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## Film Dilogy about Faith, Suffering, and Illness. Media Images of Catholic Priests Based on the Films *Father Stu* and *Johnny*

### Abstract:

The aim of the article is the issue of the media image of two priests, created for the needs of popular culture in biographical feature films. The first of them is the American priest Stuart Ignatius Long, portrayed in the film *Father Stu*. The second is the Polish priest Jan Kaczkowski, shown in the film *Johnny*. The films, due to the fact that they present people called to the priesthood, priests of the Catholic Church who devote themselves to religious activities, meet the criteria of religious cinema. The research issue was to determine whether the film productions about the mentioned priests are film hagiographies of clergy, confessional religious cinema or only loosely refer to the true biographies of priests. Priests, who struggled with their own handicap and illness for most of their lives, which they never hid from their faithful, did not hinder their pastoral ministry.

### Keywords:

religious movies, film hagiographies, media image, priest Stuart Long, priest Jan Kaczkowski

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mythology, philosophy, and religion accustomed man to death. Wars, epidemics, diseases, and famine made death a common and inevitable phenomenon (Cichowicz & Godzimirski, 1993). Since the invention of cinematography, watching death has been provided by feature films, in which death is shown in different dimensions: heroic death on the battlefield, in the form of executions, gruesome images of accidents and catastrophes, death due to old age, incurable disease. The thanatologist and anthropologist Philippe Aries (1992, p. 550), studying the issue of death across cultures, has argued that in the twentieth century, society has removed the process of dying from the public space, removed it, ‘banished’ death, with the exception of the death of great men. The deaths of well-known and popular clergymen fall into this category, and we consider Father Jan Kaczkowski (1977–2016) and the American priest Stuart Ignatius Long (1963–2014) to be such figures. Both were ordinary people, but also terminally ill, extraordinary priests. The figure of Father Kaczkowski attracted the attention of the media during his lifetime as an author of books describing pain and suffering. The books he left behind can be used as teaching manuals for medical personnel, “because they are the essence of the world as seen through the eyes of a cancer patient. It teaches that a man’s pity and a fatal illness is an adversity that must be faced and prepared for the fact of approaching death” (Kopański et al., 2016). A film portrait of Father Kaczkowski was shown in the film *Johnny*, and Father Long became the protagonist of the film *Father Stu*. Despite the distinctiveness of their dramaturgical and formal solutions, the mentioned films, since they depict people called to the priesthood and devoting themselves to religious activities, meet the criteria of belonging to the area of religious cinema from a historical, film, and thematic perspective (Modrzejewska & Ray-Ciemiega, 1987; Hendrykowski, 1994; Marczak, 2000; Sokołowski, 2002; Kempna-Pieniążek, 2013). The most numerous group of films in the field of religious cinema are images referring to the texts of the Holy Scriptures, which are a kind of illustration of biblical events (Lis, 2005). There have been many film adaptations of the Bible, including commercial blockbusters (Kolasińska, 2001). Changes in the production of religious films were brought about in the 1970s, when cinema turned to spiritual experience, portraying not only Jesus and other saints, but also showing images of priests and nuns (Jankun-Dopartowa, 2004; Regiewicz, 2011).

## 2. METHODS AND ASSUMPTIONS

The aim of the article is to present how the mentioned film productions build the media image of priests of the Catholic Church, constructing their characters within popular culture. The study falls within the current of media studies, referred to as the mediatisation of religion (Guzek, 2015), which indicates the possibility and ways of applying the concept of mediatisation to describe the influence of the media on the sphere of religion (Clark & Gillespie, 2018). As pointed out by Rafał Leśniczak (2022), the way in which the basic determinants of religious life are presented in the media is the subject of many empirical studies in the field of social sciences. Among them, he mentions, e.g., research on images of religious leaders, churches, religious associations, and institutions. Although the issue of shaping media images is, from a scientific perspective, cognitively interesting for sociology, political science, cultural studies, religious studies, film studies, media studies, and political marketing, it has not been particularly developed in Poland within the mentioned sciences, which treated image issues as the practical side of marketing and the PR area, although they tried to break free from this limitation (Pisarek, 2008; Sokołowski, 2012). The methodology of image research in the media was presented by Tomasz Gackowski and Marcin Łączyński (2009), describing its advantages and limitations. This study uses the content analysis (Babbie, 2002) and the methodological proposal of David Freedberg (2005), who conducts research on the “power of images”, and who has placed all images, not only those considered works of art, in the orbit of his interests. Freedberg argues that the history of art has neglected the issue of images, emphasising high art at the expense of other elements of visual culture, creating the richness of today’s pop culture. Limiting the field of research, I analyse two feature films presenting the image of priests of the Catholic Church. The main research problem is to determine whether the film productions about Father Kaczkowski and Long are films that fall within the trend of religious cinema. About referring to the issue of *sacrum*, holiness, religiously engaged, with a high level of the philosophical and existential spheres and artistic values. Films about the mentioned priests are inspired by their biographies. It was supposed to be their trump card, a kind of advertising trick addressed to believers who know the achievements of priests and to viewers who are not religiously engaged, who want to get acquainted with their extraordinary lives. In one of them, a reference to the protagonist (Father Stuart – Stu) appears in the title, which may indicate a deliberate production of confessional religious cinema, a film hagiography, in the type of stories about saints and blessed ones. However, even in terms of the type of productions, there is a specific standard

so that the finished film is not kitschy or of low artistic rank. “This subgenre of religious film is subject to the same requirements of evaluation as any other genre, and aesthetic quality can be achieved by works reaching the heights of art (...) as well as those that we are ready to classify as film craftsmanship” (Marczak, 2007–2008, pp. 238–239). Hagiographic films, as a rule, propagate moralising and engage in religious didacticism, showing the heroism and steadfastness of the saints and blessed ones of the Church, and are treated as a form of communicating faith (Marczak, 2019, pp. 99–114).

### **3. MEDIA IMAGE**

The history of the conscious creation of the image of people in order to make them better perceived, evaluated, admired, imitated, or worshipped in various forms of worship is as old as humanity itself (Thomson, 2001, pp. 27–69; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2007, p. 212). Nowadays, an ‘image’ is someone’s likeness in a drawing, painting, photograph, but also the way in which a given person is perceived and presented. Living in a global world, subject to the phenomenon of mediatisation, we judge public figures through the prism of their media image, shown in films, television, and the Internet. In many interpretations of the issue of media images, there is a statement that the media only give the recipient what he or she expects, desires, or demands, and this popular belief has been defined in the language of media studies as the reflection hypothesis. However, media scholars note that there is no place for a simple reflection of culture in the activities of the media, because the media shape and create culture (Renzeti & Curran, 2005, p. 203). Multimedia – including feature films – influence the way we perceive the world, including our perception of other people (Kłoskowska, 1959; Adamski, 1970; Pisarek, 2008; Sokołowski, 2010). Before we move on to the issue of the film image of priests Kaczkowski and Long, let us examine how cinema shows images of other, real and fictional priests.

### **4. FILM IMAGES OF PRIESTS**

The figure of the priest has been present in many film productions for a long time, as film directors are aware of the huge role it plays in society. However, the media image of priests is not uniform, just as the priests of the Catholic Church are not uniform. The Spanish director Louis Buñuel, who is considered the creator

of cinema that touches people's consciences, was aware of this. The Mexican religious drama *Nazarin*, written in 1959, is considered the most outstanding of his works. The main character lives in poverty and does not ask his superiors for financial support. He tries to live according to Christian principles, but everyone around him shows distrust and hatred (except for a local prostitute). Nazarin persists in his attitude; he does not avoid doubts, but imitates Christ as best he can (Kolasińska-Pasterczyk, 2007). The priest in Robert Bresson's film *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (France, 1951) does the same, experiencing physical and moral suffering, but remaining faithful to the difficult destiny of goodness. The priests in the film have something of a martyr in them, who, in the name of fighting evil, resort to the only effective means – sacrifice. A different approach is presented by Father Bobby from Barry Levinson's drama *Sleepers* (USA, 1996) lies in court but stands on the side of good in order to protect the once innocent wronged, accepting some of the blame on his conscience.

Polish cinematography has extensive experience in film portraits of clergymen: Father Suryn from Jerzy Kawalerowicz's *Matka Joanna od Aniołów* (1960), the old parish priest from Kazimierz Kutz's *Milczenie* (1962), Father Konrad from Stanisław Różewicz's film *Ryś* (1981), Father Jakub and the parish priest Andrzej from Jan Jakub Kolski's *Cudowne miejsce* (1994), Father Jerzy in the painting *Popiełuszko. Wolność jest w nas* (2009) by Rafał Wieczyński, the priest Adam in the film *W imię...* by Małgorzata Szumowska. We are left with a collective portrait of the milieu in the film *Kler* (2018) by Wojciech Smarzowski (Dąbrowska, 2020).

In recent years, the film image of the priest has clearly changed. The hero in the cassock no longer experiences great moral dilemmas, he does not “quarrel” with God. A priest in a contemporary film solves completely different problems, of a more mundane nature, but he still wins in the fight against evil (Zawisza, 2022). He is shown as an ordinary man who has small sins on his conscience (e.g., penchant for wines), he is usually a warm, gentle, and open person to the issues and problems of his parishioners, arousing sympathy. Such a priest is Antoni from Jacek Bromski's comedy trilogy *U Pana Boga za piecem* (1998), *U Pana Boga w ogródku* (2007), and *U Pana Boga za miedzą* (2009). He rides a bicycle around the neighbourhood and makes no secret of the fact that he does not need the “whole civilisation of false prophets”, which is why he lives modestly, without any amenities, and is valued and respected by the local community. Against the background of the mentioned productions, we also have a peculiar film trilogy about Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński. It is made up of the films: *Prymas. Trzy lata z tysiąca* by Teresa Kotlarczyk, *Wyszyński. Zemsta czy przebaczenie* directed by Tadeusz Syka, and *Prorok* by Michał Kondrat.

## 5. CONVERTED BOXER

*Father Stu* (World Premiere in 2022), directed by Rosalind Ross, is a biographical story about Stuart Long, a converted agnostic boxer who became a Catholic priest, beloved clergyman, confessor, and friend to many American Catholics. By the standards of a biographical film, this picture can be considered a super-production, as the role of Father Stu was played by the great star of American cinema Mark Wahlberg, and his father was played by Mel Gibson (Kit, 2021).

The future clergyman was born in Seattle and raised in the town of Helena, Montana. In high school, he played on the football team, wrestled, but his greatest success came in boxing, winning the 1985 Golden Glove in the heavyweight division at the state competition. A promising career was interrupted by an injury sustained in the ring. Leaving boxing, he intended to become an actor, moved to Los Angeles, appeared in commercials, and was an extra in films. He did not have a career, he worked in a nightclub, then at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena. In 1986, he graduated from Catholic Carroll College with a degree in English literature, although he was not a Catholic. As he admitted in an interview with “Catholic Voices”: “I lived intensely. I was in a lot of trouble, I was often in street fights, I drank, and I had a lot of problems. I’ve had several accidents, both on my motorcycle and in my car. I’ve had a few injuries during the fighting”. And this is one of those accidents that took place in 1992. He decided that it turned out to be a turning point in his life. In the hospital, he had an extraordinary religious experience. When he returned home, he decided to marry his girlfriend, but she declared that she could only marry in a Catholic church. Thirty years ago, Stuart had already begun his catechumenate, and on the day of his baptism, on Christmas Eve in 1994, he felt that he could not get married; he wanted to become a priest (La Rosa, 2022).

Like any film biography, *Father Stu* does not always fully adhere to the facts of the strange life of the portrayed protagonist. We meet Stuart, a young amateur boxer who has had a difficult relationship with his parents since his brother’s death. He gives up his sports career, wants to become an actor and goes to California, hoping to get in touch with the film industry by working in a grocery store. He meets Carol, who teaches Sunday school. She resists his advances unless he is baptised. Stu agrees and makes friends with the other parishioners. One evening, as an actor in a commercial, discouraged by the lack of success in the film, he returns to a bar, where a mysterious man advises him not to go home. Stu ignores the advice and rides drunk on a motorcycle, colliding with a car. Seriously wounded, he loses consciousness and is taken to hospital. For the first time, he has a vision

of the Virgin Mary, who tells him that he cannot die in vain. Leaving aside the intricacies of the film's further biography, let us add that it was then that he decided that he wanted to become a Catholic priest. He enters the seminary, but has already been diagnosed with myositis, and the prognosis for the future is not promising. For this reason, the rector of the seminary refuses to ordain Stu as a priest, citing his inability to administer the sacraments. Devastated, he returns to his family home, but the parishioners of Stu Church and Carmen with their families submit a petition to the bishop, who agrees to ordain him a priest. He began his ministry in Montana and quickly gained the respect, appreciation, and trust of his parishioners. He dies at the age of 50. The credits feature real photos of Long as a child, a boy, a seminarian, and a priest.

Bishop Robert Barron, on the Catholic website Word on Fire, said that *Father Stu* is one of the most theologically interesting films that have appeared in cinemas in years. "It touches upon the most difficult and puzzling matters of faith, including the nature of vocation, suffering, redemption, and, perhaps, most of all, the mystery of Divine Providence... The Lord of the universe became so interested in the former boxer from Helena that he took careful steps to lead him first to church, then to faith, and finally to the priesthood" (Kabiesz, 2022). Father Long, the film's Stu, was a counsellor at the Big Sky Care Centre in Helena, becoming a favourite pastor of the local community, among whom he became famous as a very good confessor. His weakness in the form of disability became his greatest strength. "He taught the faithful by his example to accept their limitations. He believed that his decrepitude was the best thing that had happened to him, because it shook him out of the pride that had accompanied him for most of his life and taught him even greater respect for people" (Sałek, 2017).

There are few clear references to Stu's religious transformation in the film. One critic called the film a "wasted opportunity for good Catholic cinema", stating that perhaps the "time has not yet come for Hollywood to merge religious truth with screen truth" (Obara, 2023). One of them is the price with the stranger from the bar, clearly a figure of Jesus, someone who has never been there before, is in some sense prophetic and foreshadows future events. The next one is visions, visions of the Mother of God. The film, despite many religious themes (such as the transformation of the alcoholic father, played by Mel Gibson), is a biographical film, with only a hint of *the sphere of the sacred*, but through the complicated fate of the real Stuart Long, it makes us realise how winding and intricate the paths that lead to the priesthood can be.

## 6. SACRED BEGGAR

The movie *Johnny* was made in 2022. Its creator is Daniel Jaroszek, who makes his debut in the feature film, the role of Father Kaczkowski is played by Dawid Ogrodnik, the role of Patryk Galewski is played by Piotr Trojan. The characters of the priest's parents, Helena's mother, were created on screen by Anna Dymna, while Józef's father was played by Witold Dębicki. It is a story based on true events told from the perspective of Father Jan's charge, Patryk Galewski, a cook, a former criminal, and an intern at a hospice in Puck. It shows the intertwined fates of two people from different worlds. It is the story of Patryk who, as part of working off one of his sentences, searches for meaning in the corridors of the hospice, talking to the sick. The background of this meeting was presented by the priest himself in Przemysław Wilczyński's book *Jan Kaczkowski. Biografia*. Father Jan liked to call himself a 'sacred' or 'exclusive' beggar (Kaczkowski, 2016), who was still striving for financial support for the St. Padre Pio Hospice in Puck.

Father Kaczkowski gained media recognition as an "onco-celebrity", fighting a malignant brain tumour (glioblastoma), author of many books, doctor of theology. Born in 1977 in Gdynia, he studied at the Gdańsk Theological Seminary, and was ordained a priest in 2002. In 2004, together with an initiative group, he founded the Puck Home Hospice, working with cancer patients was particularly close to his heart. He had an extraordinary gift – he spoke about the last things with wisdom, but also with humour. He was involved in the Ethical Aropag project, in which he conducted lectures and taught young doctors how to talk to cancer patients about their disease and impending death. *Johnny* was called by his friends, and his public statements supported many suffering cancer patients. He 'escorted', he recalled, at least two thousand dying people, being with them to the end. Suffering from an incurable disease himself, he was aware that "Closeness cannot be learned without exercising it" (Jabłońska, 2013, p. 40). He treated his disability as a test of faith in the spirit of the theology of disability, being aware that God does not send suffering or disability to anyone, because He is the giver of good, not evil. He saw it as a test of his faith, a time of trial to which he was exposed. Because disability is not a "punishment for sin", but rather an opportunity to shape one's own character (Maliszewska, 2017).

The title *Johnny* may suggest that it is a film about Father Kaczkowski, a fictionalised biography, portraying in a tearful or hagiographic way the attitude of the indomitable priest. Nothing could be further from the truth. The painting shows real people of flesh and blood, experiencing their failures and weaknesses, because Father Jan himself was like that, he could use a stronger word, he would



get angry. But he understood people, those who worked as volunteers in the hospice and those dying, knowing that every day of their lives, as well as of his, is a day given, unique, and special. The film is devoid of sacred meanings – “although woven from real stories and characters” – it is a very universal story about the fact that every human being deserves a second chance, and that death is something completely natural in human life. It is also a lesson in empathy and tenderness, devoid of cheap moralising, with a sense of humour that is at times blunt” (Wrona, 2022). Dawid Ogrodnik, who played the role of Father Kaczkowski, stated: “The uniqueness of Jan was, in the good sense of the word, his straightforward view of religion, which is primarily based on respect, not caring about the human being and what is most important, i.e., acting as a result of love for another human being” (Gośliński, 2022).

Maciej Kraszewski, the author of the screenplay for the film, recalled that it is easy to fall into metaphysics when dealing with a man of such stature, like Father Jan, full of charisma, passion, faith, but also a sense of humour of the highest quality. The screenwriter admitted that even during his lifetime he considered the priest the embodiment of a modern saint, not because “he saw the future or because Mother of God spoke to him. He is a saint for me because he showed that a miracle can and must be worked out. A miracle of transformation, a miracle of turning back from the road to the abyss. That it has never been too late to live a good life. This is what the film *Johnny* is about” (Wojciechowska, 2022).

## 7. CONCLUSION

Religious scholar and philosopher of culture Mircea Eliade (1999) noted that *sacrum* (holiness) and *profanum* (earthliness and commonplaceness, secularity) are two ways of the existence of man. *Sacrum* escapes the senses, *profanum* is knowable and understandable. The media, including feature films, belonging to the sphere of *profanum*, play an important role in presenting their own interpretation of the understanding of religion and the determinants of religious life to their audiences. Films with religious themes are an important part of international and Polish cinematography (Kornacki, 2005; Lis, 2007). Over the last few years, many works have been written on topics related to the Catholic Church and clergy. In this group of films, the presented “dilogy” about terminally ill priests reveals many religious elements, showing the element of *sacrum* in ordinary scenes of life. In these films, there is no polemic with the Church, no criticism of it. The analysed films, despite their dramaturgical differences, detailed formal solutions

and separate events taken from real biographies, in a clear way build the media image of priests, people of great faith, distinguished by their piety, spiritual wisdom, but also life wisdom, confronting their incurable illnesses. They have their own dilemmas and moral dilemmas, but by revealing their weaknesses, they make the characters more understandable and acceptable to the modern viewer. They are not typical religious hagiographic films (like Jerzy Łukaszewicz's film *Faustyna* about the life of Sister Faustyna Kowalska). They do not pose important questions about faith, the meaning of salvation, the presence of God, like "typical" religious films (Lis, 2007), but thanks to them the viewer has the opportunity to follow the spiritual path of priests and reconstruct the real biographies they were inspired by. What do the two films and the clergy depicted in them have in common? Certainly, suffering and illness, which together form one of the ways leading to an attempt to touch the supernatural reality. "This path can be travelled in different ways, it can be talked about in different ways and it can be interpreted in different ways. It will be done differently by a theologian who uses a very specific terminology developed for this purpose, and differently by an artist endowed with a sense of sensitive imagination, and in an even more different way by a sick person" (Kopański et al., 2016, p. 4).

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