

TRUE CONFESSIONS

US, 1981, d. Ulu Grosbard



Los Angeles, 1948, the Catholic Archdiocese. The diocese is experiencing a post-war boom, especially in the building of Catholic schools. However, it is discovered that the businessman with the principal building contract has skeletons in his closet which could be exposed and cause scandal to the Church. It is decided that he be named layman of the year and then the contract broken.



The vicar general of the diocese is a skilled administrator and an ambitious cleric. Faced with the building situation as well as potential for scandal in a priest dying in a brothel and a murder investigation, he participates in smoothing over the difficulties.

His brother is a chief detective and comes to him with information about the scandals. The vicar-general has to face the dilemmas and his sense of his own vocation as a priest. He opts to leave his administrative post and retire to a parish in the desert where he is visited by his brother and discloses that he is terminally ill.

True Confessions is often grim viewing but it is one of the best dramatic portrayals of a diocesan priest trying to do his work, combine loyalty to the Church with covering potential scandals, combine administrative work and deal-doing with pastoral ministry. It is a long way from the problems of Barry Fitzgerald and Bing Crosby in *Going My Way* although there is only five years or so difference in the settings of the two films.

The screenplay is by husband and wife John Gregory Dunne and Joan Didion from Dunne's novel which in turn is based on an incident used in James Ellroy's *Who is the Black Dahlia*. Stage director, Ulu Grosbard, has not directed many movies; they include *The Subject Was Roses*, *Straight Time*, *The Deep End of the Ocean*.

The recreation of atmosphere in Los Angeles and in the Church (with Cyril Cusack as an imposing and enigmatic archbishop) is strong. The central performances of Robert De Niro and Robert Duvall as the priest and detective respectively make the proceedings and their dramatic impact credible. De Niro is able to show us the struggle between clerical ambition and vocation. (De Niro was to be a controversial priest again in 1994's *Sleepers*.) A companion film released at the same time which shows failure in vocation rather than success is the rather over-melodramatic *Monsignor* with Christopher Reeve.

This is not 'nice' material but is real and challenging.