

Diary of a City Priest (2001)

Rated PG-13. Our Ratings: V-0; L-1 S/N-1. Length: 1 hour 17 min.

*The friendship of the Lord is for those who
fear him,*

and he makes his covenant known to them.

*My eyes are ever toward the Lord,
for he will pluck my feet out of the net.*

*Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.*

*Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.*

Psalms 25:14-17

The above might well be the Diary of a City Priest prayer of city priest Father John McNamee (David Morse). In the journal which several times a day he writes an entry, he expresses the loneliness of his vocation. He is surrounded by loyal associates by day and sought after by the needy at night, but in the essence of his being, his almost burnt out condition leads him to confess his feeling of aloneness. I was drawn to the DVD at a Blockbuster sales bin by the title, which reminded me of the 1951 classic by French filmmaker Robert Bresson's, Diary of a Country Priest. Sure enough, we learn at the very end of the credits that both Father Mac, as

he is called by everyone in the film, and director/writer Eugene Martin, were inspired by the earlier Georges Bernanos novel and Bresson's film.

Based on the work of a real priest, the director shot many of the scenes in and around St. Malachy's parish in North Philadelphia. Once a blue-collar neighborhood, the area is now part of the black ghetto where poverty and crime abound. Actor David Morse is totally convincing as the tired priest ministering to those who knock on his rectory door at all hours of the day and night. Knowing that he has no money, they ask mainly for food, which he bags from his kitchen pantry. One man asks for a pair of work shoes, and then criticizes them because of a scar on the heel. A young man's telephone call awakens him from sleep to beg him to come with him to night court so that he will be released into the priest's custody: otherwise the judge will send him to jail until his arraignment.

Along with all the human needs are the minutiae of administering a busy parish. Father Mac has an excellent staff, chief of whom are Father Dave Hagan (John Ryan), Sister Mary (Judy Bauerlin), and Sister Grace (Mary Louise Burke), all frequently vying for his attention at the same time. The plumber working on the decrepit old boiler that heats the church insists on the priest working with him. To help keep his bearings, Father Mac takes time to write in his journal, and it is entries from this that form the narrative for this loosely knit film.

As mentioned above, the one note that the priest strikes often is his sense of loneliness. He is always on call for any and everyone, but seldom can relate to someone as a friend. Even when he attends a party in the suburbs near the beginning of the film, he sees himself invited not as a friend, but as object of charity—and sure enough, well-meaning people place

checks in his hand for his work, and his hosts offer him their four year-old car. They might think that he is hesitating to accept the generous gift out of embarrassment, but probably it is because he is thinking how such a luxurious looking car might be more subject to vandalism than the old clunker he had driven up in.

There is a note of whimsy to the story by the occasional visitations of saints. Stepping down from the large stained glass window, St. Malachy (Robert Sella) offers encouragement and advice, as do St. Therese (Ana Reeder) and St. Francis of Assisi (Philip Goodwin).

Although inspired by the classic novel and film, this city priest is far more proficient than the hapless young country priest who dies young as he nonetheless whispers, "All is grace." Father Mac has connections and he uses them to help those who turn to him, such as an eager youth who needs a scholarship if he is to go to college. Father Mac might not be able to change the world, but he can enrich the world of those in his parish—and if you Google the parish name, you will see that he has lived far longer than the country priest, being now "Pastor Emeritus" of St. Malachy. Were I in charge of refurbishing the tarnished image of the Roman Catholic Church, I would work to get this film shown as widely as possible.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. How does the filmmaker refuse to romanticize the church or the people it serves? Compare this film to another in which a church is set in the inner city—Sister Act.
2. How do we see that even a devoted priest has moments of doubt?
3. What do you think of the comment that it is "important that the church stay here, close to all that need" ? What seems to be the main needs of the people? How might these physical needs be connected to spiritual ones?

4. Many Protestant, and some Roman Catholic, clergyman wish to be treated as a normal person: how is their ordination truly a "setting apart" ? How is this a burden and a blessing, especially in Fr. Mac's case?

5. The film could launch a study or discussion of the role of clergy and laity in the church. Although Protestant clergy, because of their belief in the priesthood of all believers. Speak of working themselves out of a job through their training the laity, is this likely to happen? Do you think that the church will always need special leaders, and if so, why?

6. During the scene of the Mass Fr. Mac reflects on "the mystery that we call God." Which do you think has better retained this sense of mystery of God, Protestants or Roman Catholics? How has rationalism affected your church and its teachings in regard to God? Do you think that the renewed search for spirituality reflects this? (See the writings of Kathleen Norris, among others.)

7. If you have not read the novel or seen the film *Diary of a Country Priest*, you owe it to yourself to do so. See why many critics consider the film as the greatest spiritual classic ever filmed.