

The Innocents (2016)

Original Title: Agnus Dei

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 55 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 3; Language 0; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.

Genesis 50:20

We know that in everything God works for good^[c] with those who love him,^[d] who are called according to his purpose

Romans 8:28 (RSV)

French director Anne Fontaine's film reminds me of Pawel Pawlikowski's wonderful Oscar-winning [Ida](#), in that both films are set in Poland and deal with faith and the aftermath of World War 2. The older film features just one nun, or I should write novitiate, whereas Fontaine's includes a whole convent. And, though there is even more darkness to its plot, its conclusion is a much happier and less ambiguous one.

The film opens in December of 1945, the 2nd World War has been over for several months, but its horrific effects linger on. In an old decrepit Benedictine convent two rows of nuns face each other as they sing an ethereal song. They bow to each other, and file out of the chapel. One of them leaves the convent and hurries along a path through the woods. Coming

upon some orphans at play in the nearby village, she pays their leader a small sum to take her to a doctor—but “not a Polish or Russian one,” she demands. The child takes her to the local French Red Cross clinic where she comes upon Mathilde Beaulieu (Lou De Laâge), an intern helping take care of wounded French soldiers. She refuses to go with the nun, telling her that she should go to the Polish Red Cross. Somewhat later, however, when she looks out the widow and sees the nun kneeling in the snow while praying, she changes her mind.

At the convent Mathilde is shocked when she learns that a nun is about to birth a baby—and afterward to be told that others are also pregnant. “We were persecuted by the Germans,” Maria says, “and then the Russians arrived... an indescribable nightmare. Only God’s help will allow us to overcome it.” “How many more are in that condition?” Mathilde asks. “Seven,” the Sister replies. “God’s help will not be enough,” Mathilde observes.

Mother Superior (Agata Kulesza, who was also in *Ida*) is upset with Maria (Agata Buzek) for bringing the young doctor into their convent, but grudgingly accepts her help, especially when the visitor promises to keep their secret, lest word get out to the church and secular authorities and the convent be disbanded.

During the next few days, as Mathilde drives back and forth at night to care for the nuns, she and Marie become friends, sharing their past. Maria had lived a worldly life, saying that she liked men, and they liked her. She is barely clinging to her faith after what has happened to them. She says that now she feels, “Faith is twenty-four hours of doubt for one minute of hope.” The French woman is a Communist, like her parents, accepting no religion. During her return one night Mathilde herself almost becomes a rape victim when some drunken Russian soldiers stop her at a check point.

Others of the order also wonder about how a good God could allow something like their rape to have happened, one nun giving up her faith entirely. The Mother Superior retreats into the rigid dogma and rules of the Church. As to what she does with the babies born into an atmosphere of shame, well that is something else. The rape victims, because they took a vow of chastity, feel impure, and thus believe they are somehow guilty of their fate. The narrow theology of the Abbess merely reinforces this belief, bringing them no comfort whatever. And yet Mathilda, as she hears their beautiful singing and comes to admire Maria, becomes less judgmental of what she once regarded as superstition.

Back at the Red Cross center the sleep-deprived Mathilda is sent out of the operating room by French Jewish doctor Samuel (Vincent Macaigne). She quickly falls asleep on a cot despite all the bustle about her. She lands in trouble with the Colonel for what he regards as dereliction of duty, complaining that her absence left the center short a vehicle. Mathilde and Samuel become lovers, she learning of his great loss during the Holocaust and his loathing of the equally anti-Semitic Poles: "I can't stand them. They got what they deserved with the Russians and the Germans." However, when Mathilde is forced to reveal her night-time work and involve him in it due to several of the nuns delivering their babies at the same time, he reveals his kind heart as he pitches in to help the women.

When Maria learns what the Mother Superior has been doing with the babies, she rebels, assuring that the new ones are safe. The Abbess, herself pregnant, withdraws, piteously exclaiming that what she did was to remove the shame from the convent. In a Graham Green-like statement (see his novels set in Africa) she says that she has damned her soul to save theirs.

The film ends on a happier note, which I think some of the more dour critics unfairly judge as a bad way to end the film. They neglect the fact that the script, co-written by Fontaine

and Pascal Bonitzer, has set the stage for the solution to the nuns' dilemma of how to avoid shame while saving the babies. Those orphans, who earlier had conducted Maria to the clinic, are seen many times throughout the film. The sleep, as well as play, in the streets. They become key to the plan—I don't remember whether it is Mathilde or Maria who comes up with it.

This memorable film is sure to make Visual Parables Top Ten List of Spiritual Films this year. The ensemble cast is excellent, and the cinematography by Caroline Champetier beautifully captures both the misty atmosphere of the snow-covered forest and the candle-lit scenes in the convent.

The age-old dilemma of the suffering of innocents (hence the retitling of the film) at the hands of inhuman aggressors is one that most people of faith have wrestled with—and which still has no definitive answer, save that such suffering arouses compassion. Although Mathilde and Samuel are atheists, they are joined with Maria by their compassion. Frederick Buechner has written,

“Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin. It's the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.” Sadly it is the Mother Superior who lacks this, blinded by her rigid belief system (I will not dignify it by calling it “faith”!).

The film at the end raises the Biblical understanding of providence and call espoused in the stories of Joseph and the apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans. Listen closely to Maria's letter to her now distant friend Mathilde. Also worth reflecting upon and discussing is the original title, *Agnus Dei*. What does this mean? Who do you think is (or are) the Lamb of God in the film? How is it related to its origin in John 1:29?

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the

October issue of Visual Parables.