that filmmakers talk about is the drama of sexual violence against children, which also occurs in the Catholic Church and because of pastoral workers of the Church. This text is an attempt to outline the theme present on screens since only a few decades, but which should be important for the Church when it becomes a cry for justice and truth.

¹ K.J. Wawrzynów, *Sztuka wyzwaniem dla Kościoła i teologii*, “Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny” (2011) 19/1, p. 158.

² Cf. J. Szymik, *W poszukiwaniu teologicznej głębi literatury. Literatura piękna jako locus theologicus*, Katowice 1994, Księgarnia Św. Jacka.

³ W. Kawecki, *Teologia wobec kultury wizualnej*, in: W. Kawecki et al., *Miejsca teologiczne w kulturze wizualnej*, Kraków – Warszawa 2013, “scriptum”, p. 21.

⁴ John Paul II, *Message for the 29th World Communications Day “Cinema: Communicator of Culture and of Values”*, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_06011995_world-communications-day.html (17.01.2022).

1. A brief history of sexual violence against children in film

Although cinema, a medium that has existed for more than 125 years, began to offer its audience mature stories about various human dramas as early as the second decade of the 20th century,⁵ it was not until the end of the 20th century that sexual violence against children⁶ became a subject of films: in several dramas, children are shown as victims of sexual violence (*Pixote*, dir. Hector Babenco, 1980; *The Mysterious Skin*, dir. Gregg Araki, 2004; *The Lovely Bones*, dir. Peter Jackson, 2009); protagonist of *The Woodsman* (dir. Nicole Kassell, 2004) is Walter (Kevin Bacon), who spent 12 years in prison for molesting girls. As in the case of other areas of social life (psychology, culture, media), despite the general interest in sexual crimes, earlier filmmakers omitted paedophilia in silence⁷ or did not consider it as legally or ethically reprehensible behaviour, as it happened in the case of the film *Lolita* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1962), which was considered by one of the publications as one of the “1001 films you must see”; the author of the review does not see the problem in the erotic relationship of a 14-year-old “seductress” with an adult man, but only emphasises that the director surprisingly managed to fit within the limitations of censorship and showed the film as erotic, absurd, obsessive, erudite and farcical as the book.⁸ Also in *Kinsey* (dir. Bill Condon, 2004) or in François Ozon’s films, minors’ sexual intercourse is shown as an attractive part of the story: Julia (Ludivine Sagnier) in *Swimming Pool* (2003) talks proudly about her sexual initiation at the age of 13, the slightly older protagonist of *Young & Beautiful* (*Jeune et jolie*, 2013), 17-year-old Isabelle leads a promiscuous erotic life.

The absence of this topic from the perspective of film studies is not surprising: in Amos Vogel’s important look at cinema as “subversive art”, discussing

⁵ In the lexicon of cinematic masterpieces, the oldest is the American film *Birth of the Nation* (dir. D.W. Griffith, 1915), considered to be a groundbreaking work that initiated art cinema. See A. Helman, *100 arcydzieł kina*, Kraków 2000, Rabid, p. 15.

⁶ In this paper I will use the simplifying term “paedophilia”.

⁷ Although coined in the mid-twentieth century, “the term ‘paedophile’ first rose to prominence in 1996 when the theme of ‘paedophiles in the community’ swept across the UK, receiving extensive coverage” in the media, until 1996, not least because of the publicity given to crimes in Belgium, the USA and the UK, cf. Y. Jewkes, *Media & Crime*, London 2015, SAGE, p. 117.

⁸ K. Newman, *Lolita*, in: *1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die*, S.J. Schneider (ed.), London 2003, Quintet Publishing, p. 409.

the “forbidden” themes of films (including nudity and sexual taboos, erotic, pornographic films, or homosexuality), paedophilia does not appear.⁹ In the monograph by Rafał Syska, which deals with the issue of violence in film, there is no mention of paedophilia;¹⁰ the chapter devoted to childhood in the collective study analysing “the great themes in cinema at the turn of the century” stops at the loneliness of the child;¹¹ in the cross-sectional article by Andrzej Luter, which presented the image of the priest in Polish cinema, there is no mention of films that speak of paedophilia.¹²

However, in the history of cinema there have been films showing the moral corruption of the clergy. The authors of the encyclopaedia of religious film, published in 2007, described them.¹³ The main character of the British film *Priest* (dir. Antonia Bird, 1994), Father Pilkington (Linus Roache), serving in a parish just after his ordination, turns out to be a homosexual, who cannot control his inclinations; the parish priest, his superior, lives with a young housewife, the bishop, permeated with materialism, is also corrupt. In this film there appears the theme of paedophilia in a family: Lisa, confessing to Father Pilkington, says that she was molested by her father.

The Mexican film *The Crime of Padre Amaro* (*El crimen del Padre Amaro*, dir. Carlos Carrera, 2002), a screen adaptation of a 19th-century Portuguese novel by José Maria de Eça de Queiroz, transferred to the reality of contemporary Mexico, is a story of a zealous priest, Amaro (Gael García Bernal), who after his ordination comes to a parish where there are two priests: Father Benito, who is financially dependent on drug traffickers, and Father Natalio, on the side of liberation theology. Amaro gets involved with 16-year-old Amelia (Ana Claudia Talancón), whose mother is the parish priest’s mistress. Amelia becomes pregnant and Fr Amaro, who does not want to give up his priesthood for fatherhood, becomes an accomplice in the decision to have an abortion, ending in the death of the young woman.

⁹ A. Vogel, *Film as Subversive Art*, New York 1974, Random House; cf. L. Williams, *Screening Sex*, Durham NC 2008, Duke University Press.

¹⁰ R. Syska, *Film i przemoc*, Kraków 2003, Rabid.

¹¹ B. Cyganek, *Dzieciństwo. Ciężar samotności*, in: T. Lubelski (ed.), *Odwieczne od nowa. wielkie tematy w kinie przelomu wieków*, Kraków 2004, Rabid, pp. 27–49.

¹² A. Luter, *Ksiądz w polskim filmie*, in: M. Lis (ed.), *Ukryta religijność kina*, Opole 2002, Red. Wyd. WT UO, pp. 37–49.

¹³ M. Lis, A. Garbicz (eds.), *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego*, Kraków 2007, Biały Kruk.

Sexual abuse of minors appears on the screen as one of the elements of violence to which they are subjected: *Sleepers* (dir. Barry Levinson, 1996), set in New York, is a story about four teenagers from the Hell's Kitchen district, inhabited mainly by immigrants. When the boys recklessly cause an accident, they are sentenced to almost a year in a so-called house of correction, where they encounter brutality and violence. "One of the guards, Sean Nokes, is particularly sadistic and sexually abuses his charges."¹⁴ When, years later, the men who were once altar boys take revenge on Nokes (Kevin Bacon), Fr Bobby (Robert De Niro) stands up for them, citing as his favourite Gospel passage Jesus' words from the parable of the Last Judgement: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40, NIV).

It was not until the last years of the 20th century that films began to be produced that explicitly dealt with the subject of sexual violence, with clergy or religious becoming participants (or witnesses). Several of the movies touch on the violence that took place in church educational institutions in Ireland.¹⁵

The 50-minute television documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate* (dir. Steve Humphries, 1998), made up of a series of interviews with women employed in convent laundries, inspired the script of *The Magdalene Sisters* (dir. Peter Mullan, 2002). The feature film begins in the 1960s, when three girls are sent to an institution for "fallen" women near Dublin, run by nuns: Margaret (Anne-Marie Duff), removed from her home because she was raped by her cousin, Rose (Dorothy Duffy), who, having given birth to an illegitimate child, is sent there by her parents on the advice of a priest put up for adoption, and Bernadette (Nora-Jane Noone), who attracts too much attention from boys because of her appealing appearance. They are sent on the same day to an asylum, where they will share the fate of the other women there, locked up against their will and forced to work in the laundry of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy. These institutions, which existed with the approval of the Irish government, employed women in difficult situations: single mothers, divorcees, prostitutes, and those caught in the act of adultery. The film exposes the hypocrisy of the

¹⁴ A. Luter, K. Wajda, *Uśpieni*, in: M. Lis, A. Garbicz (eds.), *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego*, Kraków 2007, p. 562.

¹⁵ Unfortunately, there is hardly any information in the largest movie database imdb.com on the earlier Irish tv productions (*Suffer the Little Children*, 1994; *Dear Daughter*, dir. Louis Lentin, 1996; *States of Fear*, 1999), only mentioned by W. Damberg, *Missbrauch. Die Geschichte eines internationalen Skandals*, in: B. Aschmann (ed.), *Katholische Dunkelräume. Die Kirche und der sexuelle Missbrauch*, Paderborn 2021, Brill Schöningh, pp. 7–8.

representatives of the Church and the abandonment of the message of the Gospel; one of them is the chaplain of the sisters, Fr Fitzroy (Daniel Costello), who sexually abuses the women in the Magdalene asylum: who among the participants of the services and processions conducted by him “could imagine that Father Fitzroy is a rapist and sexual abuser? How many spectators would see the nuns as the incarcerated women see them?”¹⁶ The female inmates, rejected by their families and society, were “humiliated and degraded – in one scene reminiscent of a concentration camp selection, a nun mocks the naked girls lined up. [...] The nuns are presented in the film as the incarnation of evil, and the establishment run by them as a place of hypocrisy and degeneration; the priest also commits wickedness here, sexually abuses one of the characters: Crispina (Eileen Walsh), taken to a psychiatric institution, calls out to the chaplain ‘You’re not a man of God!’”¹⁷ The film was highly acclaimed by critics – as evidenced by the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, among other awards – but it is a biased piece of work: the pathological incidents depicted in the Magdalene asylum were unfortunately a result of the Irish mores of the time. The last of these asylums was closed in 1996.¹⁸

Evelyn (dir. Bruce Beresford, 2002) tells the story of another Magdalene asylum case: in 1953, the children of Desmond Doyle (Pierce Brosnan), an unemployed man abandoned by his wife, are entrusted to the Magdalene Sisters, where they suffer humiliation. The protagonist’s persistence leads to a Supreme Court hearing and an unprecedented verdict that the Irish Children’s Act is incompatible with the Constitution and the principles of the Catholic faith. The casus changes Irish law, and *Evelyn* and her brothers return to their father.¹⁹ A similar theme of violence and injustice of nunnery centres towards “single mothers” is the subject of the film *Philomena* (dir. Stephen Frears, 2014), whose main character (Judi Dench) after several decades tries to find her son, given away by nuns to an American adoptive family.

¹⁶ I. S. M. Makarushka, *The Magdalene Sisters: How to Solve the Problem of “Bad” Girls*, “Journal of Religion & Film” (2012) 16/2, Article 1, p. 22, <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrjf/vol16/iss2/1> (7.05.2021).

¹⁷ K. Jabłońska, *Siostry Magdalenki*, in: M. Lis, A. Garbicz (eds.), *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego*, Kraków 2007, p. 492.

¹⁸ K. Jabłońska, *Siostry Magdalenki*, in: M. Lis, A. Garbicz (eds.), *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego*, Kraków 2007, pp. 491f.

¹⁹ A. Garbicz, *Evelyn*, in: M. Lis, A. Garbicz (eds.), *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego*, Kraków 2007, p. 149.

A story about sexual abuse by a priest is told directly in the feature-length American documentary *Twist of Faith* (dir. Kirby Dick, 2004). Its protagonist, 32-year-old fireman Tony Comes, after moving with his wife and children to a new house, discovers that their neighbour is Dennis Gray, a lay catechist who, 20 years before as a priest sexually abused him and other children. Tony, raised in a Catholic family, kept quiet, but the traumatic experience left an imprint on his life. Years later he wants to get Gray to confess, but when the bishop refuses to help, he takes the case to court. The filmmakers visited about 50 American dioceses, talking to lawyers, psychologists and victims of clergy: at the time, 10,000 cases from the years 1950–2002 were presumed to exist. The image of the Church that emerges from these conversations is that of a corporation guarding its interests, which first denies the accusations, and then, treating the faithful as enemies, threatens them with lawyers; Gray confesses that he became a priest to have a good life. The film avoids cheap sensationalism because it was the spouses themselves, Tony and Wendy, who recorded their struggle for truth and justice. The result is “a poignant intimate diary of a man sharing a painful experience, asking himself and the viewer about the essence of faith: do we believe in God or an institution? And are we able to trust Him after being let down by ‘His’ people?”²⁰

The consequences of violence, including sexual violence, are dealt with in films about church education centres for boys: a strict Catholic Reformatory and Industrial School for wayward boys in Ireland in 1939 is the setting for *Song for a Raggy Boy* (dir. Aisling Walsh, 2003). In the Spanish drama *Bad Education* (*La mala educación*, dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 2004), a narratively difficult, multi-layered film, inspired by the director’s own experiences (apart from the contemporary plot, there are also retrospectives and motifs of the work on the script and the film), there appears the theme of molestation, committed years ago by Fr Manolo at the school run by the order: his victims include the director Enrique and Ignacio, the author of the script about an attempt to take revenge on the paedophile. “The title ‘Bad Education’ means negative formation, because by not eliminating pathological behaviour that has a destructive effect on the personality of the pupils, it weighs on their later life. This is how the bad emotions of Fr Manolo shaped Ignacio-Zahara and Enrique.”²¹

²⁰ K. Wajda, *Trudna wiara*, in: M. Lis, A. Garbicz (eds.), *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego*, Kraków 2007, p. 547.

²¹ M. Marczak, *Złe wychowanie*, in: M. Lis, A. Garbicz (eds.), *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego*, Kraków 2007, p. 614.

Other important works with the central theme of clergy sexual offences and the lack of proper reaction and responsibility of their superiors appeared on screens in the following decade: the Chilean *The Club* (*El Club*, dir. Pablo Larraín, 2015), the American *Spotlight* (dir. Tom McCarthy, 2015) and the French film *By the Grace of God* (*Grâce à Dieu*, dir. François Ozon, 2018).²²

The protagonists of the film *The Club* are four priests who stay in an isolated house in a coastal town in Chile, where they are supposed to repent for their sins; they are looked after by Sister Mónica (Antonia Zegers). The peaceful life of the residents – these priests are nothing like penitents – is disrupted by the arrival of a fifth man, presenting himself as a victim of a paedophile, who brings back to them the memories of their sinful lives. The Chilean director shows a disturbing image of the Church as an organisation that, instead of confronting depravity and making an effort to overcome it, continues to turn its head in the face of its own evil: even Father García (Marcelo Alonso), a Jesuit sent to explain the suicide of the man who had been an altar boy molested by one of the clergy, “did not come here to bring justice and reparation to the victims, but to look after the interests and prestige of the institution.”²³ As the director indicates in an interview, *The Club* is a film about impunity, but also “about guilt, compassion and love. It is very dark at times, but if one wants to see the light, one must first face the darkness.”²⁴

Spotlight (2015) is a fact-inspired story about the investigative journalists of the Spotlight team from the American daily newspaper “The Boston Globe,” uncovering a growing number of cases of child sexual abuse by Roman Catholic priests. When Marty Baron (Liev Schreiber) starts working at the paper in 2001, he meets Walter “Robby” Robinson (Michael Keaton) from the Spotlight team; he manages to get lawyer Mitchell Garabedian (Stanley Tucci) to work with the team, who has knowledge that the Archbishop of Boston, Cardinal Bernard Law, has failed to stop Fr John Geoghan from abusing children. The journalist’s investigation of one priest, repeatedly transferred to different locations, leads to the discovery of a pattern of child sexual abuse by priests in Massachusetts (among whom are also victims of paedophilia) and of a cover-up by the Boston

²² The theme of paedophilia appears marginally in the Croatian tragicomedy *The Priest’s Children* (*Svećenikova djeca*, dir. Vinko Brešan, 2013).

²³ B. Żurawiecki, *El Club*, “Kino” nr 10 (2015), p. 76.

²⁴ P. Larraín, *Nie ma jasności bez mroku. Z Pablo Larraínem rozmawia Ola Salwa*, “Kino” (2015) 10, p. 33.

Archdiocese: the list of names of priests who molest children grows to 13, then to 87. The Spotlight journalists also contact the victims of abuse, and finally, on 6 January 2002, a text is published exposing the Church's negligence in the face of abuse by priests.²⁵ The film also shows the co-responsibility of journalists, resulting from their negligence: already in 1993 Robinson received from one of the victims a list of 20 names of paedophile priests – and he did not react to this message. In her bitter commentary on *Spotlight*, which bears an evangelical title, Bożena Janicka notes the similarity to Andersen's well-known fairy tale: "The city of Boston (the city and the world?) was silent because it preferred to see the beautiful robe rather than the nakedness of the king. The problem of choosing a lie as the lesser evil appears, because a brutal clash with the truth would be something worse."²⁶ The closing credits list places in the United States and around the world (among them there is Poznań and the case of Archbishop Juliusz Paetz, publicised in 2002) where superiors have been negligent, leading to the concealment of abuse by priests.

The French film *By the Grace of God* (2018) is also based on facts: the orderly world of Alexander's (Melvil Poupaud) bourgeois family in Lyon begins to be poisoned by the news that Fr Bernard Preynet (Bernad Verley) is once again ministering in the nearby parish. Alexander's nightmare, pushed away for years, returns: a quarter of a century earlier, as a child, when he belonged to a scout troop, he was molested by this priest. The strength of Ozon's film is to give voice to the victims: they have names and surnames, they live through the trauma marked by the dates and places of molestation, sealed by many years of silence enforced by indifference, downplaying the evil or the helplessness of their relatives in the face of the violence that affected their children. The offender is precisely identified: the film focuses on one of them, allowing him and those who, in their time, did nothing – or did too little – to stop the crime affecting more boys to speak too. It takes time for the viewer to understand how the paedophilic acts of Fr Preynet, aware and at the same time helpless in the face of the evil he is committing, have entwined the lives of hundreds of people in a perfidious web: we experience the drama of a man whose parents did not want to and still do not want to listen to him as an adult. They did not help

²⁵ Cf. M. Carroll et al., *Church allowed abuse by priest for years*, "The Boston Globe" 6.01.2002, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/special-reports/2002/01/06/church-allowed-abuse-priest-for-years/cSHfGkTlrAT25qKGvBuDNM/story.html> (7.05.2021).

²⁶ B. Janicka, *A kto by zgorszył...*, "Kino" (2016) 3, p. 97.

him as a child, even though too many people knew about the perverse acts of the scout chaplain and did not react. When the then Archbishop of Lyon, the late Cardinal Albert Decourtray, found out in the late 1980s, Fr Preynet was removed from his pastoral ministry, with a ban on contact with children, ineffective as it later turned out. Although the Archbishop of Lyon, Cardinal Philippe Barbarin (François Marthouret) is willing to meet and talk to the victims, he is accused of not doing enough, of not restoring justice, of not taking the side of the victims. The disturbing title of the film, which deals with the phenomenon of paedophilia in the Church, is a shocking quotation from Card. Barbarin's statement on the statute of limitations for the crime, which, when asked at a press conference by an agitated journalist, he clumsily began to retract. Accusations are also made against politicians and the entanglement of the Church, possible – as it turns out – also in secular France. Ozon reveals not so much the scale of the phenomenon, but its mechanism, indicating the complicity, also unintentional, of people who are indifferent and turn away from the unbearable truth about the crime of molestation, which hurts – as the film reminds us – not only in the Church.

The film shows how differently the lives of those hurt by a paedophile turned out: some made a life for themselves at the price of oblivion, others still can't build interpersonal bonds. Alexandre's wife will take his side (carrying her own pain!), there will be other victims, people ready to lend a hand. Apart from efforts to dispense justice, which will be carried out by the courts, there are also attempts at ordinary human revenge, accusations are made not only against the guilty of molestation, but also against the Church as an institution. The victims that Ozon brings to the fore are different: Alexandre is a Catholic, he fights in the name of responsibility for the Church, with which he is connected and which is important to him. The others have lost their faith: the injustice inflicted on them in the Church turns against the Church with the blade of a desire for revenge. Whatever their human motivation, their aim – that of the victims – is one: to free themselves from the injustice, demanding the truth about everything that has happened, and so they found the association *La Parole Libérée*²⁷ (The Unleashed Word), which undertakes efforts to restore truth and justice, up to and including the trial and conviction of Fr Preynet and the removal from office of Card. Barbarin. The media help, though ambiguously: the film shows that journalists may be more interested in immediate success, resulting from

²⁷ <https://www.laparoleliberee.org> (7.05.2021).

inflaming emotions, than in investigating the truth. Ozon does not, however, fall into an anti-church tone: the question Alexandre is asked by his son in the last scene is an important question addressed to the viewer. This scene, like the closing credits, is worth waiting for.

The perspective of the victim is also shown in the British film *Retaliation* (dir. Ludwig Shammaasian, Paul Shammaasian, 2017): Malcolm (Orlando Bloom) was molested by a priest as a teenager, years later he experiences difficulties with relationships and anger management; the work he does is demolishing desacralized churches. Years later he recognises the priest who molested him.

Andrzej Pitrus, a critic who does not hide his aversion to the Church, emphasises a common feature of films about paedophilia of the clergy: “Their intention is to publicize the problem, until today swept under the carpet.”²⁸ The problem, as we can see, is unfortunately wider: paedophilia in the Church and in the society was until recently – and therefore for many years – a taboo subject, ignored by the media, pushed out of the consciousness of parents, teachers and educators. Pitrus, in his overly journalistic stance, unfortunately does not ask the important question: why did filmmakers not talk about paedophilia for so long?²⁹ It is only recently that Polish filmmakers – years behind Western cinema – have begun to address the subject of paedophilia among the clergy (and not only³⁰): priests, who are both perpetrators and victims of child abuse, are the protagonists of *Clergy* (*Kler*, dir. Wojciech Smarzowski, 2018), in which the director refers to his earlier short film (*Priest* [*Ksiądz*], 2017): “What we first learn about Fr Andrzej Kukuła (Arkadiusz Jakubik) is that he commits acts of paedophilia; later, however, the plot reveals that the protagonist was himself a victim of molestation in childhood. Lisowski (Jacek Braciak) – the most calculating of all priests – aspires to a career in the Vatican, he is a “businessman in a collar”, acts dishonestly, and towards the end of the film it turns out that

²⁸ A. Pitrus, *Kościół tak, wypaczenia nie?*, “Kino” (2019) 9, p. 49.

²⁹ An exception is Sylwester Latkowski’s TV documentary/reportage *Pedofile* [*Paedophiles*] (2005) and its thematic sequel *Nic się nie stało* (*Nothing Happened*, 2019), in which the author, in a journalistic and emotional tone, makes serious, but not quite founded, allegations of paedophilia against representatives of the world of culture, politics and the media.

³⁰ Criminal trafficking in children, intended, among others, for sexual exploitation, is the subject of the documentary *Oczy diabła* [*Devil’s Eyes*] (dir. Grzegorz Barłóg, Patryk Vega, 2021) and the feature film *Small World* (dir. Patryk Vega, 2021).

he also commits paedophilia. In one of the scenes we learn that he too has a difficult past, which comes back to haunt him.”³¹

Unlike McCarthy’s or Ozon’s films, *Clergy* is, however, a fictional story marked by both a mocking and journalistic tone, whose director, in this and his previous films, with a moralising superiority “positions himself somewhere above this dirty, ugly and immoral community,” without offering any valuable alternative.³² The final scene of *Clerge*, absurd in the pathos of the unreal self-immolation protest, accuses the entire Church – just as Małgorzata Szumowska does in her films (e.g. *In the Name of...* [*W imię...*], 2013; *Mug* [*Twarz*], 2017) – of superficiality, under which there is no spirituality, no God. Tomasz Sekielski adopted a different creative method in the films premiered online: *Tell No One* (*Tylko nie mów nikomu*, 2019) and *Hide-And-Seek* (*Zabawa w chowanego*, 2020) are feature-length documentaries in which the director accompanies victims of molestation, reaches out to perpetrators of violence, and accuses specific bishops of negligence.

2. Reversing the perspective

While dealing with the subject of paedophilia and the Church, one should also notice films that do not fit into the above-mentioned current of accusations or exposing evil and negligence in the Church.

An interesting, although older example is the graduation film by Iwona Siewkierzyńska *Young Miss* (*Pańcia*, 1995), whose main character, thirteen-year-old Sylwia, is fascinated by a young priest (played by Piotr Dumala) she meets by chance and decides to profess her love to the clergyman, unaware of her feelings; her secret ultimately remains hidden, but – as the final scene of the etude shows – that youthful feeling marks Sylwia as adult woman.³³ Among the TV films making up the *Święta polskie* [*Polish Feasts*] series, usually maintained in a cheerful, even comedic style (including *The Purimspiel* [*Cud purymowy*], dir. Izabella Cywińska, 2000; *White Dress* [*Biała sukienka*], dir. Michał Kwieciński,

³¹ D. Dąbrowska, *Obrazy polskiego kleru we współczesnym filmie fabularnym – “W imię...” Szumowskiej i “Kler” Smarzowskiego*, “Kultura – Media – Teologia” (2020) 42, p. 46.

³² P. Gorlewska, *Polityka wstrętu, moralność obrzydzenia*, “Kino” (2018) 10, p. 55.

³³ The 14-minute film is available at <https://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?etiuda=326126> (7.05.2021).

2003), there is also a drama dealing with the theme of paedophilia: *Hell, Heaven* (*Piekło, niebo*, dir. Natalia Koryncka-Gruz, 2004) is set in a small town, where the new vicar Piotr (Bartosz Głogowski) is to replace the ailing parish priest in preparations for the First Holy Communion. With the help of Kulawik (Krzysztof Kiersznowski), a drunkard rejected by the local community, he manages to enter into the hidden drama of Marta (Justyna Lorenc) and her parents: the girl has difficulties with confession, and after the First Communion Mass she runs away, not having taken communion with other children. In the afternoon Fr Piotr finds her in the sacristy: Marta's confession allows him to discover the truth about the abuse of the girl by her father (Jan Frycz). Bound by the secrecy of the confession, he advises Marta to tell everything to her mother (Anna Radwan). After the girl's failed suicide attempt, her mother also learns the truth. For Marta "despite the dramatic circumstances, confession and Holy Communion become her first ever free choice of God and the beginning of liberation. In the case of the father, his confession of the terrible sin is perhaps only the beginning and preparation for the freedom that appears somewhere on the horizon [...]. The father's dramatic howl addressed to Fr Piotr: 'Help me, I beg you, help me', is a difficult challenge."³⁴

A clergyman suspected of paedophilia is the protagonist of the film *Doubt* (dir. John Patrick Shanley, 2008): 1960s, a black student – the only one in a Catholic school in the Bronx, New York – finds support in Fr Brendan (Philip Seymour Hoffman), which leads to a conflict with the strict headmaster, Sr Aloysius (Meryl Streep). The accusations of alleged molestation of the boy are in no way justified here, and the conflict between the priest and the sister reveals wider issues of power and the place of women in the Church.³⁵

The moving Danish film *The Hunt* (*Jagten*, dir. Thomas Vinterberg, 2012) tells the story of unfounded accusations against a kindergarten teacher (Mads Mikkelsen), resulting from accidental contact of a kindergarten girl with pornographic images seen on the screen of her older brother's tablet.³⁶ In this work, awarded by the ecumenical jury of the International Film Festival in Cannes

³⁴ A. Luter, *Piekło niebo*, in: M. Lis, A. Garbicz (eds.), *Światowa encyklopedia filmu religijnego*, Kraków 2007, p. 410.

³⁵ I. Cegiełkówna, *Wątpliwość*, "Kino" (2009) 2, p. 71.

³⁶ The activities of the pornography industry and its consequences are described by G. Dines, *Pornoland. How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*, Boston 2010, Spinifex Press; cf. B. Kmiecik, *Uzależnienie od pornografii – między prawem a społeczeństwem*, in: P. Morciniec (ed.), *Zniewoleni działaniem. Uzależnienia behawioralne a rodzina*, Opole 2013, Red. Wyd. WT UO, pp. 77–92.

in 2012, one can see a dramatic illustration of the evangelical blessing for those who suffer persecution for because of righteousness (cf. Mt 5:10): the scapegoat here is an innocent man who becomes the target – literally – of a “hunt with the violence that only social hypocrisy can generate”³⁷ blind to the truth and real dangers.

The Irish film *Calvary* (dir. John Michael McDonagh, 2014) takes an unusual perspective. The opening scene shows the parish priest of a coastal town in Ireland, Father James (Brendan Gleeson), becoming the recipient of a deeply moving confession in the confessional: “I was raped by a priest when I was 7 years old. Orally and anally as they say in the court reports. This went on for five years; every other day for five years [...]. What would be the point of killing the bastard? That would be no news. There’s no point in killing a bad priest. Killing a good one? That would be a shock! They wouldn’t know what to make of that. I’m going to kill you, Father. I’m going to kill you ‘cause you’ve done nothing wrong! I’m going to kill you because you’re innocent.”³⁸

The man wronged by a late priest gives Fr James a week to put his affairs in order, to be reconciled with God. Throughout the days of the week, Fr James tries to discover the man’s identity, meets his parishioners – many of whom are disappointed in the Church and still need a priest – but seems to be heading towards his destiny, which will be fulfilled on Sunday by the seashore. The author of the film review, although she expresses her reservations about too explicit passion symbolism (“like Christ, Father James carries his cross in order to sacrifice himself for the sins of others”), nevertheless stresses that the director takes seriously the theme of the film whose “protagonist does not fight for his own life, but for his own – and others’ – humanity.”³⁹

If the only fault of Fr James is simply being a priest – with all the burden of suspicion of crimes and abuses gathering over the clergy⁴⁰ – then the film should be read as a serious question addressed to the whole Church: how to deal with the burden of guilt of (some) clergy? After all, the suffering and pain of the

³⁷ M. Van Reeth, *Chercher l'essence des prix œcuméniques, trouver leur sens*, in: M. Lis (ed.), *SIGNIS and Cinema. Looking for God Behind the Screen*, Opole – Bruxelles 2016, Red. Wyd. WT UO – SIGNIS, p. 24.

³⁸ Quote from the film track.

³⁹ I. Cegiełkówna, *Kalwaria*, “Kino” (2015) 8, p. 90.

⁴⁰ J. McDavid, *Calvary*, “Journal of Religion & Film” Vol. 18 Issue 1 (2014), Article 11, p. 1, <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss1/11> (7.05.2021).

wronged spills over into the whole body: “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it” (1 Cor. 12:26, NIV).

3. If bishops were going to the cinema...

In his autobiography, not published in Polish until after the director’s death, Krzysztof Kiesłowski (1941–1996) remarked that: “The Church didn’t pay much attention to the film. I think it was too busy retrieving property which the Communists had confiscated from it after the war. And apart from that, it was busy worrying about abortion and religious instruction in schools. It hasn’t got time for films at the moment, luckily.”⁴¹

Probably, however, the time has come, because bishops and priests – and they are probably what Kieslowski had in mind when he spoke about the Church – have begun to watch films, to see in them signs of the times, *loci theologici*,⁴² in which one can recognize a call for justice, for a Church that will not emphasize its institutional dimension, but a desire to be a mother to its children.⁴³

For the first time in an official episcopal statement, which was the Polish Bishops’ Word to the Faithful in May 2019, there was a reference to the documentary by T. Sekielski, distributed on the YouTube platform, which has millions of views (and therefore viewers): “Many of us have watched the film *Tell No One* (*Tylko nie mów nikomu*). This documentary, above all, is a shocking

⁴¹ K. Kiesłowski, *Kiesłowski on Kiesłowski*, D. Stok (ed.), London – Boston 1993, Faber and Faber, p. 190. In the Polish translation this comment is more concise: “The Church does not have time to deal with films at the moment, luckily”, K. Kiesłowski, *Autobiografia*, D. Stok (ed.), Kraków 2012, Znak, p. 155.

⁴² Also, in the Polish theological literature there is a growing trend that deals with cinema, including Kieslowski’s films; cf. M. Legan, *Balthasar/Tarkowski. Teodramat w filmie. Koncepcja teodramatu w myśli teologicznej Hansa Ursa von Balthasara i twórczości filmowej Andrieja Tarkowskiego*, Częstochowa 2012, Paulinianum; M. Lis, *Figury Chrystusa w “Dekalogu” Krzysztofa Kiesłowskiego*, Opole 2007, Red. Wyd. WT UO; K.J. Wawrzynów, W.Z. Wojtyra (eds.), *Światłem i cieniem wydobywał prawdę o człowieku. W dwudziestą rocznicę śmierci Krzysztofa Kiesłowskiego*, Wrocław 2016, Wyższe Seminarium Duchowne Franciszkanów; B. Wieczorek (ed.), *Teologia i film: perspektywy badawcze*, Kraków 2017, “scriptum”.

⁴³ Cf. E. Kusz, *Kościół – jaki jesteś? Kryzys Kościoła w świetle skandalu wykorzystywania seksualnego*, in: M. Lis (ed.), *Kryzys w świecie, kryzys w Kościele*, Opole 2020, Red. Wyd. WT UO, p. 113.

account of people, now adults, abused in childhood by the clergy. It also contains examples of insensitivity, the sin of neglect and disbelief of those wronged, which consequently protected the perpetrators. By taking the perspective of the victims, the film made us all aware of the enormity of their suffering. Anyone who is sensitive, learning about the fate of those who have been wronged, feels pain, emotion and sadness in the face of their suffering. We thank all those who had the courage to talk about their suffering. We realise that no words can make up for the harm they have suffered. We acknowledge that as shepherds of the Church we have not done everything to prevent harm.⁴⁴

Perhaps, then, it would be worthwhile to return to the forgotten teaching of John Paul II, who already twenty years earlier, in his *Letter to Artists* (4.04.1999), drew attention to the importance of art that takes up the theme of evil: “Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience. In so far as it seeks the beautiful, fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption (p. 10).⁴⁵

Films that deal with the dramatic issue of paedophilia are sometimes perceived as an attack on the Church, bishops and priests. In the past decades, films such as *Mother Joan of the Angels* (*Matka Joanna od Aniołów*, dir. Jerzy Kawalerowicz, 1961) have been perceived as hostile towards the faith – the release of the film met with a reaction from the Episcopate, which sent an official complaint to the prosecutor’s office; French cardinals Albert Decourtray and Jean-Marie Lustiger protested to the French Minister of Culture against *The Last Temptation of Christ* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1988); prayer pickets outside cinemas screening *The Priest* (1994) were counterproductive in that they led to a significant increase in audience interest!⁴⁶ On the contrary, before the premiere of Smarzowski’s

⁴⁴ Rada Stała Konferencji Episkopatu Polski, *Wrażliwość i odpowiedzialność. Słowo biskupów do wiernych*, 22.05.2019, <https://episkopat.pl/biskupi-do-wiernych-nie-uczynilismy-wszystkiego-aby-zapobiec-krzywdom/> (7.05.2021).

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html (17.01.2022).

⁴⁶ Controversy over films that hurt religious feelings is described by M. Lis, *Co zrobić z prowokującymi filmami?*, in: J. Stala (ed.), *Dzisiejsi rodzice. Problemy i wyzwania*, Tarnów 2009, Biblos, pp. 279–286.

widely publicised film *Clergy* (2018), representatives of the Church in Poland expressed their readiness to enter into a public dialogue with its authors, who, however, did not take up the offer, commenting: “This is not the reaction of the Church we expected.”

In many cases, however, one has to admit that the filmmakers are right: they were the ones who expressed their disagreement when Church people kept silent about the committed evil, including paedophilia (*Bad Education*, dir. P. Almodóvar, 2004; *Spotlight*, dir. T. McCarthy, 2015; *The Club*, dir. P. Larraín, 2015; *Retaliation*, dir. P. and L. Shammaasian, 2018). With authors who take the Church seriously, albeit harshly, it is worth engaging in dialogue. This was pointed out, among others, by Bishop of Opole Andrzej Czaja during the service held in Biała Nyska on 19 February 2021, the Day of Prayer and Repentance for the Sin of Sexual Abuse of Minors: “Today the shouting is getting louder and louder in the media. Like a trumpet this cry is spreading. They speak of crimes committed by people of the Church, especially clergy. And they are talking about sins, great sins, giving offense, hurting minors, but also inflicting many wounds to the entire Body of Christ, which is the Church. And there is no need to grumble, no need to be offended, no need to say: ‘and there are even worse things happening in the world.’ No. You have to take this very much to heart.”⁴⁷

Cinema is not always averse to Christianity, even if the filmmakers often declare their distance from the faith or from the Church. On many occasions, films, even on a controversial subject and critical of the Church or the clergy, have reached the level of Christian meditation on the mystery of iniquity and Redemption (*Doubt*, dir. J.P. Shanley, 2008; *Calvary*, dir. J.M. McDonagh, 2014). In the voice of the filmmakers, should we not recognise the updating of the biblical story of Balaam’s donkey (Num. 22:21–34), who saves her rider – a man of God deaf to God’s admonition and blind to the threat of punishment – by bypassing the Angel of the Lord, though in the process inflicting pain on Balaam, unaware of the mortal danger? If twenty years ago the Irish bishops had been concerned about the films exposing betrayal of the Gospel and violence, including sexual violence in the Church, and had reacted to them by taking the necessary action, perhaps the Catholic Church in Ireland would not be experiencing

⁴⁷ A. Kwaśnicka, *Dzień Modlitwy i Pokuty za Grzech Wykorzystania Seksualnego Młodoletnich*, “Gość Opolski”, 19.02.2021, <https://opole.gosc.pl/doc/6739727.Dzien-Modlitwy-i-Pokuty-za-Grzech-Wykorzystania-Seksualnego> (7.05.2021).

such a deep crisis today?⁴⁸ It is high time that in the community of believers we also take a critical, creative and decisive interest in the voices emitted by the screens (and media in the broad sense): it is a bad sign of the state of faith when secular media replace our examination of conscience and are the ones calling for conversion. As Hans Zollner SJ notes, thanks to “the revelations of the Spotlight team of ‘The Boston Globe’ in 2002, the attention of the media and the public was at first focused on abuse in the Catholic Church, especially in western Anglophone countries.”⁴⁹

From a theological perspective, films, especially those “inconvenient” for the Church, can be read as audiovisual *loci theologici*, leading to a reflection on the faithfulness of Christians – especially clergy – to Jesus and his Gospel, on the necessity of constant conversion, on the remembrance of the evangelical warning addressed to scorners: “But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin!” (Mt 18:6f., NIV); it is also possible to see in them a tool for work in the area of both prevention and film therapy, the participants of which could be also people who have been wronged.⁵⁰ Like books, which offer an insight into the dramatic experiences of victims of sexual crimes committed by clergy (and others⁵¹), films – both

⁴⁸ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Pastoral Letter of The Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to The Catholics of Ireland* (19.03.2010), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100319_church-ireland.html (7.05.2021).

⁴⁹ H. Zollner, *Wandel durch Bruch? Mentalitätengeschichtliche Betrachtungen zum Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche*, in: B. Aschmann (ed.), *Katholische Dunkelräume. Die Kirche und der sexuelle Missbrauch*, Paderborn 2021, Brill Schöningh, p. 43.

⁵⁰ See D. Wedding, M.A. Boyd, R.M. Niemiec, *Movies and mental illness: Using films to understand psychopathology* (3rd rev. ed.), Cambridge 2010, Hogrefe Publishing; E. Warmuz-Warmuzińska, *Filmoterapia w edukacji i terapii dzieci i młodzieży szkolnej oraz dorosłych. Scenariusze zajęć z wykorzystaniem filmów*, Warszawa 2013, Difin.

⁵¹ See: B. Aschmann (ed.), *Katholische Dunkelräume. Die Kirche und der sexuelle Missbrauch*, Paderborn 2021, Brill Schöningh; M. Cholewa, P. Studnicki (eds.), *Wykorzystywanie seksualne osób małoletnich. Ujęcie interdyscyplinarne*, Kraków 2021, “scriptum”; J. Kaczmarczyk, *Zranieni. Rozmowy o wykorzystywaniu seksualnym w Kościele*, Kraków 2021, WAM; D. Pittet, *Mon Père, je vous pardonne*, Paris 2017, Ed. Philippe Rey; J. Pralong, *Les larmes de l’innocence – L’enfance abusée et maltraitée, un chemin de reconstruction*, Nouan-le-Fuzelier 2015, Beatitudes Eds.; A. Zabin, *Conversations with a Pedophile: In the Interest of Our Children*, Fort Lee NJ 2003, Barricade Books; A. Zamojska, *Nigdy więcej*, Kraków 2019, Znak; A. Żak, *Wierchołek góry lodowej. Kościół i pedofilia*, Kraków 2019, WAM.

documentaries and fiction – give a voice to the wounded, the survivors, who have been forced into silence for too long: years ago in Ireland, “a media attention boom emerged through the collaboration of film and book authors as well as affected people.”⁵² One cannot remain indifferent to their voice, especially in the Church.

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⁵² W. Damberg, *Missbrauch. Die Geschichte eines internationalen Skandals*, in: B. Aschmann (ed.), *Katholische Dunkelräume. Die Kirche und der sexuelle Missbrauch*, Paderborn 2021, Brill Schönningh, p. 20.

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- The Lovely Bones*, dir. Peter Jackson, 2009.
- The Magdalene Sisters*, dir. Peter Mullan, 2002.
- La mala educación (Bad Education)*, dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 2004.
- Matka Joanna od Aniołów (Mother Joan of the Angels)*, dir. Jerzy Kawalerowicz, 1961.
- The Mysterious Skin*, dir. Gregg Araki, 2004.
- Nic się nie stało (Nothing Happened)*, dir. Sylwester Latkowski, 2019.
- Oczy diabła (Devil's Eyes)*, dir. Grzegorz Barłóg, Patryk Vega, 2021.
- Pańcia (Young Miss)*, dir. Iwona Siekierzyńska, 1995.
- Pedophile (Paedophiles)*, dir. Sylwester Latkowski, 2005.
- Philomena*, dir. Stephen Frears, 2014.
- Piekiełło niebo (Hell, Heaven)*, dir. Natalia Koryncka-Gruz, 2004.
- Pixote: A Lei do Mais Fraco (Pixote)*, dir. Hector Babenco, 1980.
- Priest*, dir. Antonia Bird, 1994.
- Retaliation*, dir. Ludwig Shammajian, Paul Shammajian, 2017.
- Sex in a Cold Climate*, dir. Steve Humphries, 1998.
- Sleepers*, dir. Barry Levinson, 1996.
- Small World*, dir. Patryk Vega, 2021.
- Song for a Raggy Boy*, dir. Aisling Walsh, 2003.
- Spotlight*, dir. Tom McCarthy, 2015.
- States of Fear*, 1999.
- Suffer the Little Children*, 1994.
- Svećenikova djeca (The Priest's Children)*, dir. Vinko Brešan, 2013.
- Swimming Pool*, dir. François Ozon, 2003.
- Twarz (Mug)*, dir. Małgorzata Szumowska, 2017.

Twist of Faith, dir. Kirby Dick, 2004.

Tylko nie mów nikomu (Tell No One), dir. Tomasz Sekielski, 2019.

W imię... (In the Name of...), dir. Małgorzata Szumowska, 2013.

The Woodsman, dir. Nicole Kassel, 2004.

Zabawa w chowanego (Hide-And-Seek), dir. Tomasz Sekielski, 2020.