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Kelly Reilly and Brendan Gleeson star in 'Calvary.'

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# 'Calvary' grasps for a World beyond Fairness

A priest's faith is tested as life hangs in the balance

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

In the opening scene of "Calvary" (my favorite film so far this year), a priest, Father James Lavelle, awaits the confession of one of his parishioners. Instead he receives a death sentence. The speaker informs the priest that he was raped by a priest for five years as a child; the perpetrator is now dead, so he intends to kill Father James. "I'm going to kill you 'cause you've done nothing wrong, I'm going to kill you 'cause you're innocent." He will give the priest a week to get his affairs in order.

The rest of the film reveals how this priest spends the next seven days leading up to his date with his would-be killer. He believes he knows who has made the threat -- but we don't. So we watch him going about his priestly duties, visiting the sick and the (possibly) penitent, attempting to intervene in a domestic violence situation, visiting with his wounded daughter Fiona and the local bishop. The ending of the story is less important than how this minister lives his life.

*The commandment, 'thou shalt not kill' doesn't have an asterisk beside it, referring you to the bottom of the page, where there's a list of instances where it is okay to kill people.*

-Father James, character in Calvary

How should a person of genuine faith respond to a death threat? The question resounds for me in both its literal and metaphorical senses. Should he report the threat to the police? Obtain a gun for protection? Leave town? How Father James responds is profoundly instructive.

*He shows up.* Often his job is to be present when people are struggling or suffering, and to remain attentive to what he might do. His first line of the film is "I'm here to listen to whatever you have to say," and he often expresses a commitment to "try my best to help you." But that doesn't mean offering platitudes or cheap solutions out of the typical religious toolkit. Sometimes it means

just sitting with a person's dilemma, and offering a way to wrestle with it honestly. For example, an angry and awkward young man tells the priest that he is considering joining the military, and Father James engages him on the shallowness of his thinking about violence. "The commandment, 'thou shalt not kill' doesn't have an asterisk beside it, referring you to the bottom of the page, where there's a list of instances where it is okay to kill people," he explains. "What about self-defense?" the young man asks. "Well, that's a tricky one, alright," Father James responds. Of course, the priest is the only one facing a threat.

*He listens.* Again, watch that opening

scene. Father James listens, intently. When the congregant criticizes him for his reaction to the revelation about sexual abuse, Father James considers, then apologizes. In scene after scene, you can see him working at remaining open to what may be happening in each interaction. That doesn't mean he always responds in a way the speaker wants to hear, but generally he works to remain open and engaged.

*He is courageous.* He doesn't shy away from the hard questions. During the visit from Fiona, who has recently failed in an attempt to kill herself, he gently pursues her with questions that will move them past her despair and defensiveness. He hangs in there as she expresses sorrow and anger for the ways he abandoned her for the priesthood after her mother died, and as she struggles with the ultimate questions of faith. In other scenes, he attempts to intervene in a troubled marriage where a cheating wife is getting beaten, even though the wife, husband, and lover all are hostile and unrepentant.

*He is discerning.* Nearly all the members of his community are responding to their own brokenness or doubt with anger, or treachery, or hostility. Father James is gen-

continued on page 17