

Anti-Catholicism: a double standard that deserves doubt

By C.S. Morrissey
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“**T**his play is dedicated to the many orders

of Catholic nuns who have devoted their lives to serving others in hospitals, schools, and retirement homes. Though they have been much maligned and ridiculed, who among us has been so generous?” (John Patrick Shanley).

Doubt is fascinating because it allows me quickly to find out from people who have seen the play (or the movie version with Oscar winner Meryl Streep), what they really think of Catholic priests and nuns.

I am frequently surprised at the firm certainty,

DOUBT: A PARABLE
At Pacific Theatre
pacifictheatre.org
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at the sheer lack of “doubt,” with which many people express their condemnation of the priest character: of course Father Flynn

was sexually abusing that young boy! Of course Sister James is shocked to discover the hypocrisy of the system she serves! Of course Sister Aloysius learns to doubt Catholicism by the play’s end!

This is fascinating, because the play, by John Patrick Shanley and directed by Ron Reed, is crafted precisely to deconstruct such cynical anti-Catholic prejudices.

The play contains undeniable formal indications (visible to experienced readers sensitive to subtleties) that the priest is innocent, that he is a chaste man with a homosexual orientation, who is befriending a young African-American boy with a homosexual orientation, a boy who is being bullied by others in a way he himself has no doubt once suffered.

The key scene for decoding the play’s content is the one in which the mother of the boy laments to Sister Aloysius how her son is being bullied by the prejudice of his own father. And Father Flynn’s pillow parable condemning gossip is the key formal clue, thanks to the play’s full title, **Doubt: A Parable.**

For me, the unusual merit



Miramax / CNS

Amy Adams and Meryl Streep talk with writer-director John Patrick Shanley on the set of the movie *Doubt*. Shanley has successfully adapted his stage play to film, recreating the Catholic milieu of the era.

of **Doubt** is that it deconstructs the most familiar anti-Catholic prejudices about

“lustful, abusive, predatory priests” and “stern, frustrated, sexually repressed nuns.”

It does this not just by allowing us sympathetically to inhabit the lives of the priest and nun characters. It actually uses the “stern nun” stereotype (in the form of Sister Aloysius) to deconstruct the “lustful priest” stereotype (when we eventually come to understand Father Flynn).

And then it humanizes Sister Aloysius by allowing us to see her “better self” as mirrored in the younger Sister James. Just as Sister Aloysius admirably helps an older nun going physically blind, Sister James ends up helping Sister Aloysius, who is going spiritually blind.

In order to overcome (to come to “doubt”) one’s own prejudices about priests and nuns, one has imaginatively to engage with the drama of these characters as real, fully

dimensional human beings. In this way, we can understand that older Sister Aloysius focuses on externals and thinks in stereotypes in order to attain moral certainty.

Young idealistic Sister James, in contrast, is open to human beings as human beings. Sister James rightly wishes to cultivate kindness and warmth by giving people “the benefit of the doubt” about their hidden inner nature and character.

Sister James begins to lose sleep by the play’s end, however, by being tempted to think only in stereotypes and to focus only on external certainties.

But it seems she will not give in to this temptation in the long run, because Sister Aloysius provides a salutary negative example, confessing to her that hardening oneself to think heartlessly about human beings as reductive caricatures does not bring any lasting certainty or real peace.

The emotional intelligence of Pacific Theatre’s production of **Doubt** is found in how it understands the all too often unnoticed philosophical truth at the heart of **Doubt**. It offers a superbly executed dramatization of this brilliant play by using stereotypes only to subvert them and to challenge us to be more human. Don’t miss it.

The full version of this review can be viewed at www.bccatholic.ca.

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