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Dear Voynovich Essay committee,

I am submitting my essay, “The Good, the Bad, and the Faithful: Religious Failure and Forgiveness in Priest,” for consideration in the religion category of the Voynovich Essay Competition. This essay analyzes the 1994 film Priest, directed by Antonia Bird. This submission is in compliance with the Kalamazoo College Honor System.

Thank you,

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The Good, the Bad, and the Faithful: Religious Failure and Forgiveness in Priest
A strait-laced man in his thirties spends his day at the church. He delivers a sermon, sits in a confessional and assigns penance, he conducts a funeral service and pronounces the absolution of a grieving widow. He goes home, removes his clerical collar, pulls a leather jacket out of his closet, and spends the night with a nice man he meets at a gay bar. This is Priest, a 1994 film directed by Antonia Bird, written by Jimmy McGovern, which follows Father Greg, a man struggling to reconcile sexuality and desire with his devotion to his faith. He faces the ridicule of fellow clergymen, of his congregation, of the public, and of the man he loves. While the film approaches extremes of parody in the way it presents the behavior of these members of the Catholic church, it also raises significant questions about the nature of commitment to religious faith. At the time of its release, Priest received mixed reviews and met with controversy, particularly from Catholic clergy due to the unfavorable portrait of priests and the perceived anti-Catholic values on the part of the filmmakers. Protests managed to delay the movie’s U.S. premiere, originally set for Good Friday in 1994—a choice seen as distasteful by Catholic organizations. On the other hand, writers from the Jesuit magazine America stated that they “did not think it was an anti-Catholic film, or Catholic bashing,” and that “the central theme of the film, in many ways, is forgiveness”—a theme significant to this argument, and further asserted by the magazine’s characterization of Priest as “very powerful” and “a step forward” for showing the human side of the priesthood (The Christian Century 1995, 415-416). While in many ways, Priest paints a discomforting and somewhat mocking portrait of the Catholic Church, the film also embodies and supports the value of forgiveness, suggesting that we are made stronger, more compassionate, and better suited to fulfill our duties through the failures that we overcome.

Religious “failure”—a term referred to and defined in more detail throughout this paper—suggests the inability of an individual, or group of individuals, to properly uphold the values and carry out the duties they have committed to as members of a church—in this case, the
Roman Catholic Church. In Bird’s film, these failures come in many forms—some of these transgressions occur within the church itself, others in the private sphere. Regardless, each of these failings demonstrates the inability of the individual to commit to the values they outwardly, falsely adhere to. In his article, “Reflections on Religious Obedience,” Vincent Pelletier describes the significance of the vows made within the church, according to the Code of Canon Law:

A vow is a legal agreement defined in the Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church. The Code of Canon Law is a book that guides or defines the life of the Catholic Church. The Laws of the Catholic Church were codified in 1917 and promulgated on the Feast of Pentecost.... It is clear that those who profess the Catholic faith have to realize that their entire faith life is governed by the Church's Law. (Pelletier 2007, 284-285)

Through the Code of Canon law, the church makes evident its expectations for those who wish to follow its faith. The vow described in Pelletier’s article—the vow taken by priests at their ordination—makes clear their values, their role, the rules they must abide by to fulfill their religious duty and live faithfully in the eyes of the church. As Pelletier writes:

When one agrees to become a member of the Catholic Church, he/she takes on certain rights and responsibilities. These rights and responsibilities are clearly spelled out in the Code of Canon Law. If one keeps the rules and regulations, he/she is a good and faithful member of the organization. However, if one does not keep the rules and regulations, he/she is not a faithful member and can even exclude oneself from membership for failure to observe the rules and regulations. (Pelletier 2007, 285-286)

As Pelletier asserts, the difference between a “good”—or, more aptly, faithful—member of the church, and a “bad”—unfaithful—member, lies in their ability to adhere to the rules set forth by the Code. In terms of the Catholic Church, and thus in terms of Bird’s film, we can define religious failure, simply, as the inability to uphold the Code of Canon Law—either through the breaking of a holy vow, or through one’s implied inability to truthfully live out the values of the church—most obviously and most prominently, in the movie, through one’s inability to forgive others of their sins, or to acknowledge one’s own failings and ask forgiveness in return. In this way, the inability of one to offer or receive forgiveness, rather than the explicit breaking of the Code itself, truly embodies a religious failure and corruption of the spirit and serves as Priest’s major message.
Bird’s film brings forth it’s message through five major players: Father Greg—the film’s protagonist, a secretly gay priest new to the congregation; Father Mathew—a fellow priest at the congregation, in a relationship with their housekeeper; Lisa—a teenage girl who comes to Greg for help; Mr. Unsworth—Lisa's father and abuser; finally, the congregation as a whole—the people who attend the church, and ultimately cast the harshest judgement. The film offers its religious failures, most notably, through multiple forms of sexual “transgression.” Firstly, in the form of Mr. Unsworth’s incestuous and nonconsensual sexual relationship with his fourteen-year-old daughter, Lisa. Secondly, in the breach of the Catholic vow of celibacy by both priests. Thirdly, and more ambiguously, in Father Greg’s homosexuality. These deviations from the “norm,” or, rather, from social and religious expectations of sexuality, function to demonstrate the failings of several social figures and structures on multiple levels. Mr. Unsworth represents the failure of fatherhood in the family sense—his mistreatment of his daughter, his failure to protect her through his sexual exploitation and manipulation of her body, discredit him as a father figure, emphasize his complete lack of understanding of his rights and duties as a father, and, consequently, as a Catholic. Father Matthew and Greg represent the failure of religious fatherhood, i.e. Catholic priesthood—in breaking their vows of celibacy, both priests effectively undermine and discredit themselves, demonstrating their failure to properly establish themselves as trustworthy and grounded in faith. (This assertion does not serve to denounce sex or sexual desire as wrong in and of itself—this statement does not function as a religious judgement—but rather to establish that Matthew and Greg, having made these vows, and in breaking them by demonstrating their failure to properly fulfill their duties, thus display their incompetence as priests, suggesting themselves incapable of upholding fundamental values beyond the vow of celibacy.) Finally, in sharp contrast, Father Greg’s homosexuality functions not to discredit him as a priest, or even as a “good Catholic,” but rather to demonstrate the failure of the members of the congregation—their disgust with Greg’s homosexuality, their refusal to accept him or forgive his breach of celibacy, demonstrates their failure to properly execute their duties and exercise
their values as Catholics. The film’s critique of religion exists most prominently in the way “true” Catholic values and morality seem to function in direct opposition to the rules long established by the bureaucracy of the Catholic Church.

In the simplest terms, Father Greg transgresses from his faith in two ways: by breaking his vow of celibacy, and by engaging in homosexual behavior. The question of which of Father Greg’s transgressions proves more offensive to his position within the priesthood remains confused—an issue addressed head-on only by Father Matthew, and more discreetly through the film’s message on the nature and importance of love. The members of church, who, near the end of the film, stand to vocalize their disgust with Father Greg’s behavior, cite his now open homosexuality as their main point of concern, and thus assert their intolerance as starkly discriminatory, homophobic, and unforgiving. However, Father Matthew stands beside Father Greg in the face of both transgressions. The first because he himself has admitted to breaking the vow of celibacy—a rule which he fundamentally disagrees with, or otherwise has simply reshaped his understanding of in order to justify his own behavior—and the second because he believes in love in all forms, in all ways. He does not seem the slightest bit alarmed by Greg’s homosexuality—perhaps he already suspected—and openly asks him about his feelings toward Graham—the man Greg has been seeing in secret. Ultimately, the film presents one major, unified statement about relationships, and hence sexuality, in declaring that they must be based upon “Love. Passionate commitment from one human being to another”—a message delivered (seemingly hypocritically) by Greg to a group of teenagers midway through the film. This statement refrains from casting judgement upon with whom, or how one expresses this love. The film demonstrates the ways that love cannot function—e.g. in the form of one individual taking horrifying advantage of another because he sees this act as his right—but does not discredit homosexuality, so long as the desire remains based upon true love and passion. Here, however, the film’s voice becomes muddled. Do the priests intend to ask for forgiveness of Greg’s homosexuality, or for acceptance? Matthew consequently invokes the bible verse, “let him who is
without sin cast the first stone,” thus begging that the congregation refrain from judgement, rather
than welcome this relatively scandalous concept of sexuality and love. The priests thus imply
Greg’s sexuality as a sin deserving of forgiveness, rather than placing the congregation at fault for
their closed-mindedness, and failure to uphold values of love and acceptance. While both priests
seemingly fail to properly address their failings in relationship to those of the congregation, and
of the church itself, one must look toward an alternate route of interpretation.

Alternatively, it seems more apt to classify Greg’s major failing in terms of the manner
through which he attempts to combat his guilt and repent for his sins. Greg’s initial approach to
his faith functions in sharp contrast with Matthew’s. However, Matthew and Greg ultimately
expose themselves as the same figure—the same priest—existing at different points within a
timeline, on a journey toward a new understanding of their faith. Matthew has made peace with
his choices—has justified his transgressions over the course of many years spent redefining his
understanding of Catholic doctrine. The film presents Greg, on the other hand, as far stricter in
his devotion—a devoutness which seems to function as penance for what he views as the
internalized knowledge of his own sins which constantly eat away at him: “inside here there’s just
sin and sickness and evil.” He struggles to live with himself in the knowledge of his “sins”—i.e.,
the aforementioned transgressions—and thus attempts to compensate for his unfaithful behavior
through a firm and unrelenting fidelity to other Catholic values and regulations. Early in the film,
Greg preaches to his new congregation that: “we’ve got a scapegoat today. It’s that mythical beast
called society…. they’re not our sins anymore. They’re not the fault of the individual anymore.
They’re society’s fault. Well, I’m sorry. I don’t understand that.” Greg firmly believes in
justifying his guiltiness, his selfishness; he wishes to make up for his sins by spreading his belief
that we are all directly responsible for our own failings, that we cannot blame others—not society,
not our families, not the doctrine of the church itself—for our own mistakes. This strict adherence
to a conservative interpretation of Catholic doctrine further propels Greg into despair and
complicates his ability to clearly uphold the true values of his faith. Meanwhile, Matthew
becomes increasingly liberal in his ideologies, going as far as openly bashing the church during mass: “churches, cathedrals, bishops, popes: the trappings of power. We care more about that than the thing itself. The teachings of Christ: love and compassion, for all mankind. Men, women. Black, white. Old, young. Gay, straight.” Matthew has not only come to terms with his own “failings” as a priest—he celebrates these ideas, embraces them, and ultimately considers the church as at fault, rather than himself.

The problem with these priests lies not within their openness to liberal ideas or broader interpretations of the bible or of Catholic doctrine—not within their individual transgressions—but rather in their hypocrisy, and in the uneven nature of their commitment to the priesthood. Greg makes up for his “sins” by brutally upholding the confidentiality of confession, thus putting himself through a kind of suffering in the face of his knowledge about Lisa’s situation—a sort of self-flagellation—punishing himself through Lisa’s pain. Greg speaks of his reasoning, describing a hypothetical scenario from his time in seminary: “A man tells you in confession that he’s poisoned the alter wine. Do you still go out and say mass? I had no problem with that. I’d go out and say mass. Drink the wine. There’s a bit of the martyr in all of us. But when it’s not you suffering, when it’s someone else suffering, and you know you could stop it just by speaking out...” Greg seems to understand the severity of the situation—seems to understand the power he holds in correcting Lisa’s situation—and yet he continues to value the rules of the church over his personal moral compass because this is what he has been told he “ought to do” in any given situation. He seems to believe that by maintaining such an outwardly moral and searingly “Catholic” façade, he can somehow balance out his late-night, leather jacket-clad trips to gay bars. So caught up in his guilt over these transgressions, Greg fails to uphold truly moral values, or properly fulfill his role as a priest. He entirely loses sight of his job, of his duty. His selfishness in the face of his guilt makes him incapable of considering the lives of others above his own. Rather than break the confidence of the confessional in order to help Lisa, he strictly adheres in order to make up for his own, selfish mistakes, and thus further proves his incompetence. He unwittingly
derives a sort of absolution from his knowledge of Lisa’s suffering—from his knowledge that he is bound by the seal of the confessional, through his vows of priesthood, to keep her situation to himself. Greg has, without a doubt, betrayed Lisa by failing to fulfill his job as a priest, by failing to protect her from her father’s transgressions. Worse yet is the lack of moral ambivalence the film presents in relation to the situation itself: Lisa’s father demonstrates few redeeming qualities. He does not feel remorse for his actions but rather champions himself—in private, to Father Greg—as having “devoted [his] life to the study of incest.” He takes pride in his abuse, seeming to believe himself the only person brave enough to fulfill his desires—to take advantage of his “right” as a father. *Priest* does not present Mr. Unsworth as sympathetic, or as desiring to repent. Father Greg acknowledges him as “grinning, sickening evil.” And yet, Greg’s actions do not extend beyond asserting that Mr. Unsworth’s “got to stop”—a futile attempt at quelling the situation which only serves to further discredit him as a faithful member of the church.

Furthermore, Greg’s relationship with Graham asserts his incompetence and inability to uphold his own standard of love and compassion. The two continue to see each other, even after Graham discovers that Greg is a priest. Despite Greg’s initial resistance, he begins to confide in Graham. Their relationship grows, and yet, Greg resents his love for Graham. In conversation with Matthew, the two discuss the deeply troubled nature of Greg’s understanding of love:

“Do you love him?”
“I despise him. Satan comes in many forms.”
“This is the man who gave you his body. How dare you talk like that....To call another human being Satan? What kind of religion is that?...His sole purpose in life is to tempt you into sin, is that what you’re saying? You’re Christ and he’s just the bloody servant? Is that what you’re saying, you arrogant prick?”

Thus, Greg contradicts his own beliefs and teachings on the importance of love and relationships, deeming his love for Graham as evil and wrong. While Greg has broken the vow of celibacy in engaging in a sexual relationship, he goes beyond, condemning himself not only for this violation of his religious code, but also for the act of love itself—for the act of passion and commitment that he has previously declared imperative to any relationship. Greg takes out his frustration on
Graham, blaming him for his own religious failings, despite the contradictory nature of his interpretation of their relationship. Greg later admits to Matthew that he loves Graham, at which point Matthew affirms this love, and goes as far as to scold Greg for insulting the nature of his own relationship (an important scene almost immediately undermined by a rather obscene gay sex joke, poking fun at the stuffy, Latin-speaking priest in the next room). Despite the affirmation of this love, and the ultimate validation of Greg and Graham’s relationship both by Matthew, and the filmmakers, their love also serves as Greg’s downfall. Greg is first found out and arrested after a policeman finds the two in car together—a scene which serves as the ultimate, inevitable conclusion to Greg’s double life. However, Greg’s true failure comes earlier in their relationship, when Graham attends one of Greg’s masses to receive communion. Greg looks at him, stunned and afraid, and does nothing. He refuses to offer Graham the body of Christ. He fails to fulfill his duties because of his own interests, his own feelings. Once again, Greg’s failing comes in the form of his own selfishness, his own fear, his own inability to uphold the values he preaches.

The film's final shot serves as its most poignant, and seemingly most morally significant and clear. As the congregation gangs up against Greg—after the truth of his sexuality has been discovered—one man accuses him of “making a laughingstock of [his] faith,” while another throws bible verses condemning homosexuality at the priest as his major rhetorical device. These disgruntled individuals take their families and leave the church service in outrage. However, the most painful of the congregation’s responses to Greg comes not from these vocal, livid men, but from the silent majority, who remain seated, and seemingly accepting, until the time comes to receive communion. Not a single member of the church lines up to receive the body of Christ from Greg—he stands alone at the front of the church, confronted by the shame of this major snub, embarrassed and alone. But then comes the critical moment—the film’s heart, its moral center—when Lisa, the girl Father Greg has most wronged, most betrayed, stands to receive communion from him. He places the Eucharist on her tongue, and then the two embrace. Greg begins to cry—amazed by the warmth of her forgiveness, by the feeling of true faith, love, and
devotion to the values of the Catholic church. Lisa, in her embrace of Greg, and thus her acceptance of him and his mistakes, ultimately serves as the only true Catholic among them, the only member of the church capable of seeing beyond the hatred, the anger, the fear, and fighting back instead with love and forgiveness. Her acceptance of Greg demonstrates not a lapse in judgement or a dismissal of her religious values, but rather a clear and powerful demonstration of her understanding of, in short, “what Jesus would do,” in her situation. The camera takes flight and pans above Lisa and Greg, capturing their embrace in full and suggesting a sense of transcendence—of a greater power watching from above, of something much stronger than hate, or suffering, that has just been generated.

Where Greg longs to embody this degree of devotion—a devotion and commitment that transcends dogmatic hypocrisy—Lisa fulfills this ideal of true faith. Where Mr. Unsworth clearly lacks the remorse necessary for redemption and forgiveness, Greg makes strides toward rebuilding and recommitting to his role as priest. Father Matthew’s redemption thus comes in the form of his support of Greg, and his ability to uphold his values regardless of the strict rules of the church. Greg takes a large step toward redemption when he ultimately receives forgiveness from Lisa, and finally realizes where he has truly failed—not in terms of his sexuality, or the breaking of his vows, but in his responsibility to a young girl’s well-being. His tears fall not for himself—for his own pain, for his own rejection—but rather for his recognition of Lisa’s capacity for true faith, and for the suffering he has caused her. In his article from *U.S. Catholic* magazine in 1994, Father Mark Boyer writes on the nature of forgiveness:

> Forgiveness is not easy because it requires that we act not out of a position of power but from the trenches of weakness and need. Most of the time we prefer to be in control. When it comes to forgiveness, however, we must climb down from our throne of being offended and step into the muck of humanity, recognizing that that is where we recognize another’s weakness and understand why another has hurt us in some way. Forgiveness emanates from weakness. If we forgive out of strength, we elevate ourselves above the other. (Boyer 1994)

Thus, Lisa assumes a position of vulnerability—she recognizes Greg’s struggles, acknowledges the reasons he has failed her, and ultimately forgives him of his weaknesses. Her compassion, her
empathy, her display of love for Father Greg serves not to leverage her power over him—to
demonstrate anger, or hatred, or a desire for revenge in the face of a person who has wronged
her—but rather to acknowledge that they have both suffered, that all human beings make
mistakes, that Greg knows he has failed her, and to offer him the forgiveness that he has asked for
and repented for. Herein lies the true spirit of forgiveness—and it exists within Lisa.

Throughout *Priest*, director Antonia Bird juxtaposes elements of failure with forgiveness,
commenting on the commitment to religious ideals as larger than simple adherence to doctrine.
Sexual transgressions on the parts of Father Greg, Father Matthew, and Mr. Unsworth, all serve
in different ways to open a conversation on what these failings means, who they affect, what
makes a person deserving of forgiveness, and how one achieves that redemption. Ultimately,
what do all of these intersecting conflicts and discoveries mean for Greg’s faith, and his status as
a Catholic priest? As Greg says of Father Matthew, “He’s been very supportive. He thinks being
gay has made me a good priest. Human, compassionate. He thinks that all that’s happened
recently has made me a better one. More human, more compassionate.” As the film suggests, and
as the final scene with Lisa cements, Greg not only returns from his failures, but is made stronger
because of them. He better understands his duties and his relationship with God. So, do Greg’s
imperfections ultimately make him a better priest? Does forgiveness serve to absolve his sins and
redefine the nature of Greg’s commitment to his faith? Does he learn how to better uphold his
values, demonstrate his devotion, his compassion? *Priest* does not answer all of these questions
for its characters, but it does demonstrate the complexities and contradictions of the human spirit
in a way that values the courage to fail, and the courage to forgive, above all else.

Bibliography


