

Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

'Calvary' grasps for a World beyond Fairness

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erally onto them, but doesn't over-react. A local atheist doctor who has seen too much of the dark side of humanity brazenly snorts cocaine around the priest and tries to provoke him with a story of a botched operation that left a young child blind, deaf, and paralyzed. A financier keeps turning up and cynically offering the church money to assuage guilt he doesn't even feel for his sins, and keeps emphasizing how much his possessions cost and how little they mean to him. Father James also visits a vile serial killer in prison who taunts him with the revelation that he felt like God as he took the lives of his victims. Father James sees the hostility and dishonesty of these men for what it is, and sometimes responds with appropriate revulsion. Often he will ask a person, "Why am I here?" when it is clear that he is being toyed with. But generally he manages to keep open a space to respond in genuine love if ever the person comes around to being able to accept it.

His actions communicate his belief that no one is a lost cause. Not the doctor, despite his taunts. Nor the financier, even after he pisses on a painting to prove the already obvious point that nothing means anything to him. Nor the serial killer, who Father James continues to visit even while aware enough of the man's history to know when the man is manipulating him. The unrepentant

wife seems bent on communicating that she is a lost cause, and even says so at one point, but Father James corrects her. And to the male prostitute who assumes a manufactured accent and a flamboyant, nearly assaultive bravado, Father James finally asks, without irony, "Are you all right?"

He has integrity. Perhaps the hardest person for Father James to tolerate is his co-pastor, a facile priest who preens and judges and utters not a single word of authentic truth in the entire film. Fiona observes wryly that the co-pastor is "the future of the priesthood," and one might fear that is the case, though history does not lack for similar examples, and not just in Catholicism. At one point Father James cries out in exasperation, "Why are you a priest?" The question wounds the co-pastor, who later remarks that he didn't realize Father James hated him that much. Father James, who has spent the past week with a murderer and a thief and a prostitute and two adulterers, responds, "I don't hate you at all. It's just that you have no integrity. That's the worst thing I could say about anybody."

Indeed. And though by this point Father James' own flaws are more evident, it is clear that he does have integrity. He is engaged in a struggle for truth, including a struggle for the truth in himself, right until the end of the film and even in his moments of fear when

his life hangs in the balance.

This film deals with the question of faith in a challenging way, which also involves dealing with the question of fairness. Father James is an innocent man facing a threat of death that is wholly unjustified. The question of the unfairness of life hangs over nearly every scene of the film. Much of what troubles these characters is life's unfairness -- the doctor who has seen a patient killed by a drunk driver and a child's life ruined by an anesthesiologist's error; the sex abuse victim for whom there will be no justice; the prostitute who has spent his life as a plaything; Fiona, who has struggled with experiences of abandonment.

The film places an answer to these questions in the mouth of a young Frenchwoman whose husband is killed by that drunk driver. Father James comes to perform the last rites, and learns that the couple loved each other very much and had a good life together. He tells her that performing the last rites is never easy but that some cases certainly seem less unfair than hers. When a person dies so young, people often lose their faith, he says.

That isn't much faith to lose, she remarks. And he allows that for most people, faith amounts merely to fear of death, which is easy to lose. The woman remarks that what happened to her is not "unfair; it is just what happened." She notes that some people don't live good lives, and

never experience love. "That is unfair," she says.

Having just lost someone under circumstances even more unfair than an accident caused by a drunk driver, I struggle with the woman's statement. But perhaps that struggle has integrity. Late in the film she and Father James encounter one another again and, deep in her grief, she remarks, "At times I think I cannot

go on. But I will go on." In the view of this film, and in my own view, that's faith.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column *Opinionated Judge* appears regularly in *The Portland Observer*. You can find her movie blog at opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com.

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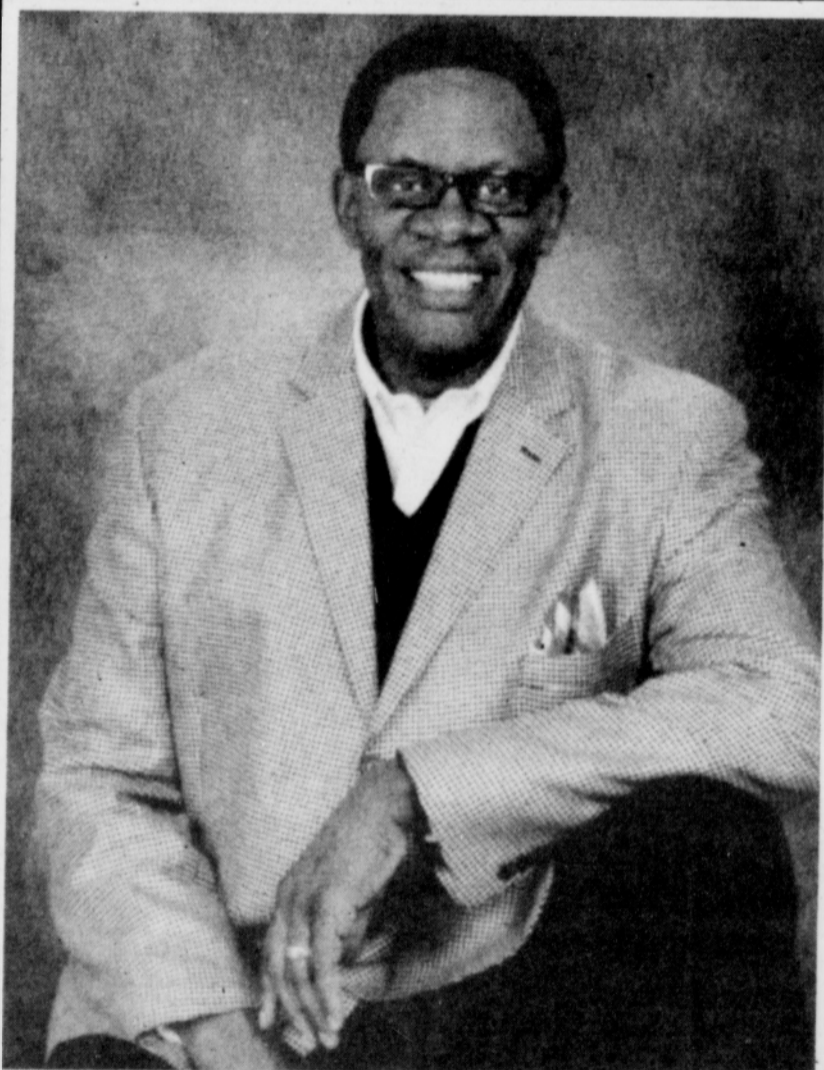
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