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'By the Grace of God' - a powerful and impactful movie

By Sophie Braccini



Image provided

The newest presentation of the International Film Showcase in Orinda, "By the Grace of God," is not an easy movie on any count. The topic is tough: it shows the fight to bring to justice a priest and Scout master who used his position and charisma to molest hundreds of very young boys. The way the director, Francois Ozon, decided to narrate the story is almost that of a documentary, the names are real (for the priest and hierarchy, not the victims) and the facts have been checked. This lack of embellishment or voyeurism makes the raw reality of political cynicism sink in with great power.

The movie starts with Alexandre Guerin, a devoted Catholic man and father of five who continues to put his faith in the church. He learns one day by chance that the priest who abused him as a child is still in charge of a parish and teaches young children. He decides it has to stop and chooses to go the regular route of appealing to the priest's hierarchy and Cardinal Barbarin to have him removed from his parish and defrocked.

As the priest's story of abuse surfaces, other former victims decide to join the fight. The film in turn examines the different ways that abuse has marked these men's lives and how they have affected relationships with their family and others. Francois

Debord, an atheist, at first does not want to get involved in the fight to try to remove the priest, but when he finally gets in touch with his long-buried emotions, he decides to do all he can to alert the media.

These men, whose case has legally expired because of the statute of limitations, look for people who can still press charges. Emmanuel Thomassin is one of them. A young man who never really got his balance back, he is a dropout, full of anger and violence. He agrees to join the fight and the three men start an association to free the expression of the victims. Thomassin presses charges, is confronted with the priest, and the French judicial system starts to move forward slowly.

What is thrilling in the film is the cynicism of the Catholic hierarchy that does not appear to be concerned at all with the suffering of the children. Ozon exposes the veil of silence that covered the priest's acts for years, coming from the church, but also from some parents who decided to either not see or minimize what was happening.

The actors are incredibly simple and believable, including Bernard Verley who plays the priest and Francois Marthouret, who plays Barbarin.

The way the movie gets its name is chilling and revealing. Moviegoers will discover it by themselves toward the end of the film.

The film is over two hours long, so it might take some stamina to stay until the end, although it is totally worth it. The movie opens Jan. 24 for one week at the Orinda Theatre.

Coincidentally, Bernard Preynat's trial opened in Lyon, France on Jan. 14. Preynat pleaded guilty and confessed to having molested four or five children each week in the Scout camps, and one or two every weekend in his parish, over a period of at least 20 years. He added that his hierarchy knew of his tendencies since his preparation to the seminary when he was 16 years old.

The Office of the Public Prosecutor requested eight years in prison for child molestation; the final verdict is expected in the spring.

For information, visit www.orindamovies.com/

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[back](#)

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