

Of Gods and Men

Film length: 2 hours

Film rating: PG 13

Director: Xavier Beauvois

Genre: Drama and Politics/Religion

Synopsis:

Of Gods and Men is a film portraying the life of eight Trappist monks living in the mountain top Monastery of Notre Dame d'Atlas nestled in the village of Tibhirine in predominantly Muslim Algeria. These monks must choose how to deal with violence around them due to civil war. This story, based on the real-life events of the monks, provides a gripping window into the very ground and essence of their lives, which provides the foundation for the choices they must each make. The film focuses on the way in which they choose to live, even as they face the religious and political violence and the forces that try to convince them to leave. They are challenged to live a peaceful and loving life while possibly facing a violent death.

The monks live in harmony with each other and their Muslim brothers and sisters in the surrounding villages. They provide medical care for the people in the village, cultivate a community garden to provide for the needs of the villagers and sell honey in the local market to support their own basic needs. They are vibrant part of the surrounding community and welcomed into the lives of the villagers in a mutual relationship of care and respect. As militarized religious extremist groups infiltrate the hills, their peaceful coexistence is threatened and the fate of both the monks and the villagers are inextricably entwined and endangered. On the quest for political power, one of the militant groups' goals is simply to rid Algeria of foreigners. The presence of the monks as French nationals causes them to be a visible and marked target.

The richness of the film does not focus on the violence but on the portrayal of the harmony, depth and significance of the daily lives of the monks. They are not choosing to die, but learning what it means to truly live out their faith. The way in which they lived their lives continues to bear witness to their faith and the ultimate horizon of God's redeeming love.

Themes to Engage Through the Film:

- Christian - Muslim relations
- Living with purpose, integrity and authenticity
- Solidarity in the midst of violence
- The roots of religious and political extremism
- The relationship between the Abrahamic religions (Christians, Jews and Muslims)
- The incarnation of love and the nature of faith
- The meaning, relevance and witness of martyrs in the Church today
- The call to live one's vocation fully



Link:

Of Gods and Men - Official Website

<http://www.sonyclassics.com/ofgodsandmen/>

Book:

The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria by John W. Kiser (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003).



Catholic Social Teaching Connections:

The following social justice and biblical justice themes found in Catholic social teaching can be explored in the film.

Life and Dignity of the Human Person:

The film highlights the beauty and precious nature of life. It shows the beauty of diverse cultures and the relationships that enrich life. It shows the very human struggle to be faithful to one's deepest beliefs and values. It highlights the courageous struggle of following one's conscience and live in faith.

Solidarity:

The monks lived in solidarity with the people of their village and saw themselves as brothers and sister. After the monks were killed, Pope John Paul II said of them in a homily: "Despite our deep sorrow, we thank God for the witness of love given by these religious. Their fidelity and constancy give honor to the church and surely will be seeds of reconciliation and peace for the Algerian people, with whom they were in solidarity."



The Common Good:

The relationship between the monks and the people of the village of Tibhirine was one of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. The film showed how these relationships connected their lives on a deeper level and fostered the promotion of the common good. Their lives and fates were intertwined.

Subsidiarity:

Early on in the film, the prior of the monks, Christian, makes a decision for the community without consulting the others. They challenge the way the decision was made and their lack of participation in it. Christian hears them and lets each take ownership for the decisions to be made by the community. The principle of subsidiarity holds that a central authority should not decisions or take on roles that can be effectively made at a local or lower level.

Questions for Discussion:

1. The title of the film is taken from Psalm 82: 6-8 "I said, 'You are "gods"; you are all sons of the Most High.' But you will die like mere men; you will fall like every other ruler. Rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance." -Psalm 82. Why do you think this biblical phrase was chosen for the film? How do you understand this title?
2. This film is a rare and striking presentation of the incarnational nature of one's faith, that is, how we live faith through our embodied presence and actions in the world. How do you see faith incarnated in the very human interactions of the monks? What scenes stand out as indications of incarnated faith?
3. In one scene, two of the monks confess to the Muslim village leaders, "We are like birds on a branch. We don't know if we'll leave." One Muslim woman from the village responds to them saying, "You are the branch. If you go, we lose our footing." What does she mean? Why does she say this? What responsibilities do the monks have to the villagers?
4. The monks meet to discuss their situation and whether in the facing of growing unrest and violence they should

leave. Why is this such an essential question? What does it reveal about each person? What are the questions they must explore? How does solidarity among the monastic community help them explore these questions?

5. At the end of the day, they have to determine whether they should leave to save their own lives or stay to help the lives of the people they are linked to. What values shape the possibilities they explore? What experiences and insights in their lives add clarity as they move to their final decision? Do you agree with the decision they made? What would shape your decision making process in a similar situation?
6. The monastery is a very small Catholic enclave situated in a predominantly Muslim country. What does it mean to be a presence of Christ among a people that does not share the faith or believe in this way? What is needed today to live in peace with each other? How can we all be a loving presence in an often unloving world?
7. Brother Luc, the elderly monk who is the doctor, quotes a pensée of Pascal stating, “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction.” Would you agree or disagree with Luc? Why? How would you describe Brother Luc? What qualities does he exemplify?
8. Each monk has to make a very personal decision. How is each monk’s deepest integrity, dignity and authenticity made evident in what they say and do? Do they struggle with solidarity? How is solidarity a challenge and a gift to them? What kind of courage does it take to struggle as they do? How is their witness a challenge to us?
9. How did silence speak at times in the movie louder than words could have? Can you identify some examples?
10. There are several scenes rich in symbolism— particularly the “Last Supper” scene in which Luc brings in wine and music to accompany the meal. Why does he do this? What effect does it have on the community? The music that he played was Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake. [Note: In mythology and other forms of literature, the swan is often a symbol of self-transformation, intuition and sensitivity of the soul. Swans also often symbolize the idea of faithful love.] Why did this music fit the events as they were unfolding? Can you describe the impact of the music, the sharing and the solidarity among the brothers during this last supper—for them and for us?
11. How were the final event of the monks’ lives presented? What images and scenes were chosen to end the film? What were your emotions at the end of the film? What was your final impression of the film and its message?



The seven monks of Our Lady of Atlas had dedicated their monastic lives to furthering the growth of healthy and life-giving relations between Muslims and Christians, who shared faith in and worship of the God of our common father, Abraham. At first impulse one might say this sacrilegious butchery had decimated their life's mission. But in fact, according to the paradoxical logic of an ail-loving God, it gave it a whole new impetus.

Source: Reflection by M. Basil Pennington, OCSO, Monk of St. Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, MA.

This Letter was sent by Pope John Paul II to the Cistercian community during their General Chapter in October 1996 four months after the monks in Algeria were killed.

Dearest Brothers and Sisters,

With a keen sense of participation, I unite with you as you gather around the altar to celebrate, in the sacrifice of Christ, the memory of your seven confreres of the monastery of Our Lady of Atlas, at Tibhirine, in Algeria, who were killed in a barbaric manner last May. With this message I wish to express my spiritual nearness to you and my solidarity, along with a special remembrance in my prayers. "If the grain of wheat falling to the ground does not die, it remains alone; if instead it dies, it produces much fruit. He who loves his life will lose it, while he who hates his life in this world, will keep it for eternal life. If someone wishes to serve me let him follow me, and where I am there also will my servant be. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him." (John 12:24-26)

How pertinent are these words of the Gospel! How appropriate they sound, as we think of your seven confreres and of your present Capitular meetings, which are taking place in the light of their witness! The Lord alone can comfort his children in such dramatic trials. Faith in Christ, crucified and risen, tears away the veil of suffering and makes us understand the mysterious fecundity of the death of believers, whose life is not taken away but transformed. I am certain that the sacrifice of the monks of Tibhirine has not failed to provide special inspiration for your Capitular labors, enabling each of you to meet with full openness of Spirit the two great challenges which face you: that of a renewed fidelity to the radical following of Christ, and that of communion within the great Cistercian Family. Be certain of this: the blood of martyrs is in the Church a force for renewal and of unity.

"At the end of the second millennium, the Church has become once again a Church of martyrs." (Tertio millennio adveniente, n. 37) The witness of the Trappists of Our Lady of Atlas takes its place alongside that of the Bishop of Oran, His Excellency Pierre Lucien Caverie, and of not a few other sons and daughters on the African continent who, during this period, have given their lives for the Lord and for their brothers and sisters, beginning with those who persecuted and killed them. Their witness is the victory of the Cross, the victory of the merciful love of God, who saves the world. The testament which Dom Christian de Chergé left behind, offered to all the key for understanding the tragic occurrence in which he and his confreres were involved, the final meaning of which is the gift of life in Christ. "My life," he wrote, "was given to God and to this country."

Venerable brothers and sisters, you are the custodians of this memory, guardians in prayer, in common discernment, and in the concrete directives which you decide upon, so that the memory of this event be fruitful in the future for Trappists and for the whole Church. In this rich promise of hope, we invoke the abundance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit on each of you and on the works of your respective Chapters, and we impart to you with all our heart the Apostolic Benediction.

Pope John Paul II
October 6, 1996

Source: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/1996/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19961006_padre-olivera_it.html