



# Calvary



IRELAND, 2014, 100 MINUTES, COLOUR

*Brendan Gleeson, Chris O’ Dowd, Kelly Reilly, Aidan Gillen, Isaach de Bankole, Dylan Moran, Marie- Josee Croze, M. Emmet Walsh, Orla O’ Rourke, Domnhall Gleeson, Pat Shortt.*  
*Directed by John Michael Mc Donagh.*

As can be seen from the title, this is a film rooted in the gospel story and in Catholic faith. It is one of the best films on priests in recent years. It was written and directed by John Michael Mc Donagh, whose screenplay reveals quite detailed knowledge of the church in Ireland and which brings the plot to contemporary life – even though, one hopes, that the principal events of the film would not happen in real life.

A key film on the life of a parish priest was Robert Bresson’s version of the novel by Georges Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*. *Calvary* is the diary of an Irish country priest of the 21st century. It can be noted that Brendan Gleeson gives a totally persuasive performance as the priest. And the setting is on the Irish Atlantic coast, 38 km from Sligo according to a road sign.

With the focus of the title, it is clear that this will be a film about suffering, or that the priest will be a significant Christ-figure, a victim of his own Calvary, an innocent victim, atoning for the sins of others.

This is made very clear from the opening sequence, the priest sitting in the confessional, a man coming into the box and declaring that he has been a victim of a priest’s sexual abuse, that it happened over many years, that it has ruined his life. And then he makes a threat that he will kill this priest on the following Sunday, not because he is a guilty man,

but because he is innocent and that will make his death more significant.

Since the initial theme is that of clerical sexual abuse, *Calvary* has to be seen in the context of the revelations of recent decades, of the government enquiry, of sentences for guilty clergy, and the criticism of church officials for not understanding the crisis and for not acting on it well. This gives a powerful framework for this week in the life of the parish priest, considering what he has been told, preparing for his possible death. The accuser could be anyone in the village, although the priest has recognised his voice.

While this is the framework, the rest of the film shows the priest going about his ordinary ministry in this parish. He is a late vocation, a widower who decided on priesthood after his wife’s death. We are introduced to his daughter, who has attempted suicide, but has come to visit her father and talk things over with him. Which means he is a priest of some life experience, of family life, even though he reflects that he was something of a failure – and a drinker.

The action of the film is basically the priest visiting different people in the parish, a woman who does his washing, is separated from her husband, the local butcher, and is having an affair with the local garage man. She is not averse to other relationships,

especially to the atheist and mocking doctor in the local hospital. But, as with the other characters, she is able to speak frankly to the priest and he is able to speak frankly with her. It is the same with her husband, the butcher. There is a young man in the village, rather prim and proper, awkward in his manner, who comes to the priest to discuss his ambitions, his personality, his sexual problems, his future. Other people he visits include the man from the garage, the local policeman and his rather exhibitionist son, a local landowner who is alienated from his family, drinks a great deal, and confesses that he cares for nothing and no one. On the lighter side, there is an old American author who welcomes the priest, getting food from him, but wanting a gun just in case he gets ill and needs to leave this world.

A significant accident occurs with the death of a foreign visitor. The priest anoints the dead man, comforts his widow, encounters her at the airport when he is inclined to leave the village and avoid his imminent death. It is the words of the widow as well as his watching two workers slouching over the dead man's coffin, that indicate that he should go back face to face what will come.

The priest is very fond of his pet dog and is

devastated when he finds the dog's throat slit. And this follows his church being burnt down by the accuser. It is clear that the priest is moving towards Calvary. In moments of agony, he takes to drinking, returning alone to his spartan room.

This statement will not reveal who the would-be killer is or whether he goes through with his threats or not – it is the priest's preparation and readiness which is more important than what might happen. However, one significant question for the priest is whether he wept at his dog's death – and whether he wept at the plight of the victims of sex abuse. A key question for the church, hierarchy and laity.

John Michael McDonagh? does have a key idea, revealed early in the film, when his daughter asks the priest about virtues. He replies that forgiveness has been underrated – something which pervades the ending of the film.

Calvary is well worth seeing, the story of a priest and his own agony and Calvary in a contemporary situation, showing contemporary problems, illustrating the response of contemporary parishioners and non-believers. The writer-director has intelligently combined problems with a portrait of a genuine, if struggling, 21st-century parish priest.

## ***Fr Peter Malone MSC***

*Peter is a former president of SIGNIS - the World Catholic Association for Communication. He's a highly experienced film critic and author who has travelled the world watching, writing on and talking about movies. Since 1968, he's written reviews for a number of Catholic magazines and periodicals. He has also written many books on cinema including *Films and Values*, *Movie Christs and Antichrists*, *Cinema Down Under* and the excellent *Lights, Camera, Faith (Movie Lectionary)* series.*