

Gravity evokes expansive vision of fragile human life

“In all its phases and at every age, human life is always sacred and always of quality. And not as a matter of faith, but of reason and science!” said Pope Francis on September 20 to a gathering of Catholic gynecologists.

The remarks came only one day after a headline-grabbing interview that was misinterpreted by the world’s media. Surely that widely reported interview demands to be understood in light of this speech. Yet most media outlets studiously ignored it.

“In the fragile human being each one of us is invited to recognize the face of the Lord, who in his human flesh experienced the indifference and solitude to which we often condemn the poorest, whether in developing countries or in wealthy societies,” said the Pope.

Interestingly, these remarks came only days before the opening of the astonishing new movie *Gravity*, starring Sandra Bullock and George Clooney. The film, which is being hailed by many as “unlike any movie ever made,” takes the fragility of human life as its theme.

It opens with these words against a black background: “At 600 km above planet Earth, the temperature fluctuates between +258 and -148 degrees Fahrenheit. There is nothing to carry sound. No air pressure. No oxygen. Life in space is impossible.”

When Sandra Bullock’s character in the film, Dr. Ryan Stone, appears floating in a fetal position, with what looks like an umbilical cord behind her, a discernibly pro-life dimension of the movie’s theme comes into focus. The camera lingers over this image. We are invited to contemplate its significance.

To my mind, this captivating artistic image is a wonderful example of what Pope Francis recommended in his infamous interview. Namely, once we see the Church’s teaching about abortion in light of everything else, only then do we grasp its great beauty.

In the *Gravity* film, the fragility of all human life in the cosmos is underscored. Be-



cause the only commensurate response to this universal fragility is gratitude, the movie exudes an authentic religious dimension that surely has ample embrace for the unborn within its cosmic view of all of humanity.

One is almost invited to see in *Gravity* an allegorical, pro-life message. Space is like the womb, and the attempt of the hero, Dr. Ryan Stone, to return to Earth, is like a fetus, against all obstacles, trying to be born.

We learn that she was given a boy’s name because her father wanted a boy. Symbolically, this invites us to consider the hazardous situation of a female child within the womb. The evil of gendercide, the deliberate abortion of baby girls by parents who reject the gift of a female child, is a horrible contemporary evil that surrounds us on all sides. It is satisfying to see a major artistic statement that subtly prods us to meditate on the injustice of such malpractice.

But of course the movie is an artistic as well as a box-office success because its message magnificently transcends mere reduction to a political argument against abortion. Instead, it evokes a truly expansive vision of human life, to which we too are invited to respond with gratitude.

Science fiction aficionados should have no difficulty interpreting the full significance of the film’s stunning image of Sandra Bullock floating like a fetus in space. The image invites comparison with the Star Child at the end of Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

In Kubrick’s film, the Star Child is a new stage in the evolution of the human race. His movie juxtaposes our violent ape ancestors with the advent of space travel. The discovery of an alien artifact sends a beacon to the extraterrestrials who buried it on the moon. The encounter with the aliens then triggers the evolu-

tion of humanity to a higher mode of existence.

Kubrick uses the music of Richard Strauss, “Thus Spake Zarathustra,” to invoke the dubious idea of Nietzsche’s Superman (Hitler was a fan) and to reinforce the film’s theme of human evolution to a higher state.

But *Gravity* is Alfonso Cuarón’s mind-blowing artistic rejoinder to Kubrick. When Cuarón visually invokes the evolution of life on Earth at the end of his film, he replaces Kubrick’s monolith with his own towering testimony to what is most distinctively human: the uttering of religiously significant words of gratitude.

Man is the religious animal, the animal capable of giving thanks. The highest stage of evolution, Cuarón seems to be saying, is not when aliens contact us. Instead, it is when we humans, lost in the cosmos, finally become at home by making contact with God.

After a symbolic baptismal rebirth, the final words in Cuarón’s film, if we were to translate them into Latin, would read: *Gratias ago tibi*. Note that it is from that word “*gratias*” that we get our English word, “grace.” The Greek word “Eucharist” also references that same fundamental human act of gratitude.

Gravity and Grace is the name of a book by the French philosopher Simone Weil. It was originally published in French in 1947 and translated into English in 1952. After watching the amazing spiritual journey depicted in the movie *Gravity*, I recalled one of that book’s most interesting passages.

“To find extraordinary difficulty in doing an ordinary action is a favor which calls for gratitude. We must not ask for the removal of such a difficulty; we must beg for grace to make good use of it,” writes Weil. “In general, we must not wish for the disappearance of any of our troubles, but grace to transform them.”

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