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Using Film in Orthodox Pastoral Practice

Summary: While most Christian denominations were condemning or openly demonizing movies when this form of artistic expression was still in its infancy, many of them today embrace film and use it for pastoral purposes. Orthodox Church is not an exception: while at the end of the 19th century Holy Synod of the Russian Church officially opposed movies because of their potential to lead the faithful astray, modern Orthodox filmmakers produce movies with the blessings of the highest Church authorities. Some of these movies, e.g. *The Island* (2006) and *Man of God* (2021), seem to function as cinematic homilies, more effective and more memorable than traditional formal homilies one can hear inside the church buildings. Nevertheless, religious movies are primarily artistic expressions and, as such, should be interpreted as any other work of art. Theological interpretation of movies, especially by pastoral theologians, should encourage their actual use as pastoral means in parish communities. Since the theology of film is still largely unknown or ignored in the Orthodox world, this paper contains a short introduction to the topic of “theology and film”, which is followed by a theological analysis of four films with specifically Orthodox themes: *The Island*, *Angel’s Aisle*, *Healing Fear* and *Man of God*.

Key words: Film, Orthodox Church, pastoral practice, hagiography, sin, repentance, redemption, faith, preaching.

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Abstract: While most Christian denominations were condemning or openly demonizing movies when this form of artistic expression was still in its infancy, many of them today embrace film and use it for pastoral purposes. Orthodox Church is not an exception: while at the end of the 19th century Holy Synod of the Russian Church officially opposed movies because of their potential to lead the faithful astray, modern Orthodox filmmakers produce movies with the blessings of the highest Church authorities. Some of these movies, e.g. *The Island* (2006) and *Man of God* (2021), seem to function as cinematic homilies, more effective and more memorable than traditional formal homilies one can hear inside the church buildings. Nevertheless, religious movies are primarily artistic expressions and, as such, should be interpreted as any other work of art. Theological interpretation of movies, especially by pastoral theologians, should encourage their actual use as pastoral means in parish communities. Since the theology of film is still largely unknown or ignored in the Orthodox world, this paper contains a short introduction to the topic of “theology and film”, which is followed by a theological analysis of four films with specifically Orthodox themes: *The Island*, *Angel’s Aisle*, *Healing Fear* and *Man of God*.

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Although not many textbooks of traditional Orthodox Pastoral theology focus on arts, the irrefutable historical fact is that various forms of artistic expression played an important role in Church’s mission. Icons were never thought of as simple ornaments; their purpose was to teach people about important events from Biblical times, as well as to present (at least in Byzantine iconography) a transfigured, eschatological form of humanity in Christ’s Kingdom. Church architecture also has a missionary goal. In both Byzantine and later Russian missions, the construction of church buildings at the center of the newly baptized community was a means to represent the eternal glory of God and to visibly affirm God’s presence among his people. It was not only the exterior of the church but also the forms of worship inside it that witnessed God’s glory. According to the traditional story about the baptism of Russia, the envoys of Prince Vladimir the Great were fascinated by the majestic singing inside Hagia Sophia, which made them feel as if they were in Heaven. Due to its transformative force, Christianity has managed to “baptize” human culture and to use its products, especially the arts, for pastoral and missionary purposes.

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Complex theological tractates were never written for popular consumption. The truths contained within these writings were, however, represented in art, e.g. in iconography and hymnography. Illiterate people were able to see Biblical events on icons and even to learn dogmatic formulations by listening to liturgical hymns, such as “The Only Begotten Son” written by Emperor Justinian. In other words, artistic forms used by Church were always closely connected to its witnessing, especially those arts that were accessible to the masses. In our time, the art form that is both widely distributed and presumably most popular is film: “From the very beginning, films were made to be distributed to and viewed by mass audiences; film was to be a *medium populi*” (Bryant 1982, 101). The popularity of film is not a strange phenomenon. Looking at the screen, people are able to see, in a relatively short time, their favorite heroes from Bible, novels, and comic books in the flesh, as they overcome obstacles, fight against evil, and protect the innocent from all kinds of dangers. The films were even able to build their own worlds and mythologies that captivated human minds, such as *Star Wars* or *Pirates of the Caribbean*. In the constant rush of our modern world, 90–120 minutes long movies seem to shorten the time necessary to read lengthy novels, while simultaneously combining other forms of art with storytelling, most notably drama and music. Furthermore, film’s ability to represent the most important archetypes of the human psyche has broken all social boundaries: “Not since the Shakespearean stage, it has been argued, has the audience of an art form been so general and crossed so many class and education divisions as the movies” (Bergesen, Greeley 2000, 18). It is not hard to understand why the film seems to be an excellent medium for conveying the Christian message to modern humanity. This paper aims to explore such mediating role of movies, specifically in the case of the Orthodox Church, as well as to offer theological interpretation and evaluation of several movies that explore typically Orthodox Christian themes: *The Island* (2006), *Angel’s Aisle* (2008), *Healing Fear* (2013) and *Man of God* (2021). These movies were selected in accordance with two principal themes of Christian preaching: repentance that leads to redemption (*The Island* and *Angel’s Aisle*) and the lives of saints as models for Christian conduct (*Healing Fear* and *Man of God*).

Film and Religion

Regardless of complex theological formulations, which we sometimes perceive as the very core of Christianity, its true basis is actually a story. It was not the Nicene Creed or Chalcedonian formula that brought millions of people to the Church but a story about Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected Son of God, in whose resurrection we received the affirmation of our own salvation and eternal life. This story is a true *myth*, although not in the usual sense of the word, i.e. as a made-up story without any historical truth to it. According to John Lyden, the myth “can be any story that functions symbolically for a community to provide it with meaning and identity” (Lyden 2008, 212). This means that historical events can also function as myths. For Serbian people, the Battle of Kosovo (1389) is both historical and mythological: it is historically

important due to all its political implications for the medieval Serbian state, but it also has mythological significance since Prince Lazar's decision to choose heavenly instead of worldly kingdom serves as the basis for Serbian self-understanding. In other words, this historical myth provides Serbs with the necessary "meaning and identity". The story of Christ is precisely this kind of myth – a *story* that is both historically and symbolically true.

Simply put, people like stories. Most people will easily remember the contents of an interesting novel while struggling to remember the contents of an academic article. It is precisely for this reason that great global religions, such as Christianity or Buddhism, even today attract more followers than rationalistic and scientific atheism. Since "religion is a story before it is anything else and after it is anything else" (Bergesen, Greeley 2000, 15), the way in which it was conveyed through the centuries depended on the most popular form of storytelling. Religion was preached through myths, Gospels, lives of heroes or saints (hagiography), drama, novels, and, in recent times, film. Although new forms of storytelling were sometimes questioned or even outright condemned by religious authorities (film being the most recent example), storytellers were usually triumphant, as were their innovative means of conveying symbolically important narratives. Since "religion is (among other things) a narrative-producing mechanism", as Melanie Wright states, it "can be likened to both literature and the cinema" (Wright 2007, 4). Myth, understood as a symbolically potent story, does not have to be historically true in order to be religiously effective. The usual fundamentalist argument against movies as made-up stories, which presumably negates their religious value, should also be applied to novels, but there are no serious Orthodox theologians who would reject novels of Dostoevsky as untrue, despite the fact that these are basically products of artistic imagination. The same higher, symbolical, *mythological* truth contained in Dostoevsky's novels might be found in the movies.

Modern theological understanding and interpretation of movies has left dogmatic evaluations and moralistic censorship behind. Film is no longer perceived as a dogmatic statement but as a narrative that may (or may not) contain religious motifs and messages. However, if one adopts Paul Tillich's view of culture as essentially theonomous (based on religion and permeated by religion), then all cultural products, including movies, might be understood as consciously or unconsciously religious in nature. The supposition that film naturally serves religious purposes does not seem farfetched to many religious authors. Darrol Bryant writes: "As a popular form of the religious life, movies do what we have always asked of popular religion, namely, they provide us with archetypal forms of humanity – heroic figures – and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society" (Bryant 1982, 106). On the other hand, Albert Bergesen and Andrew Greeley compare the ancient setup of religious storytelling around the light of a fire with modern (religious) storytelling around the light of a projector: "The underlying hopes and fears that make up these stories probably haven't changed all that much over time, but what has is the medium in which they are told" (Bergesen, Greeley 2000, 16). Certainly, archetypal forms of the battle

between good and evil, fearless heroes, old sages, and chaotic monsters are present in both ancient Ramayana and modern stories of Marvel's Cinematic Universe. Even the underlying morals are usually identical: modesty, bravery, righteousness, and love are praised, while arrogance, cowardice, wickedness, and hatred are scorned. In the case of Christian movies, these motifs and morals are represented through Biblical characters, heroic saints, or even ordinary people who are searching for God.

Despite the obvious advantages of film in the realm of storytelling, Christian communities around the world were not ready to immediately accept this new art form. A well-known example of religious censorship of film was the Catholic Legion of Decency, founded in the USA in 1934, which inspected movies' contents for any suspicious elements that might harm the faith. A lesser-known fact is that Orthodox Church has also stood up against the movies. Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church published the document "On the inadmissibility of holy subjects being shown using the so-called 'Living photography'" in 1898, which condemned depictions of Jesus in movies, but the biggest outrage was caused by Yakov Protazanov's 1912 film *Departure of a Grand Old Man* (*Уход великого старца*) because it showed Leo Tolstoy's encounter with Christ (Mitchell 2011, 374–375). Of course, the depiction of Jesus was not as problematic as the depiction of his encounter with excommunicated Tolstoy, since this was essentially a negation of the validity of the Church's decision on a controversial count. This was followed by further prohibitions: it was strictly forbidden to depict Christ, angels, and saints in film, as well as to record real priests and churches, while clergy was forbidden from attending the screenings of movies (Сучкова 2022, 132).

Church's reactions were seemingly justified when Bolshevik authors, such as Leon Trotsky, encouraged the usage of film against both the old political regime and the Orthodox Church: "For some, like Trotsky, cinema had the potential to replace the need for visiting traditional places for worship; for others, it was perceived as a powerful tool of persuasion to be used to promote the new regime" (Mitchell 2011, 375). Films were certainly used for secular propaganda in communist countries, but so was literature, drama, music, academia, etc. This should certainly not entail the rejection of all arts and sciences by the Church. Even though film was used for secular purposes, it would be wrong to conclude that film is secular by its nature: "The source of cinematic art like any art is still the human psyche, and the physical reality of man and nature will surely remain the substance shaped by the director in celluloid. It is inconceivable, moreover, that either the human psyche or nature will ever be drained off at least the vestiges of the sacred. Archetypal image and sacred object remain irrepressible" (May 1982, 23).

Church's concerns regarding film were not, however, totally baseless. Artistic imagination is usually not controlled by religious authorities, which means that depictions of religiously important events and persons in movies may certainly be blasphemous. Depictions of God the Father in movies such as *Dogma* (1999) or *Bruce Almighty* (2003) are not considered problematic because of some sinister Christian sexism or racism, but because of the inability of the human mind to imagine or to de-

pict the transcendent Father. Even the depictions of God the Father as an old bearded white man on some icons are not very much liked by most Orthodox theologians. There are two traditional solutions for this problem in Orthodox iconography: one is the depiction of incarnated and therefore visible Christ – “anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9) – and the other is a symbolic representation, such as Andrei Rublev’s *Holy Trinity*. However, this does not mean that God should be completely absent from the movies. Michael Bird writes:

If art cannot give a direct representation of the dimension of the holy, it can nonetheless perform an alternative religious function: art can disclose those spaces and those moments in culture where the experience of finitude and the encounter with the transcendent dimension are felt and expressed within culture itself. Where art is unable to portray the face of God, it can on the other hand show man’s struggle to discern the divine presence (Bird 1982, 4).

For a pastoral theologian, however, discussions about the dogmatic validity of artistic representations of God in movies, which certainly are important, are not of primary interest. Since pastoral theology deals with preaching and witnessing Christian truth, it will usually walk on “safer terrain”, i.e. it will utilize and interpret those movies that might be considered purely Christian. Movies about the life of Christ first come to mind, but these will be left for some other discussion. Our main interest is a specific genre that gained popularity in predominantly Orthodox countries during the past several decades, termed “hagiopic” by Pamela Grace. Similar to a biopic (biographical picture), a hagiopic is a hagiographical picture. It encompasses both lives of historical saints and fictional characters, depicting their struggles on a narrow road that leads to the Kingdom of Heaven. Nevertheless, hagiography and hagiopic are not identical, the main difference being their treatment of a protagonist. According to Grace, “the former idealizes the hero while the latter may critique this idealization or examine how the hero’s ideas have been distorted by followers or religious institutions” (Grace 2009, 2). This difference is actually quite important in a pastoral context. While idealized images of religious heroes do awaken feelings of respect and admiration, not many people are actually able to identify with such characters. In order to identify and sympathize with any kind of hero in literature or film, a person must recognize their own human struggles and weaknesses in the protagonist. Superman, probably the most overpowered character in modern mythologies, has a weakness in the form of kryptonite, but it does not make him any less of a hero. Without the kryptonite, Superman would probably become a boring character and the biggest failure in superhero franchises. Similarly, religious heroes who display typical human flaws, at least at the beginning of their journey, move human minds to ask the simple question: if these heroes, who are as human as I am, managed to overcome their weaknesses and become closer to God, am I also able to achieve the same goal? Christianity knows of many such examples: Saint Paul was originally a persecutor of Christians, Saint Mary of Egypt was a prostitute, Saint Pelagia was an actress and seductress, etc. These saints were always favorite

examples in Orthodox pastoral counseling: sin is not an absolute category unless a person surrenders to it, and the way to overcome any sin is to follow the path of great sinners who truly repented and became great vessels of God's mercy.

We have witnessed in recent times a truly great ingenuity of Orthodox bishops, priests, and theologians regarding innovative means of preaching. Churches possess TV and radio stations, gifted individuals preach via social media (mostly Facebook and YouTube), parishes organize public lectures and, sometimes, screenings of Christian movies. However, the usage of movies in pastoral practice should not end with mere projections. Formal homilies may certainly become more lively and interesting if the preacher uses examples from the movies previously screened in the parish. Moreover, those screenings should be followed by lectures or conversations about the content, meaning, and messages of the movie. This seems especially important, since movies, like any other work of art, might be interpreted in different ways, and not all interpretations correspond to Church's basic teachings. For example, the story about a murderer who becomes a monk in order to repent for his sins does not mean that the monastery is the only place where great sins can be forgiven. Similarly, the story about a bishop who was a lifelong victim of abuse by his jealous colleagues should not encourage contempt towards clergy or the need to follow only one clergyman (a guru figure) that one perceives as particularly holy. Priests or theologians should be able to predict various interpretations and address them directly, thus avoiding theologically problematic consequences. This is predicated on the assumption that priests and theologians can be objective, critical viewers of movies, which should be the goal of pastoral theology as an academic course. In the next part of this paper, we shall explore four movies from the hagiopic genre and offer theological interpretations of their contents, thus giving examples of how such films might be used in a pastoral context.

Sin, repentance, redemption

The Island

The Island (*Остров*) is a 2006 movie by Russian director Pavel Lungin, depicting the final days of a fictional ascetic Anatoly (portrayed by Petr Mamonov) in a remote northern Orthodox monastery. The film abounds with traditional themes of Orthodox asceticism, such as sin, repentance, catharsis, prayer, wonderworking, etc. Other important motifs are "foolishness for Christ", envy and formalism as obstacles on the road to salvation, and the role of "starec" (старец, a monastic elder and teacher) in Orthodox spirituality. This is probably the most famous and most popular Orthodox hagiopic, praised by both theologians and the general audience. Jolyon Mitchell even compares the success of *The Island* in Eastern Christianity with that of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) in Western Christianity (Mitchell 2011, 379).

The reason for Anatoly's life of repentance is explained at the beginning of the film: during Second World War, he betrayed his captain Tikhon to German soldiers

and was then forced to shoot him, presumably killing him. Ending up in a nearby Orthodox monastery, Anatoly was overwhelmed with guilt for betrayal and murder, and the only thing he could do was to persistently pray and repent. As a matter of fact, prayer is not a simple illustration of Anatoly's character in *The Island*; one might say that this movie is by itself a prayer, since The Jesus Prayer, Psalms, Biblical passages, and liturgical hymns permeate the entire script. The film opens with The Jesus Prayer – both the simplest and most powerful prayer of repentant Christians in Eastern tradition. *The Island* is an artistic representation of The Jesus Prayer: Christ, Son of God, who is invoked in this prayer to forgive human sins, is invisibly present in the isolated northern monastery, forgiving Anatoly and sanctifying him in order to help resident monks and visiting people. Thus, Anatoly is a Christ-bearer, a witness to God's mercy, forgiveness, and power to raise repentant sinners to the heights of sainthood. Marek Lis notices several parallels between Anatoly and Biblical characters: "Father Anatoly bears resemblance to David (penance), St. Paul (as Christ's converted disciple aware of his weakness), and is even seen as a Christ figure (as a thaumaturge and a teacher)" (Lis 2018, 87).

Anatoly's life is that of severe asceticism. Despite his old age and obvious health problems, he still puts great effort into transporting coal manually and heating monastery buildings from his dirty boiler room. He even sleeps on coal and refuses the abbot's offer to move into his chambers. Life of repentance, asceticism and constant prayer to Christ resulted in many gifts of the Holy Spirit. As depicted in the scene with the widowed woman, Anatoly has a gift of prophecy, revealing to her that her husband is actually alive in France. Similarly, Anatoly's prayer results in the miraculous healing of a boy with an injured leg. In both of these cases, it is clear that the worldly way of life stands in the way of humanity's spiritual progress: the old woman is reluctant to go to France due to her chores and fear of visiting a capitalist country, while the boy's mother fears that she might lose her job if she stays on Liturgy instead of going to work. The message is simple: we should always remember God, not only in troublesome situations, and we must never allow our doubts to cloud God's will.

An interesting detail in *The Island* is Anatoly's performance of exorcism. Anatoly drives out the demon from the possessed girl via simple prayer, which might not look like anything special, but it is actually quite important in the context of Orthodox spirituality. In most horror movies inspired by Christian demonology, Satan is presented in a dualist manner, as a being almost equal to God in power. John May critiques such an image of Satan in *The Exorcist* (1973): "The Catholic rite of exorcism is elevated to the level of the parting of the Red Sea in William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*, but when all the swelling subsides and the blood and vomit dry it is a simplistic view of Satan rather than a hint of the genuine experience of evil that has been served" (May 1982, 28). Of course, a blockbuster about demonic possession is expected to have terrifying scenes and an almost invincible antagonist who frightens people of faith. Lungin, however, depicts Anatoly's exorcism in a different manner, more appropriate to the original Christian understanding of the devil. Magnificent ritual, excessive vomiting, spider-walking, and a complete rotation of the head are absent; in-

stead, the possessed girl shows symptoms of psychological distress that only Anatoly recognizes as demonic possession. He plays and laughs with her, showing no fear of the demonic force that possessed her, eventually taking her to an island where he usually prays and exorcising the demon with a simple prayer. Devil is not shown as an almost omnipotent force, but as a being completely helpless in front of a man whose life is ceaseless service to God. Depiction of exorcism, as well as other miraculous acts performed by Anatoly, conveys the message of pure Christian optimism: “If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:20).

The phenomenon of the so-called “foolishness for Christ” is clearly represented through Anatoly’s character. In Orthodox monastic tradition, “fool for Christ” is a title given to those whose behavior might be deemed crazy or even blasphemous, but is actually the expression of freedom in the Holy Spirit, often aimed against formalism in Church ranks. This motif is depicted through Anatoly’s interactions with abbot Filaret and especially with father Job. Preoccupied with rules and formal aspects of monasticism and worship, Job is a typical Pharisee figure: he often complains to the abbot about Anatoly’s behavior, his lack of hygiene, unpleasant singing, and conversations with visitors – laypeople. Job is even upset about Anatoly’s custom of drinking tea (with sugar!) with those who come to him for help and spiritual advice. At the same time, Anatoly does not miss a chance to tease Job, e.g. when he intentionally dirties a door handle before Job grabs it. Anatoly’s answer to Job’s scolding is presented in a form of a question: “Why did Cain kill Abel?” This question is a key for understanding Anatoly’s interactions with both Job and abbot Filaret. While Filaret seems to understand Anatoly’s point, Job presumably does not. When Anatoly reveals his approaching death to Job and asks to be buried in a simple box rather than in a suitable coffin, Job gets extremely angry. He does not understand why Anatoly does not even want to be buried like a person, accusing him of pride – the greatest sin of all. However, further development of their relationship helps the audience discover the true meaning behind Anatoly’s question about Cain and Abel. Just like Cain, Job is jealous of the attention that God pays to Anatoly. Job’s sacrifice consists of complete adherence to rules, zeal for worship, learning pious books by heart, etc. However, God seems to prefer Anatoly’s sacrifice, which on the surface looks like a simple job in a boiler room. Job actually knows that Anatoly is a holy man, but does not know why his own efforts fail to produce the same result. Nevertheless, Job is not the antagonist in this film and the atmosphere of Christian optimism prevails. By the end of the movie, Job understands the lessons Anatoly tried to teach him: his sacrifice is not worthless, but it is not permeated by humility. Job understands that pride has infected his soul and not Anatoly’s. The final scene of Anatoly’s funeral procession shows Job holding a big cross, which might indicate that Job has rejected the foolishness of formalism and accepted the wisdom of cross-bearing: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

Anatoly teaches Filaret the same lesson. While the abbot seems to understand Anatoly’s behavior better than Job, even desiring the same life of asceticism, he re-

mains bound by worldly worries. In a par excellence depiction of “foolishness for Christ”, when Anatoly disrupts the worship by constantly turning to the north, in the direction of the abbot’s chambers, instead of east, the chambers are engulfed in fire. Initial suspicion that Anatoly was the arsonist is quickly dismissed when it turns out that the fire was an accident. Filaret presumes that this was a sign that he should start a life of true asceticism, so he decides to move into Anatoly’s boiler room. However, Filaret brings his favorite boots and bedding, placing them on the coal that Anatoly sleeps on. In both comical and somewhat scary scene, which inevitably forces the audience to doubt Anatoly’s sanity, Anatoly burns the abbot’s boots and, after temporarily keeping him locked in a boiler room full of smoke, throws his bedding into the sea. Of course, Anatoly is not insane: this was a lesson befitting the true “fool for Christ”, not expressed in words but in symbolic acts. Boots and bedding represent earthly pleasures that stand in the way of Filaret’s salvation, something he immediately understands after Anatoly’s performance.

By the end of the movie, Anatoly finds out that Tikhon, whom he has presumably murdered, is actually alive and is now an admiral. The possessed girl was his daughter. This moment brings up a serious question: was Anatoly’s life of repentance and suffering pointless? If Tikhon was not dead, what was the point of all the suffering Anatoly has endured? However, instead of questioning God’s will, Anatoly utters a simple sentence: “Angels are singing in my soul.” Repentance and prayer are not self-sufficient: their true goal is unity with God. Anatoly has reached that goal and was not only forgiven but also perfected in Christ. Having peace in his heart, Anatoly lies down in his wooden box while wearing a white garment – a symbol of resurrection – and dies.

The Island is a film with great missionary potential. Rich symbolism and deep Christian messages are wrapped in a popular art form and the excellent performance of the late Petr Mamonov as Anatoly can hardly leave any viewer indifferent. Despite the gloomy scenery of the icy end of the world, *The Island* manages to produce an optimistic, even eschatological atmosphere through strong indications of Christ’s presence in Anatoly’s words and actions. The seemingly ugly reality of the fallen world is transcended by the beauty of God in one dirty and foolish, yet an undeniably holy man. This kind of worldview, along with previously mentioned moral lessons, should be offered to modern humanity as a cure for its identity crisis. *The Island* is, therefore, an excellent example of a truly Christian movie.

Angel’s Aisle

Nikolay Dreyden’s 2008 film *Angel’s Aisle* (*Придел Ангела*) is quite similar to *The Island* in its basic ideas and messages. Similar to Lungin, Dreyden depicts sin, repentance, and salvation through the character of Maxim Proshin, portrayed by Alexey Morozov. Although he is the son of an Orthodox priest, Maxim fell in love with the Bolshevik eschatological idea of a “Happy Future” – a secular version of paradise – and became an assassin in Soviet service. A possible source of inspiration for Maxim’s character is given in a scene depicting communal dinner in a monastery, while one of the monks reads

aloud the life of Saint Porphyrius. This 4th-century saint was an actor who mocked Christians in his plays. During his performance on the birthday of Emperor Julian the Apostate, he immersed himself in water in order to mock the rite of baptism, but this act has actually awoken true faith in Porphyrius. Publicly proclaiming his new-found Christian faith, Porphyrius was martyred by Emperor Julian, himself a former Christian who allegedly “washed away” his baptism by bathing in bull’s blood.

Maxim Proshin’s life follows a similar pattern. In the beginning, he looks like Emperor Julian: he was baptized, but now he believes in secular eschatology of “Happy Future” that entails persecution of the Church. The film opens with a scene of an old priest writing a letter of recommendation for Maxim, which was supposed to help him infiltrate an Orthodox monastery that was formerly in Russia but is now under Finnish rule. Since the priest was clearly forced by a group of armed communists to write the letter, Maxim mocks him, asking him whether prayer will justify his betrayal in God’s eyes. The priest does not engage in theological discussion but simply asks him: “Who are you?” Although Maxim seems to believe in his atheistic ideology, many details throughout the film indicate that he truly does not know who he is. Before he shoots the old priest who recites Lord’s Prayer, Maxim has a nosebleed – a sign of emotional distress. Nosebleeds occur every time Maxim is preparing to kill someone, indicating that he is not what he desires to be. In his mind, Maxim is a faithful servant of the communist regime who is ready to risk his life on a mission to murder Finnish General Mannerheim during his visit to the above-mentioned Orthodox monastery. The development of his character suggests otherwise.

In order to cross the border between the Soviet Union and Finland, Maxim needs help from a young girl named Zhenya. Despite the orders to kill the child after successful crossing, Maxim disobeys and actually brings her along to the monastery. Upon arriving on the island where Orthodox monks and Finnish soldiers were stationed, Maxim meets an old blind monk Svyatoslav who announces that he has been waiting for him: “I dreamed last night the two of us standing like now, and your guardian angel behind you, showing you the way.” Zhenya, who was standing behind Maxim during this scene, seems to be his guardian angel. Of course, this is symbolic: Zhenya is a child, thus pure and innocent like an angel, which serves as a reminder to Maxim of what he once was and who he truly is. Zhenya’s criticism of his evil intentions, as well as his direct experience of monastic life, forces Maxim to question his previous convictions. Idealistic “Happy Future” is contrasted with the idea of the Kingdom of Heaven: how can one build happiness on destruction and murder of the innocent? Bolshevik idea of Christianity as essentially inseparable from the old tsarist regime, which made the Orthodox Church a legitimate target in an ideological war, does not seem so convincing in the light of Maxim’s new experience. While on the boat sailing towards the monastery, Maxim asks an Orthodox monk: “Don’t you long for Russia?” Monk’s reply, as he looks at the monastery’s steeple behind the trees, confuses the communist assassin: “Nothing has changed. We live as we used to live. There she is, my Russia.” This answer is reminiscent of the original Church’s understanding of Christians’ place in the world: “They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they

participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign territory is a homeland for them, every homeland foreign territory” (*Epistle to Diognetus* 2003, 141). If Maxim considers tsarist Russia to be the natural homeland of Orthodox believers, the monk, on the other hand, considers his monastery a true homeland, a true “Russia”. Needless to say, “Russia” in this context does not signify political entity but a place where believers find peace in Christ. In other words, the homeland is everywhere where Christ is.

Maxim’s questioning of his sinful ways culminates during an attempted murder of General Mannerheim. While father Svyatoslav and Zhenya, both representatives of child-like innocence that Christ demands of his followers (Matthew 18:3), prey for Maxim, he finally repents, decides to spare Mannerheim, and rejects the atheistic delusion of a “Happy Future”. Just like Saint Porphyrius, who miraculously believed after false baptism, Maxim finds his faith after false novitiate – an indication that Christ enlightened his mind thanks to Svyatoslav’s and Zhenya’s prayers. The prodigal son has returned to his father.

In the last scenes of *Angel’s Aisle*, we see older Maxim wearing a monastic cassock and grown-up Zhenya, both of whom remained in the monastery. The obvious tension between them seems to be sexual in nature, although it is not clear whether this is due to their actual relationship or mere sexual attraction. Regardless, this detail raises the question: was Maxim’s new way of life genuine, or did he succumb to another temptation? The viewer now doubts Zhenya’s status as a “guardian angel”. This new twist, honestly, seems like an unnecessary addition to the overall story. Nonetheless, Maxim demonstrates his Christian faith when Soviet soldiers occupy the monastery. Before he was shot by one of his former comrades, Maxim utters Lord’s Prayer, just like the old priest whom he has murdered at the beginning. It is now Maxim who asks his executioner: “Who are you?” Finally affirming his own identity, Maxim dies on the frozen ground, surrounded by monks and wailing Zhenya.

Although not as popular or as striking as *The Island*, *Angel’s Aisle* certainly manages to convey some important Christian messages. The innate goodness of all God’s creation is strongly emphasized through Maxim, Dreyden’s take on Saint Porphyrius, negating the absoluteness of sin and affirming the possibility of salvation through repentance. The apolitical nature of Christianity is another important motif: “The Earth is the Lord’s and everything in it” (Psalm 24:1). Biggest problem, however, seems to be the role of Zhenya, at least in the final scenes. Feminist theologians might rightfully ask whether she really had to be sexualized in the end and what this detail entails. It might signify that monastic life is a constant struggle against temptations, but Zhenya was already presented as Maxim’s guardian angel and thus seems unfitting for the role of temptress, a medium of new demonic influence on Maxim. This is, however, not a detail that ruins the experience of watching *Angel’s Aisle* – a truly Christian film. In a pastoral context, this detail might be interpreted as signifying the persistence of temptations, but it might also serve as a conversation starter about the perception of women’s role in traditional Christian communities.

Lives of saints

Healing Fear

Aleksandr Parkhomenko's 2013 film *Healing Fear* (*Излечить страх*), also known as *Luka* (*Лука*), depicts the life of Saint Luke of Simferopol and Crimea (1877–1961), the Blessed Surgeon. While famous in the Soviet Union during his earthly life for selfless service to everyone, he became known throughout the Orthodox world for many reported miraculous healings after his death. His leading religious and humanist principles are well represented in Parkhomenko's film, reinforced by the masterful performance of Vitaliy Bezrukov as Saint Luke.

Healing Fear is constructed as a series of memories that Saint Luke, an old and blind bishop, recalls during his final hours in 1961 while conversing with a young priest Seryozha. The viewer thus follows Saint's life from his arrival in Tashkent as a young married surgeon until Second World War, a time when Saint Luke was already a bishop, but also a surgeon in the Soviet army. His service to Soviets did not imply betrayal of faith, nor was it only an act of patriotism in the time of war. As a matter of fact, his work in Tashkent, in Siberian exile, and in the Soviet army was the expression of his most basic conviction that becomes clear at the very beginning of the movie:

My passion for drawing was so strong that I decided, after graduating from high school, to enroll in the Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg. However, during entrance exams, I was faced with a serious dilemma. Was I choosing the right path? My dilemma was ended when I decided that I do not have the right to choose what I like, but that which might help those who suffer.

Saint Luke's choice resonated with Christ's words: "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35). The choice of serving others is also a choice of the cross and personal sacrifice, which Saint Luke bravely accepted and endured until the end. The first obvious sacrifice was the abandonment of his love for art. Instead of becoming an artist, Saint Luke became a surgeon. His own well-being did not matter, as long as he was able to help suffering people. This trait of Luke's character is well depicted through his medical work: he is eager to save all people during the turmoil of the Russian Revolution, regardless of their ideological leanings. He operates on both Bolsheviks and tsarists, which almost resulted in his execution after communists took over. The Bolshevik reign of terror did not frighten him: understanding that persecuted believers needed priests, who were either killed or forced out of churches, the now widowed surgeon decides to take monastic vows while still attending to his medical duties. Paradoxically, he even offers medical advice to his tormentor in prison, a former priest who abandoned his faith and embraced atheistic ideology. Probably most painful of all his sacrifices was accepting the fact that his children were forced to renounce him as their father, but not even this temptation managed to distract him. Luke's faith remained firm.

Despite these details, one can hardly interpret Parkhomenko's Luke as a "Mary Sue" type of character. Viewers are not introduced to a superhuman who has no doubts or fears; instead, surgeon Valentin Felixovich Voyno-Yasenetsky is presented as a man possessing quite the usual traits, such as love for his wife, fear for her ever-worsening health, deep sadness after her death, etc. One might even detect a dose of spite in his decision to don the monastic cassock after church doors were nailed shut by communists all over Tashkent. It is only after many personal struggles, dilemmas, and tragedies that surgeon Valentin becomes Saint Luke. This implies that firm faith is not something that one might or might not possess; on the contrary, the firmness of faith is achieved only after defeating many temptations, both spiritual and material. A saint is made through challenges that many people fail to overcome – an idea presented by comparing Luke's reactions to crises of faith with that of several other characters. After the Bolshevik victory and mass executions of clergymen, local priest Vasiliy shaves his beard off and leaves Tashkent, while Luke replies to communist intimidations by embracing monasticism and priesthood. In a more emotional example, Luke's colleague Mikhailovskiy loses his young son to illness and consequently loses his faith, smashing his household icon with an axe. On the other hand, Luke's reaction to his wife's death is different: he cries and obviously doubts, but his faith survives.

An interesting aspect of Luke's personality is the way in which he combines faith and medicine. It is a historical fact, and not just a product of Parkhomenko's imagination, that Saint Luke resumed his medical practice even after becoming a bishop. Contrary to fundamentalist and atheistic prejudices, scientific (or, in this case, medical) and religious worldviews do not necessarily contradict each other. Luke is an excellent example of a true Christian, undoubtedly holy, who has managed to turn his worldly profession into God's work. His medical interventions are preceded by prayer, and he even refuses to perform surgery without an Orthodox icon in the operating room. What looks like a superstition is actually a deep Christian belief that no act of philanthropy is perfect unless performed in cooperation with God. In other words, Luke believes in God's love as the only perfect way of helping humanity, while seeing himself as an instrument of God's will. He cures not lumps of meat but Godlike creatures, *persons*. After a successful operation on a wounded Soviet soldier, one surgeon, who was previously skeptical regarding this "case", asks Saint Luke about his good results, to which he replies: "Nothing special, it is just experience. While operating, one should not only care for the abdominal cavity but for a person as a whole. Also, one should not call him a 'case', like you did."

Healing Fear is essentially a movie about faith: faith in God, faith in the goodness of humanity, faith as a weapon in war against temptation, and most of all, faith as a cure. The scenes depicting Saint Luke's medical efforts as acts of faith indicate something more profound: faith itself is a cure for ailments of the soul. As demonstrated by Luke's courageous embracement of monastic vows and breaking through nail shot door of the church, a true Christian should not be afraid of adversaries capable of only hurting bodies. However, if Christians start feeling fear in turbulent times, then that very fear becomes their most dangerous enemy. Fear is a disease that ruins our souls:

fearful priest shaves his beard off and bows to atheistic murderers, fearful children renounce their father, while fearful Seryozha succumbs to communist intimidations and obeys the order to poison already dying Luke. Nevertheless, faith is never completely lost and it can always reappear to heal the very fear that once squeezed it out of the human heart. Of course, suppressed faith needs a stimulus in order to reemerge, and one such stimulus is the life of a saint. After listening to Luke's memories, Seryozha finds his faith once again and begs the old bishop to forgive him. Forgiveness was natural for Luke, and Seryozha's fear was healed. In conclusion, *Healing Fear* is an excellent Orthodox hagiopic, a cinematic homily that effectively conveys very profound Christian messages while respecting basic rules that distinguish a hagiopic from a hagiography, primarily the necessity of character development. This very detail, the lack of which makes movie protagonists monotonous and unable to move the viewer towards the path of spiritual improvement, makes *Haling Fear* a good choice for priests who want to introduce works of modern art into their preaching activities.

Man of God

The *Man of God* (2021), written and directed by Serbian-American director Yelena Popovic, depicts the life of Saint Nektarios of Aegina (1846–1920), a Greek saint that is well-known throughout the Orthodox world as an ideal monk and great wonder-worker. In this primarily English-language movie, Nektarios is portrayed by a Greek actor Aris Servetelis, while Mickey Rourke makes a notable guest appearance as a paralyzed man who was miraculously healed in the same hospital room where Saint Nektarios died. Due to the great popularity of Saint Nektarios among Orthodox believers, *Man of God* was very well received, presumably even better than *The Island* which did spark some controversy in more traditional audiences.

The main theme of *Man of God* is suffering in the unjust world. Humble and merciful Nektarios, a bishop in the Alexandrian Patriarchate, is loved by people, but not by jealous clergy. Scheming bishops slander him, convincing the old Patriarch Sophronius that his spiritual son Nektarios is planning to overthrow him and take his position. This scheme results in a conviction without trial: Nektarios was left without a diocese and expelled from Alexandria. However, the injustice does not end there. Most bishops in Greece believe in false accusations and Synod refuses to give Nektarios a diocese, reluctantly offering him jobs quite unfitting for a bishop, such as the position of a preacher. False accusations, which nobody seems willing to question, follow Nektarios everywhere: he is despised as a preacher, as a director of Rizarios Ecclesiastical School, and even as a recluse monk on the island of Aegina.

Bishops are regular antagonists in this film. Metropolitan Meletius of Athens seems fond of Nektarios but, as it turns out, this fondness was in fact a way to utilize Nektarios' theological prowess in the fight against heretics. Meletius is quick to renounce Nektarios after a controversy regarding a new monastery in Aegina, which Nektarios actually founded with Meletius' blessing. Nektarios' asceticism also seems to be despised by Orthodox bishops, since one of them comments on his regular

monastic cassock with clear contempt: “Try to dress more appropriately. You look more like a beggar than a bishop.” As a matter of fact, Nektarios is contrasted against the remainder of the clergy throughout the movie. While several clergymen pass by a beggar, completely ignoring him, Nektarios sits next to him and gives him his own shoes. Similarly, while other bishops prefer the company of rich and influential individuals, Nektarios prefers regular people. Kostas, one of Nektarios’ rare friends, protests against the injustice and insists that Nektarios should become a patriarch. Nektarios replies: “There lies a danger in what you desire for me to become, Kostas. When you become a patriarch, you become a man of power. The position of power is like cancer, it eats at you slowly and you don’t even know it. Before you realize it, you can turn into something that you once despised.” Nektarios freely chooses suffering as a lowly monk, refusing to fight for the position of power that will surely corrupt his soul.

There are many illustrations of Nektarios’ humble and tolerant character in *Man of God*, especially in the scenes depicting his days in Rizarios School. Although he is a director, a person of authority, he performs the tasks of a janitor. He is taking care of the garden, cleaning school grounds, and we even see him cleaning toilets. His authority is not enforced but earned. Instead of punishing troublesome students, Nektarios inflicts punishment upon himself, thus teaching them responsibility and the necessity of brotherly love. Later, during the construction of the Aegina monastery, Nektarios is shown collecting and carrying heavy stones in order to help construction workers.

Similarly to *Healing Fear*, *Man of God* deals with the issue of faith in the context of suffering. Kostas openly admits that he would lose his faith if forced to endure the same temptations as Nektarios. Minas, one of Nektarios’ associates in Alexandria, finds he lacks faith due to enormous suffering, injustice, and poverty in this cruel world. The president of Rizarios School embraces enlightenment and obviously despises Nektarios and his monastic ideals. He thinks that asceticism is a relic of the dark ages, something that cannot help Greece on the way towards emancipation. In all these cases, Nektarios does not try to force his worldview but calmly explains that faith in God should not be subjected to our limited personal experience. Unjust suffering and the advancement of science – two key components in the global crisis of faith – force everyone around Nektarios to doubt, while his very existence proves that faith is strong enough to endure these temptations.

Due to its popularity among believers, criticizing *Man of God* will surely be an unpopular opinion. However, there are several details that make this movie not so much theologically problematic but, for lack of better words, theologically unconvincing. The first such problem is the way in which Nektarios’ character is presented. There is no discernable character development, we do not see how he became who he is, and there are essentially only two instances in which we see Nektarios truly displaying any kind of emotion besides calm acceptance of everything that happens to him. If questioning of Church establishment was absent, this movie might have been interpreted as a mere mirroring of hagiographical material instead of the true hagiopic as Pamela Grace defines it. Of course, Nektarios faces hard temptations throughout the

movie, which might have served as steps for character development, but viewers are presented with the “finished product” of asceticism that simply suffers and endures. Nektarios is portrayed as an ideal monk, one who faces temptations with faith and eventually wins, without losing his hard-earned calmness and humbleness. The historical fact is that Nektarios truly was such a monk. However, there is a difference between the ways characters are portrayed in historical documentaries and live-action films, and *Man of God* seems to play on both sides. It wants to present historical facts, but at the same time it strives to be a hagiopic, and the solution seems to be presenting the necessary internal struggles and doubts through other characters, but not through the protagonist who, for some pious reason, had to be left intact. This is not completely meaningless, since saints are those who have bravely faced and defeated temptations, becoming examples of Christian virtue for those of weaker faith. But all of them started as sinners, people with typical human flaws – a state that most of us find ourselves in. People are not only interested to see a great saint; they also want to know *how* that person became a saint in order to better themselves. One might suppose that portrayal of Saint Nektarios could have been far more convincing if viewers were allowed to see at least some episodes from earlier stages his of spiritual struggle. Simply, there is a person to emulate in this movie, but there are no clear indications of how to do it without falling into spiritual self-deception (πρελεκτ), which is a state of superficial imitation and lack of true inner transformation.

The way Church hierarchy is presented in *Man of God* constitutes another problem. Once again, the movie struggles between historical documentary and live-action formats: Nektarios did have some very dangerous opponents among bishops, which is faithfully depicted in the movie, but the story of any film, even historical dramas, must have meaningful morals in order to be a live-action. A moral message is derived from interactions between protagonists and antagonists, and bishops are clearly antagonists in *Man of God*. One might suppose that this way of portraying higher ranks of the hierarchy is nothing more but a faithful representation of historical facts from Nektarios’ life, which is a partially justified argument. However, *Man of God* is not a historical documentary. It is a live-action movie and it does convey certain messages through depicted interactions between Nektarios and other bishops. In the previously mentioned conversation with Kostas, Nektarios implies that he despises “power” that functions like a spiritual “cancer”, turning good people into despicable individuals. Regardless of the screenwriter’s intentions, this indicates that there is a very small minority of good bishops, like Nektarios, and a vast majority of bad ones, like all other bishops in *Man of God*. Needless to say, this might encourage some very problematic ecclesiological interpretations.

This critique of the bishops’ portrayal is not based on some cheap clericalism, nor is it an attempt to justify Saint Nektarios’ historical adversaries; on the contrary, it is merely a critique of the characters’ dynamic in this film. This is where a true theological problem becomes obvious. While in all previously mentioned films characters are given a fair opportunity to repent, thus moving from sin to virtue, characters in *Man of God* are rather static and simple. The only moment when the movie comes

close to the mystery of repentance is the conversation between Nektarios and the rationalist president of Rizarios School. While saying farewell to Nektarios, the president admits the lack of peace in his soul because God has presumably tortured him during his whole life, simultaneously stating that having peace is unimportant when compared to finding the truth. Nektarios praises the president as a good man, hoping that one day he will find his peace. This conversation is a highlight of the film, but we do not see how it further affected the doubtful president. Similarly, we do not know whether Minas has strengthened his faith, or whether any of the bad bishops have actually repented. Characters are seemingly reduced to basic traits that define them throughout the film: jealous bishops are always jealous, rationalist president is always rational, good ordinary people are always good, etc. A careful theologian cannot miss the lack of personal dynamic of these characters, since Christian ethics is based on the belief that humans are dynamic creatures, always moving towards or away from God. Characters in *Man of God*, on the other hand, seem to occupy fixed positions on this spiritual road, almost as if they were predestined to be the way they are. God does not intervene, not even in the subtlest of ways, remaining silent until the very last scene of the film. It is only then that we see Nektarios conversing with God immediately before dying, while Mickey Rourke's character, a paralyzed man, miraculously moves and sits on his bed.

Man of God is a movie about suffering and enduring until the end. If anyone wanted to make a Christian historical drama that explores this theme, the life of Saint Nektarios would probably be the best choice. However, Christian teachings can hardly be reduced to several elements at the expense of others, since there is no *only* suffering or *only* repentance. Christian teachings are as complex as the entirety of human experience, which means that the treatment of any subject, e.g. suffering, cannot be properly understood without a wider context of sin, guilt, God's love, prayer, repentance, redemption, etc. Popovic's film is clearly based on good historical research, but its theological basis seems rather wobbly and vague. Priests who would like to use *Man of God* as preaching aid must be prepared for the possibility of wrong theological conclusions among the viewers. The possibility of repentance is very real and, according to Orthodox theology, nobody is predestined for hell or heaven. Church hierarchy does not originate from some other planet where everyone is perfect, but it also does not consist of the worst imaginable individuals. One should never reject entire hierarchy based on some unreasonably high moral standards and look for a perfect guru outside of the established Church. Serbian Orthodox Church has had more than enough troubles with such individuals and movements in recent times, which makes it wise to warn the faithful not to interpret *Man of God* as a permanent criticism of Church hierarchy. Such interpretations were certainly not intended by Yelena Popovic: "Towards the end of the film, when Nektarios' faithful friend and companion Kostas confesses: 'Father, if it had been done to me what had been done to you, I wouldn't go to church anymore,' Saint Nektarios responds: 'Woe to me if my faith depends on men'" (Turley 2022). That is in fact the strongest message this film manages to convey.

Conclusion

As previously discussed films indicate, Orthodox reception of cinematic art has truly evolved from initial distrust to contemporary acceptance. Many Orthodox hagiopics were made with blessings of bishops or monasteries, which does not necessarily entail censorship. On the contrary, Church has managed to become a source of inspiration for filmmakers, successfully retaking artistic imagination from secular ideologies that once used noble arts, including film, as tools of propaganda. That is a very good sign, especially in former communist countries of Eastern Europe. Religion used to be practiced by the elderly, predominantly women, and dissidents, i.e. those who were not the primary target audience of propaganda or were brave enough to reject it. In modern times, many young people turn to Church and see it as an important or even decisive element of their identity. However, there are other influences that do not necessarily produce good results, at least from a Christian point of view. All kinds of media are used to convey radical postmodernist messages that endanger traditional concepts of family, chastity, humbleness, piety, etc. Young people often struggle between the two worldviews, one presumably modern and the other presumably outdated. Making Orthodox hagiopics seems like a good strategic move in a battle for human hearts and souls, while simultaneously answering the call for “modernization” of the Church’s preaching methods.

Priests should certainly use Orthodox hagiopics as preaching aids, but should not confine themselves solely to this genre. Practically any film that manages to convey good moral messages might be used at least as a conversation topic, especially with younger believers. Fans of George Lucas’ *Star Wars* franchise, for example, might be introduced to interesting theological interpretations of the concept of “force”, while the fans of *The Godfather* trilogy might be surprised by Francis Ford Coppola’s insertion of Christian symbolism and messages in his movies. Even in the world of animation, which is today predominantly Japanese, a careful observer can discover meanings and morals that are surprisingly Christian in nature. Since animated movies and series are more popular among younger audiences, it would be natural to rely more on cartoons (not just animated Biblical stories!) and anime as aids in pastoral work with children. Sometimes these works of art can be used as illustrations of Christian teachings: Masashi Kishimoto’s *Naruto* persistently searches for goodness in his enemies, often managing to bring them back to light, which is a fitting illustration of Christ’s words: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Orthodox hagiopics are, on the other hand, more appropriate for pastoral work with adults. The goal of this paper was to offer an interpretation of four such films and to emphasize their important theological messages that should be discussed with parishioners. Since Church is encouraging artistic imagination, works of art inspired by Christianity can and should be actively used in modern pastoral practice.

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Употреба филма у православној пастирској пракси

Резиме: Хришћанске заједнице нису одувек биле благонаклоне према филмској уметности. Ране римокатоличке и протестантске реакције на појаву филма често су разматране у литератури о односу филма и религије, док се православне ређе помињу. Ипак, Руска Православна Црква је веома рано објављивала јавне осуде приказа Христа на филмском платну, нпр. у документу „О недозвољивости приказивања свештених предмета у такозваној живој фотографији“ из 1898. године. Упркос томе што су руски комунисти активно користили филм као пропагандно средство против царског режима и Цркве, Црква је временом и сама прихватила филм као легитимно средство уметничког изражавања религијских доживљаја. Данас бројни православни аутори стварају филмове по благослову црквених великодостојника и манастира, често успешно приказујући важне хришћанске теме и саопштавајући јеванђелску истину. С обзиром на откривени проповеднички потенцијал филмске уметности, многи свештеници користе филмове као помоћна средства у пастирском и вероучитељском раду. Пастирска употреба филмова, међутим, треба да буде пропраћена адекватним теолошким тумачењем њиховог садржаја и порука, што уједно помаже верницима да увиде и прихвате имплицитна значења и да избегну еклисиолошки неповољна тумачења. Након сажетог увода у тему односа теологије и филмске уметности, аутор излаже тумачења четири филма са доминантно православном тематиком који спадају у агиографски жанр (hagiographical picture, hagiopic), и то: *Осврво* (2006), *Кайела анђела* (2008), *Излечитији сѝрах* (2013) и *Човек Божији* (2021). Филмови су изабрани према две основне теме које се обично обрађују у овом жанру: пут од греха ка покајању и спасењу (*Осврво* и *Кайела анђела*) и светитељска житија (*Излечитији сѝрах* и *Човек Божији*). Истакнута је потреба да агиографски филмови прате елементарна правила развоја приче, нарочито постепен развој лика који омогућава гледаоцу да у унутрашњим борбама про-тагонисте препозна своје сопствене борбе те да, самим тим, извуче ваљане моралне поуке из филма. Анализирајући поменуте филмове, аутор указује на њихове кључне теолошке моменте које је у пастирском и проповедничком контексту неопходно објаснити, али и критикује одређене елементе који могу изазвати погрешна теолошка тумачења, па тако и проблеме у парохијском животу.

Кључне речи: Филм, Православна Црква, пастирска пракса, агиографија, грех, покајање, искупење, вера, проповед.