

St. Vincent (2014)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 42 min.

Our content ratings (0-10): Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 4.

Our star rating (0-5): 4

We call Abraham "father" not because he got God's attention by living like a saint, but because God made something out of Abraham when he was a nobody.

Romans 4:17a

...You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,/In church, or in trains,, or in shops, or at tea;/For the saints of God are just like folk like me,/And I mean to be one too.

"I Sing a Song of the Saints of God," Lesbia Scott

"A saint he aint!" So single mom Maggie (Melissa McCarthy) and her 12 year-old son Oliver (Jaeden Lieberher) would have said about their neighbor Vincent (Bill Murray) upon their first meeting. They are just arriving at their new home when their small moving van, driven by two Hispanic Americans, backs into a low hanging branch of the large tree in Vincent's front yard that hangs over their driveway. The large branch crashes onto his vintage car parked in his narrow driveway. The noise awakens Vincent, who had spent the night knocked out on his kitchen floor (more on this later). With blood on his forehead from his fall the night before, Vincent berates the hapless moving men, and then the mother and son. He threatens to sue, calming down only when Maggie promises to begin payments for the damage. Not a great way to start out with new neighbors!

Vietnam War veteran Vincent is a profile in dissipation who

would have made a good subject for English artist William Hogarth, producer of the "[The Rake's Progress](#)" series of paintings. Often bleary-eyed with a cigarette dangling from his lips and a glass of liquor in one hand, Vincent usually wears mismatched shorts and shirts that Good Will would have tossed. He is in debt to his pregnant hooker girl friend, the Russian Daka (Naomi Watts)—he might or might not be the father. He also has run his tab at his favorite bar up to its limit. Worse of all, he is months behind in paying his gambling debts to Zucko (Terrence Howard), a tough-minded bookie who orders his strong-armed goon to beat dead beats, but not to kill them.

Vincent tries to obtain more cash from the firm where he has his house in a reverse mortgage, but has already spent all that he can get. The teller at his bank informs him that his checking account is more than \$100 overdrawn. The arrival of Maggie and Oliver thus is almost providential because she is pushed into overtime at the hospital where she works as some kind of a scanner technician. She needs someone to watch Oliver after school and well into the evening, and he is the only person she knows that would be cheaper than a daycare service. (This is perhaps the weak part of the story, that a caring mother such as she would entrust her only son to such an outlandish looking old man.) The \$11 an hour won't solve all of his debt problems, but it is a beginning.

The plot of a child mellowing a grumpy curmudgeon is a familiar one, perhaps my favorite being Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino*—in that film also the curmudgeon owns a vintage car. Thus we know where this story is going because we have seen it numerous times, but this need not diminish our enjoyment of the film. The fun is watching Bill Murray and his two co-stars bouncing off each other in both funny and touching ways. Murray in an early scene is under the influence of alcohol when late at night he backs his car into his picket fence, flattening it and his mailbox. Then inside, while trying to

break up a mass of ice cubes to soothe his aching head, he hits his fingers with the hammer, and slipping on the ice that has fallen to the floor, falls, hitting and gashing his head. He lies on the floor until awakened the next morning when the moving van hits a low branch of his tree, and it falls onto his prized car. Through at least three fourths of the film that smashed fence and mailbox remain on the ground, Vincent backing over the debris each time he drives home—the mailman has to reach down to insert mail into the box.

Bill Murray makes this one more than just an enjoyable entertainment. He is so convincing in his dissolution (especially later on when he suffers a medical emergency) that we can well believe that the only one that can put up with his company is his Persian cat Felix. However, in the scenes in which he visits a woman named Sandy (Donna Mitchell) in a nursing home we see a surprisingly tender side of the old man. During each weekly visit he brings in her fresh laundry and takes home her soiled clothes, even though an attendant tells him they can provide laundry service.

The two costars are both excellent in holding their own with Murray in their scenes together. It is good to see Melissa McCarthy in a role that calls for meekness rather than her usual abrasive belligerence. As a single mom facing a contested child custody suit while being stressed out by the uncaring demands of her hospital job, she exhibits a dramatic flair unseen in such farces as *Tammy*. However, the real treat is watching young Jaeden Lieberher in his second movie. He is so believable as the rather weak, scrawny kid unable to do the exercises in gym class and bullied by larger kids. Vincent, as he grows fond of the boy, teaches him how to bloody the nose of a bigger kid. It is easy to see why even the hard heart of money grubbing Vincent melts during their time together. Those times include taking the boy with him when he visits the bar, the strip club where Daka works, and even the racetrack. When Oliver makes a suggestion about what horses to bet on, their

three horses perform well, and Vincent has to sneak their winnings out of the track lest Zucko, who has become impatient with his failure to pay his debts, spot them. (Oddly the boy, so central to the story, was left out of the poster displayed on imdb's site!)

Oliver attends St. Patrick's School in Sheepshead Bay Brooklyn, and this is where the theme of sainthood arises. His teacher is the wry-tongued Father Geraghty (Chris O' Dowd) who teases and cajoles his charges through their lessons. As a part of their study of the saints he gives the assignment to find and write about a real person who might qualify as a modern living saint. He describes a saint as someone we celebrate for their sacrifices for a deep commitment to make the world a better place. Need I ask whom the boy chooses to write about, even though he and his mom have quarreled with and broken away from him? The scene of Oliver giving his illustrated speech at a school assembly, too sweet for some critics, is a stirring moment that begs for discussion.

Along with the film based on Graham Greene's novel* about an adulteress who becomes a saint, *End of the Affair*, director/writer Theodore Melfi's film offers people of faith a great opportunity to reflect upon and discuss sainthood. Just as English author Graham Greene wanted to bring freshness to the concept of sainthood in what were called his "Catholic novels," so Melfi enables us to see that a saint is not a stain-glass figure high up on a church wall to be venerated, but also one of flesh and blood, with flaws as well as admirable attributes.

It is a rare filmmaker who can pull this off without preaching or resorting to churchy "inspirational music. And while on the subject of music, I want to call attention to two of the songs in the background, neither of which will be found in a hymnal. As we are being introduced to the skuzzy Vincent we hear Jefferson Airplane's "Everybody Needs Somebody To Love," suiting the unloved curmudgeon to a tee. The insertion of Bob

Dylan's enigmatic "[Shelter From The Storm](#)" might provoke some thought and discussion. It also is good to see a clergyman portrayed in a positive way. Both the Roman Catholic, as well as Protestant churches could use more minister/teachers like Father Geraghty!

Before signing off on this review, here are two more quotations worth injecting into your reflections and/or discussions:

I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.

– [Nelson Mandela](#)

God creates out of nothing. Wonderful you say. Yes, to be sure, but he does what is still more wonderful: he makes saints out of sinners.

– [Søren Kierkegaard, The Journals of Kierkegaard](#)

*See the discussion guide in the November issue of *Visual Parables* for a list of Greene's novels that would add to a study/discussion of sainthood.