



*Film Makers, Film Viewers: Their Challenges and Opportunities
A Pastoral Letter*

*Cardinal Roger M. Mahony
Archbishop of Los Angeles*

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For thousands of years, people have told stories whenever they were frightened, lonely or confused and needed to gather together to make sense of their lives. Included were stories of love and stories of war, stories of courage and stories of despair, factual stories and made up ones, stories that make us laugh, others that make us cry. But the element common to all these stories is that each one captures a portion of the truth about what it means to be human.

Stories delight us. We love to tell them and we love to listen to them. Why? Because we are story tellers. Because more often than not, stories link us to the past, connect us with each other and enable us to sift things out, fit things together and reach for the meaning and purpose of our lives.

For most of human history, people gathered around the campfire to tell their stories. Only later would they write them down. In more recent times, they congregated around a cracker barrel stove in a country store to do their story telling. Sometimes they would put their story to music and sing it to the accompaniment of guitar or banjo. In our own century, we have discovered new ways to tell our stories, ways that involve wondrous new technologies and exciting new art forms. Television--whether news or entertainment--is electronic story telling. It has become the vehicle of popular culture. And the theatrical motion picture is cinematic story telling. It has become the great contemporary art form.

These two developments have profound significance for all those who care about the dignity of the human person and the well-being of the human family.

I am issuing this Pastoral Letter on the fifth anniversary of the visit of Pope John Paul II to Los Angeles and his special Address to the leaders of the Entertainment Industry in which he said: "...as communicators of the human word, you are the stewards and administrators of an immense spiritual power that belongs to the patrimony of mankind and is meant to enrich the whole of the human community."¹

I am directing this Pastoral Letter primarily to the many men and women who give leadership to the country's entertainment industry: producers, directors, writers, technicians, actors, artists--all who share in the production of television programming and motion pictures. But I also write for our Catholic Community and for all people of good will across the nation who are the viewers of these efforts.

In this Letter I would like to share some brief, preliminary reflections on television news, then move on to a more complete treatment of storytelling entertainment, whether on the small screen of television, or on the large screen of the motion picture theater.

I. Television News

I believe television news has a providential contribution to make to the social and political life of our people. At its best, it can help create the enlightened electorate which is the bedrock of a healthy democracy. It can also provide the platform on which the great issues facing this society are debated, a focal point for the ongoing dialogue which is the life blood of a free society. The problem, of course, is access--and the money it takes in the present system to secure that access.

All too often, the problem is also the compression of ideas that seems to be demanded. A thirty second sound bite is hardly adequate for a reasonable discussion of the serious problems that face us.

I also believe television news has a providential role to play in unifying the peoples of the world. It accomplishes this by taking us into the hearts, minds and souls of people in other parts of the world who may be very different from us in skin pigmentation, language, culture, education, religious faith, ethnic heritage, political orientation or economic status. Yet these people share with us a common humanity, a mutual membership in the family of God on this earth. Good television can help us experience this.

Television news can also help unify the peoples of the world by enabling us to experience the same deeply moving events at the same time. I am thinking of events as diverse as the moon walks, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the Olympic Games, the famines in Ethiopia and Somalia, an Academy Awards Presentation, the explosion of the space shuttle, a Super Bowl, the students in Tiananmen Square, a Papal Election or a Presidential Inauguration. Hundreds of millions of people in all parts of the world viewed these momentous events almost simultaneously. That has to draw us together and help us experience our common humanity.

One television image--the shot of the earth from outer space--says it all. Who can look at that beautiful blue marble floating in that sea of blackness and not cry out in awe, "That's where I live. That's where we all live. We are in this together"?

Television helps us experience what we have in common as so much deeper and more important than that which separates us. We are indeed brothers and sisters of each other. When properly used, television can move Jesus' prayer, "That all may be one, Father, ...that they may be one in us" (Jn 17:11-23), a giant step closer to fulfillment.

But television news can do more than make us aware of our underlying oneness. It can also help us experience those things which still separate us. It can challenge us to face the cruelties we inflict on each other. It can tear at our hearts with the needs and

sufferings of our fellow human beings. It can speak for those who cannot speak for themselves--the young, the poor, the marginalized--and it can demand justice for them.

It can rip the mask of glamour off the ugly face of war. It can reveal the greed behind racism, the hypocrisy behind sexism, the despair behind random violence. And it can summon for judgment the violator of human rights, the despoiler of the environment, the betrayer of the public's trust before a jury of many millions of people.

II. Entertainment

But television is not only a news medium, it is also entertainment. The situation comedy, the dramatic series, the two hour movie of the week have become staples of popular entertainment. It is to the makers and viewers of these programs, and of the theatrical motion picture, that I would like to direct my reflections in this letter.

I do so because Los Angeles is the entertainment capital of the world. A great proportion of the world's entertainment is conceived, financed and produced by companies in this area. Many of our people earn their livelihood in the entertainment industry.

I also do so because of the moral power of these media. In this society, at this time, only the human family itself surpasses the visual media in their capacity to communicate values, form consciences, provide role models and motivate human behavior.

I do so not because I am a director or producer, a screenwriter or performer, an editor or a composer. I enjoy all of these art forms, but I have expertise in none of them.

Rather, I speak as the leader of a religious community which comprises a significant portion of the viewing public and which believes it has a special responsibility to foster the moral health and spiritual growth of all God's children.

III. Art and Religion

The religious community has a long tradition of collaborating with the best of the world's artists--be they painters or sculptors, architects or musicians, playwrights, poets or novelists--to create works of art which have illumined and challenged, elevated and delighted the human spirit for centuries. These artists have helped the Church tell her story, share her insights, communicate her values and give expression to her faith in liturgical action and sacred symbol, a contribution which the Second Vatican Council affirmed in its Decree on the Means of Social Communication in 1963.² We like to think the Church has helped these artists stretch their talents and maximize their creativity.

How has the Church helped? By asking these artists to open their creativity to a transcendent purpose. By challenging them to address the deepest and most persistent of humankind's questions about the human situation. By helping them go deep within

themselves, give voice to their spiritual yearnings and put flesh on the most personal of their intuitions. What has been the result? These artists have created works of enduring significance, works that continue to enrich us all.

This mutually beneficial collaboration between the religious and artistic communities came about, I believe, because religion and art have so much in common. Both arise from the deepest reaches of the human personality and deal with the transcendent meaning of human life. Both impact every level of the human personality and aim to elicit an experience. Neither is content with cerebral, mind--to--mind communication. Both art and religion seek to render matter transparent to spirit.

One example of the intimate intertwining of art and religion can be seen in the double birth of western theater--whether tragedy or comedy from religious ritual, first in ancient Greece and later on the front steps of the great Cathedrals of Medieval Europe.

This affinity between religion and art is particularly true of Catholicism. We are a story-telling religion. The essence of our faith is the story of God's passionate love for every member of the human family and of our ambivalent, on again, off again response to that love. This ongoing romance reached new intimacy with God's covenant with the Jewish people and was consummated in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The romance continues now in the life of the Church, and in the depths of the souls of each one of us, as we struggle to accept God's love and respond to it. This is the central drama of every human life. Under many guises, in many forms, this is the story of the human family.

For the Catholic, the essence of God's inner life is communication, at one moment, self-revelation, at the next, self-giving. For us, Jesus is the Word of God, the Father's way of revealing Himself to us. He is the Image of God, the Father's way of giving Himself to us. "God so loved the world, " St. John tells us, "that He sent His only begotten Son into the world, so that all who believe in Him might have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

For us, Jesus is the Word or Image of God made flesh, become human, visible, tangible, vulnerable, earthy, sensibly present among us. This Jesus continues to live out His risen life not only in the souls of those who believe in Him but in every member of the human family, especially in the poor and needy. When we open ourselves to them, sharing ourselves with them, responding to their needs, we open ourselves to the God who lives in them.

What is the result? God gives Himself to us through them. This is the usual way God operates: He makes the human a conduit of the divine. Most often He speaks to us, shares His love with us through other people, through human language and gesture, through the very human signs of bread and wine, water and oil. Which is to say Catholicism is also a religion of sacred signs and symbols, a sacramental religion.

Is it any wonder, then, that we Catholics feel such a kinship with those artists who use words and images to compress human life and distill human experience so as to tell the human story and reveal its transcendent meaning? Is it any wonder we like stories that get below the surface of human life and probe its mysterious depths? Is it any wonder that we like love stories that mirror in their own unique way the love story which is at the heart of the human experience?

And is it any wonder we seek a dialogue with the entertainment industry's film makers?³ Their power--for good or for ill--is awesome. What they create not only reflects human society but also helps shape it. "Yours is indeed a profound influence on society," said Pope John Paul II in his Address to the industry leaders. "Hundreds of millions of people see your films and television programs, listen to your voices, sing your songs and reflect your opinions. It is a fact that your smallest decisions can have global impact".⁴ Rare is the priest, minister or rabbi, educator, politician or business executive who has the film maker's power to elevate or degrade the human person.

IV. Enrichment and Entertainment

Of course film makers have an obligation to entertain--entertainment is a human value. God's children need to laugh, to cry, to fantasize, to play. Entertainment is a way of doing these things. But while they entertain, film makers as any artists also have an obligation to enrich their audiences, to share with them some insight into what it means to be a human being, to challenge them to take charge of their lives and use their freedom to grow, to say "yes" to themselves, to reach out in love and compassion to all their brothers and sisters in the human family, thus making their contribution to the building up of the humane society of peace and justice for which we all yearn.

I do not believe film makers can fully entertain their audiences without also enriching them. And I do not think they can enrich them without also entertaining them. Entertainment without enrichment is superficial and escapist. Enrichment without entertainment is simply dull; it enriches no one. It is not a question of entertainment or enrichment. It is a question of entertainment and enrichment.

V. Freedom and Responsibility

To combine entertainment and enrichment is a creative challenge of the first magnitude. The task of responsible film makers is an extremely difficult one, and they need much freedom if they are to succeed at it. This means freedom to probe deeply into the characters of their stories; freedom to confront the demonic as well as divine sides of their characters; freedom to explore honestly the decisions with which they struggle; freedom to look at the consequences of those decisions; freedom to speak the truth as they see it; freedom to do so as compellingly as they can; freedom to try things, to risk, even to fail. Artistic freedom is essential for the creative process.

Film makers are rightly jealous of this freedom. But a moment's reflection will convince them that the freedom they cherish cannot be separated from the moral order, the

demands of truth, a concern for the common good, or the well being of other people. Such a separation would result not in freedom, but in license.

We rejoice in our Constitution's First Amendment which protects our right, not only to worship God in accordance with our consciences, but also to speak the truth as we see it. No reasonable person would say the First Amendment gives us the right to cry "Fire!" in a crowded theater or to libel another human being or to perjure ourselves. Artistic freedom must always be responsible.

The responsible film maker's task is made more difficult still by the fact that a significant portion of his/her audience may be made up of young people who are not yet emotionally mature. Too many of them know little about delaying gratification or disciplining themselves. Their self-affirmation is shaky and their values are in flux. They carry within themselves a powder keg of turbulent emotional energies that have yet to be brought under the governance of reason or given a wholesomely human outlet.

Given the power of film, what might be a tasteful and realistic portrayal of a significant human experience for a disciplined and mature adult, can result, for sensitive and vulnerable young people, in self-destructive, anti-social behavior.

The industry's NC 17 rating is of limited help, since most of our young people reach emotional maturity much later than 17 years of age.

The golden rule applies here. Responsible film makers will not do to their audiences what they would not want done to themselves--or to their own teenage sons and daughters. In search of theatricality, for the dramatically powerful, film makers will not assault the sensitivities of their viewers. In their desire to tell stories that are totally involving and compellingly cinematic, they will not play to the undisciplined emotions of their less mature viewers. In trying to please their audiences, they will not pander to baser instincts, to narcissism, hedonism and greed. Nor will they tell their viewers part of the truth--the part easy to hear--and withhold the other part--that which demands hard work, discipline and unselfish love.

VI. The System

Film makers' responsibilities are heavy. Their decisions are extremely difficult ones, and are made more difficult by the commercial system within which they operate.

Television is a ratings-driven business. Its programmers target a segment of the viewing public--those likely to buy the products advertised in their commercials--and then select those programs they think will attract that demographically desirable segment.

The motion picture industry is similar. It is driven by the box office. It makes what its executives think the people will pay to see.

This commercial system has obvious disadvantages. It is inclined to ignore the needs of whole segments of the viewing public, reduce entertainment to marketing, concentrate immediate programming power in very few hands, tell people what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear, appeal to the lowest common denominator, and impose severe restrictions on the creative freedom of the industry's film makers.

But it does have one great advantage. It links the story teller with the story viewer, and grounds the creative process in what the viewers want. In the long run, this gives to the TV viewing and movie going public considerable say over the content and quality of what is produced. This is a significant power, and it carries with it a significant responsibility.

VII. The Responsibility of the Viewer

It has been said that in a democracy the people get the kind of government they deserve. The same can be said of entertainment. The viewing public, whether in the theater or before the TV set in their homes, gets the kinds of motion pictures it will support.

This is not to absolve the film maker of his or her responsibility. But it is to say that the viewing public must also shoulder its share of the responsibility. Neither the viewing public nor the creative community can abdicate its responsibility and place the total blame on the other for the present state of affairs.

So how is the conscientious viewer to decide what TV programs to watch and what movies to see and which to recommend to his or her friends? How, in particular, are conscientious parents going to help their children make these kinds of decisions? How is the critic to evaluate what he or she sees? And how is the responsible film maker going to decide what kinds of stories to tell and how best to tell them?

These are not easy questions to answer nor easy decisions to make. The viewer, the parent, the critic, the film maker must resolve them in the solitude of his or her own well formed conscience.

Because I reject censorship, I do not propose a code to govern what film makers may create, nor do I wish to dictate what intelligent viewers may see.

Rather, my contribution through this Pastoral Letter is to lift up and offer certain criteria which I hope will help guide both film makers and film viewers as they struggle to answer these questions and make these decisions.

VIII. General Criteria

A good motion picture or TV program is made up of many, many ingredients. From a human values perspective, three are of particular interest: the characters, the nature of the conflict, and the development of the story.

Evaluating the Characters

In the book of Genesis, the Lord tells us He made humankind in His image and likeness. That means every human being is both a replica and a residence of God. This gives each person an infinite dignity, a divine worth. This dignity expresses itself when people open to reality and grasp the truth, take charge of their lives and exercise their freedom in a responsible way, opt to grow and develop and become fully alive, fulfilled persons, commit their lives to the God who has called us to friendship with Him, and reach out to share God's love with other people. Love, more than anything else, is what makes us like God. Love is the fulfillment of the human personality, the source of our greatest joys.

Yet loving does not come easy for human beings. Neither does responsibility, nor freedom, nor surrender, nor growth, nor openness to the truth. We find contrary energies at work within us--negative energies, life-destroying energies--a tendency to lie to ourselves, to barter away our freedom for a slavish kind of security, to opt for stultification and death rather than for the full flowering of our lives, to pull back in fear from the rigorous demands of loving into a snake pit of narcissism and resentment, apathy and self-pity. St. Paul puts it very well: "The evil I hate, that I find myself doing. The good that I love, that I don't do" (Rom 7:15-19).

There is no denying the fact: we are ambivalent creatures--torn between the positive and the negative poles of our being, between truth and illusion, love and hostility, freedom and compulsion, the life and death wishes--alternately cowardly and courageous, flawed yet beautiful.

This ongoing conflict is the heart of the human condition. It is also the stuff of great story telling.

To evaluate the characters in a movie from a human values perspective, we have to ask:

- Are they believable? Can I relate to them? Can I find echoes of myself in them?
- Am I taken inside the characters in the story? Do I get to know what they think, feel and choose? Am I given some idea of how they got to be the way they are, why they do the things they do?
- Do I like them? Do I feel compassion when they suffer? Do I see glimmerings of the divine in the despicable characters? Inkling of the demonic in the admirable ones?
- What do these characters tell me about myself, about the people around me?

Evaluating the Conflict

The engine that drives most stories--whether comedic or dramatic--is the conflict between good and evil.

The "good" is that which frees the Divine to work in and through us. It is life enhancing, life fulfilling, life celebrating. It clings to the whole truth, no matter what the cost. It uses its freedom to share itself with other people. It heals, reconciles, and loves.

The "evil" is just the opposite. It suppresses the Divine within us. At first glance, it looks good; it promises much. But it cannot deliver. At the heart of evil is a terrible emptiness--and a lie, the half truth that is used to distort the whole truth, a lie that it clings to, that it will do anything to protect. Evil takes this fear of exposure and transforms it into hate and this hate, when pushed, expresses itself in violence, whether verbal, emotional or physical. It is no accident that Jesus called Satan a liar and a murderer.

To evaluate the conflict in a movie, we have to ask:

- How deeply and honestly is the evil treated? Do we see its initial allure, the disparity between what it promises and what it delivers, the lie that constitutes its essence, the fear that drives it, the cowardice that lies at its heart, the dehumanizing emptiness that afflicts those who succumb to it, the violence that all too often is its culmination? Do we see its life-suppressing, life-stultifying, life-destroying effects?
- How deeply, how honestly is goodness explored? Does the film get beyond the superficial image of goodness to which most people pay lip service? Do we see the rigorous demands it makes, the price the person who opts for it must pay, the courage it takes to meet these demands and pay that price? Do we see that goodness is its own reward whether the good person is recognized and applauded in this world or not?

Evaluating the Development of the Story

In the classic story structure of a motion picture, the main characters--the protagonists--need or want something and must overcome one obstacle after another in their pursuit of it. Early in the story, the protagonists develop a problem, complications arise and the problem gets worse, more complications come along and the problem gets worse still.

At each step along the way, the protagonists are tested and must make decision after decision. Finally, in the last act, climactic decisions are made and the conflict is resolved. Maybe the protagonists get what they want; maybe they don't. In the process, the protagonists are changed. Sometimes, they grow, having been tested, chastened and enlightened; sometimes, they fail to grow, having opted out on their own growth.

To evaluate the development of the story in a movie, we have to ask:

- Is the resolution of the story realistic? Is the change in the characters, from beginning to end, credible? Does it take place because of exterior circumstances or interior choices? Do the characters grow or regress? If the former, what produced the growth? If the latter, why the regression?
- Does the film avoid a shallow romanticism—a view of life through rose colored glasses—where virtue always triumphs and vice is always punished? At the other extreme, does the film avoid a despairing cynicism which says truth is unattainable, growth impossible, love a self serving illusion, that, in short, there is no hope and life is not worth the pains of living?
- Does the film, on the other hand, reflect a more balanced and realistic view, which says that it is all right to be vulnerable, that disappointment and defeat, pain and loss are inevitable in this life but that properly used they can accelerate our growth and contribute to the richness of our lives? "To those who love God," St. Paul says, "all things work together unto good" (Rom 8:28). This is the tragic view, but it characterizes many comedies.

Specific Criteria for Areas of Concern

A. Relationships

"It is not good for man to be alone," the Lord told Adam in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:18). We are social beings. We discover who we are, actualize our potential and come to our fulfillment only in relationship to other human persons.

Relationships fall into three categories:

1. The I-Thou Relationship--the deepest, the richest, the most fulfilling of human relationships. Most people can sustain only a very limited number of them. Availing myself of Martin Buber's insights, I would describe such a relationship as: Two people, standing opposite each other, open to each other, waiting on each other, present to each other, saying "yes" to each other.

They stand opposite each other because both persons are treated as worlds unto themselves, good in themselves. Neither is a satellite of the other.

They open to each other, sharing the most intimate, personal and vulnerable side of themselves in total trust and honesty.

They wait on each other, because such sharing follows a natural rhythm and cannot be hurried.

They are present to each other because they remain attentive to each other, tuned in to the needs of the other on a permanent basis. This is the heart of fidelity.

They say "yes" to each other not because of what they get from each other but because of what they see in each other--a human person whose soul mirrors the face of God. This unconditional yes creates a deep kind of emotional bonding. Two people become one. Each cares about the other--and about their love for each other--as much as they care about themselves.

2. The I--You Friendship--the most common of authentic human relationships. Both persons are recognized and affirmed as ends in themselves, good in themselves. Yet the relationship is not as intimate nor is the communication as deep or trusting as in an I--Thou relationship.

3. The I--It Relationship--an inauthentic relationship because one party is not treated as a person but rather as a satellite of the other, existing for that other person, but possessing no dignity or value of his/her own. Such a relationship is characterized by manipulation and exploitation.

The closeness of a relationship can be judged by the quality of the communication between the people involved. The more open and trusting, honest and vulnerable they are with each other, the closer the relationship. The more guarded and superficial, affected and dishonest their communication, the more alienated they are from each other.

Relationships begin with, express themselves in, and are nurtured by deep, intimate and personal communication.

The more truth people share with each other, the better the relationship. You can have no friendship--let alone love--without a prior commitment to the truth. Fidelity begins there. Dishonesty is the acid that eats away at relationships. Lying destroys them.

To evaluate the relationships in a movie, we need to ask:

- What does the picture say about the relationships of its various characters? Do we see the courage it takes to enter into and sustain an I--Thou relationship? Are we made to feel the price--in risk, sacrifice and ego transcendence--is worth it? Do we see the degradation involved in an I--It relationship? Do we root for the degraded person to break free of the exploitation and assert his or her own dignity?
- How well do the characters communicate with each other in the beginning of the picture? At its end? Do they have difficulty sharing their vulnerability with each other? Why? Is self acceptance a problem for them? Why? Trust? What does fidelity demand of them? Are they tempted to opt out on the truth? What happens to them--and to their relationship--when they succumb?

B. Sexuality

Sexuality is a beautiful, even sacred part of human life and so any honest treatment of the human situation is going to include it.

The sexual act is a unique and privileged form of human communication. More complex and more significant than the casual coupling of two bodies, it presupposes an I--Thou relationship and brings about a fusion of a man and a woman on every level of their personalities--physical, psychological and spiritual. It also says, I believe, something quite specific, "I belong to you, only to you, forever." Such a mutual, permanent and exclusive commitment, when verbalized before the religious community, brings into existence the covenant of love we call marriage.

Christian tradition holds that the only proper context for sexual intimacy is between husband and wife, and that apart from the permanent and exclusive commitment which marriage entails, the sexual act loses its deepest significance and becomes dishonest.

To evaluate the sexuality of a motion picture, we have to ask:

- When the characters in the film are portrayed as engaging in sexual relations, what are they saying to each other? If they are saying something with their bodies they do not mean with their minds, hearts and souls, if, that is, their sexual activity is simply a physical release, a source of pleasure, devoid of life-long commitment, is the picture honest about the inauthenticity, the inadequacy, the terrible emptiness, the shallowness and the self-deception of such a one dimensional approach to human sexuality?
- Are the sexual scenes handled with the taste, delicacy and reverence the subject demands? Are they an essential part of telling the story or are they exploitative? What will be their effect on younger, less mature viewers? Would you want your teenage children to see this picture? How about their friends?
- Does the picture convey the beauty of authentic sexuality, or does it demean his very important part of being human? Does it cater to the self indulgent side of its viewers or does it motivate them to be more honest, sensitive and loving in their relating to other people?

C. Women

Men and women are different physically, and they may be different emotionally. It seems to me women have a special genius for mirroring the tenderness of God and they are absolutely equal in their God-given dignity.

Women desire equal rights in the political and economic spheres, equal opportunity in employment, and equal pay for equal work.

Marriage is an equal partnership which extends to breadwinning, household duties and the care of the children.

To evaluate the portrayal of women, we have to ask:

- How are the women in the story portrayed? Are they persons possessing the same intrinsic dignity as their male counterparts and, at the deepest level, facing the same soul wrenching challenges to grow and become the aware, free, loving worlds unto themselves that God made them to be? Or is the impression given that they are somehow something less, valued as objects rather than the persons they are?
- Is the unique vocation of motherhood given its proper due? Is the contribution mothers make, frequently at the cost of great self-sacrifice, not only to their own children but to society at large, appropriately affirmed and appreciated?
- Are the agonizing pressures and tensions of working mothers, especially those who must educate, nurture, and support their children alone explored with sensitivity, candor, and compassion?

D. Family

Most Americans give a very high priority to family life because family life, although demanding a great deal, gives even more in return. It is where most Americans look for their fulfillment, how they validate their lives.

To evaluate the presentation of family, we have to ask:

- How well do the members of the family in the picture communicate? Is there openness and trust, an acceptance of vulnerability and emotion or is there fear and suppression? Do the members share honestly what they are feeling with each other? Or do they slip into roles and play games? If so, why? With what results?
- Do we see the gritty sacrifice family life demands of the parents, the moral stamina it takes for them to keep renewing their love for each other, and for their children, despite change, human frailty and the inevitable quarrels? Do we see the ego transcendence, the ongoing need to forgive and forget that is required for flawed human beings to live in harmony and in happiness with each other?
- Do we see how children blossom in an atmosphere of love, and how they wilt when that love is absent? Do we see the lethal effects of parental infighting? Is the right children have to a secure and loving home inhabited by both their parents recognized and affirmed, a right that takes precedence over any other? Do we see the tragedy, especially for the children, that follows a Family's break up?

E. Religion

The overwhelming majority of the American people believe in God and pray regularly. They look to God to give meaning to their lives. They seek from God strength and wisdom to confront life's challenges and solve its problems. They view God as the ultimate motivation for much of what they do, which is to say, the ultimate validation for the way they live.

To evaluate the aspect of religion, we ask:

- Is the religious dimension of the characters in the story in evidence? If not, why not? As their problems mount, do they turn to God for help? How strong a motivating factor is their faith in God? Do we see them argue with God, become angry at Him? Do we see them do things they wouldn't do if they did not believe in God? Does their faith help them understand their lives more fully? Are they happier, stronger, more caring people because of their faith? If not, why not?
- Are they active in a religious community, worshipping God and serving the general community through that religious community?

F. Work

Work has an important part to play in every human life, not only as a way to earn one's livelihood and contribute to the common good, but also as a crucible for developing one's talents, a school of self discipline, a source of self affirmation and a vehicle for self expression.

To evaluate the presentation of work, we have to ask:

- Do we see the necessity of work, the satisfactions of work, what it can give and what it cannot?
- Do we see the arduous effort it requires and the fulfillment it can deliver?
- Do we also see the necessity of balancing work off against the other facets of our lives?

G. Possessions

Money and the things it can buy have an important contribution to make to our lives. It can enable us to do things we cannot do without them, give us a measure of security and free us to pursue our own fulfillment.

But money and possessions cannot satisfy the deepest yearnings of the human heart. Nor can they guarantee happiness, which comes, not from what we have, but from whom we become. It is not a matter of exterior riches, but of interior ones--what we have come to know and experience, what we have created, and most important of all, whom we have loved and who has loved us.

To evaluate the place of possessions in a motion picture, we need to ask:

- Does the film in any way give the impression that money and the things it can buy are a prerequisite for the good life, that wealth equals happiness?
- Does the pursuit of money in the picture draw people together or pull them apart? Does a preoccupation with things make the characters in the movie more human or less?
- Do we see the value of the things money cannot buy, the difference between interior and exterior richness?
- In the picture, how are the poor and the oppressed portrayed? Is justice--a respect for the rights of other people, and an adequate response to the needs of the poor and the oppressed--part of the equation? What contribution can the poor make to the rich with whom they come in contact?

H. Authority

Every human community needs leadership--to communicate the community's vision, preside over its dialogue, articulate its consensus and execute its will. Somebody has to concern him/herself with the community's welfare, coordinate its activities, protect its weak and needy members, reconcile its warring factions and pull the community together. The purpose of authority is never domination, always service. It exists for the people, not vice versa.

To evaluate a picture's presentation of authority, we need to ask:

- How do the authorities in the picture fulfill their responsibilities? What is their contribution, if any, to the characters in our story? Do they seek to dominate or to serve?
- If the film maker pokes fun at their limitations of mind and heart, or subjects them to a barrage of sarcasm and ridicule--perfectly legitimate in itself--is an implicit distinction made between the office holder and the office, the former being denigrated, the latter being affirmed? If not, why not?
- Can you imagine the characters in the movie living in a world without authority? Would you want to live in such a world?

I. Violence

Tension, even conflict, between individuals and groups is inevitable, given our sinful, flawed human condition. We do not know what the other person is feeling, what he is thinking or what he might do--and so we are afraid. After a while, the fear curdles into hostility and, given the right provocation, the hostility can flare into violence of either the verbal, emotional or physical kind.

The big question, in film as in life, is how do you resolve the conflict. There are two possibilities:

- **The way of violence.** One person threatens to or actually clubs the other into submission. This dehumanizes the person (or group) doing the clubbing as well as the person being clubbed. All too often the latter seethes with resentment and looks for a chance to get even. So a new cycle of violence is launched. Since there is violence in all of us, it takes little courage to give it expression. Violence is the coward's way to resolve disputes.
- **The way of dialogue.** The individuals involved face the conflict and decide to talk it through. They commit themselves to seek the truth, through their dialogue, even if that should require they change their position. They also commit themselves to love their adversary, affirming what is best in him or her and to abstain from any kind of violence, whether verbal, emotional or physical. "Love your enemy," Jesus tells us. "Do good to those who hate you. Pray for those who persecute you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left" (Mt 5:39-44). This takes great moral stamina, since it requires more courage to endure suffering than to inflict it. But it works. It can bring about a genuine reconciliation between adversaries. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. have shown us how powerful non-violence can be.

Unfortunately, in contemporary America, there are situations that elude the above two possibilities. What does one do if one's adversary refuses the invitation to dialogue and threatens violence to oneself or other people? Most moralists would agree self defense is a right and, under certain circumstances, the use of force to protect the innocent can even be obligatory-but only as a last resort and only the minimum amount needed.

Unfortunately, there is violence in life and so there will be violence in movies. To evaluate it, we have to ask:

- Is the violence demanded by the story? Is it presented as a desirable way to solve problems and resolve conflict? Is it presented honestly? Do we see the cowardice at the heart of it? Do we feel the pain and dehumanization it causes to the person on the receiving end, and to the person who engages in it? Do we see how it spawns more violence?
- Is non-violence--the way of dialogue--presented as a credible alternative? What would it involve in this story? Do we see the fortitude it would demand? The way it could really reconcile the adversaries?
- Is the moral dilemma faced by someone threatened by violence explored sensitively? Do we see the difference between loving your enemy and letting yourself be walked on? What does a nonviolent person do with the anger he/she quite naturally feels when someone else causes him/her pain? Are we obliged to defend ourselves? Do we have the right to turn someone else's cheek?
- Does the film cater to the aggressive and violent impulses that lie hidden in every human heart.? Is there danger its viewers will be desensitized to the horror of violence by seeing it?

IX. Conclusion

The criteria I articulate here, and the values that underlie them, are the exclusive property of no one religious community, ethnic grouping, educational level, economic class or political party. Certainly the Catholic Church has no monopoly on them.

Being human values, they are recognized and affirmed by all the people. In the United States, there is a broad consensus in favor of these values, and to most Americans, they are not controversial. I believe these are the values most Americans want to see reflected in their popular entertainment, the values, certainly, they want to communicate to their children.

I think all those who care about the dignity of the human person and the moral fiber of our country--be they Catholic or Protestant, Christian or Jewish, Hindu or Moslem, Buddhist or agnostic--must work together to foster this kind of entertainment.

The Chinese motto adopted by "The Christophers" seems especially relevant: "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."

I commit the Archdiocese of Los Angeles to this effort. In the weeks ahead, I will ask our Catholic educational institutions, from kindergarten through graduate school, to make media literacy (which includes film appreciation, media criticism, and TV discernment) a priority for their students.

I will ask our two Archdiocesan papers--The Tidings and Vida Nueva--to give full coverage to TV programs and films which explore and reflect these values.

I will ask the National Catholic News Service to do the same.

And I will ask our Archdiocesan Communications Office to make itself available to the creative community, so that we can help them in any way we can.

To the film makers of our community, I say: Make films which reflect these kinds of values and you will actualize what is deepest, richest and most creative within you. By doing so, you will also give something very special to your audiences. I can think of no better way for you to say 'thank you' for the superlative talents you have been given by God.

And to the broad spectrum of the American viewing public I say: These are the kinds of values you should be looking for in the stories you watch. Seek them out, and when you find them, discuss them with your family, and recommend them to your friends, so that they may see them too.

I hope and pray the religious and creative communities may work together to realize the full humanizing potential of these great new storytelling art forms, that together we may use them to help our people grow and develop and become the kind of human beings

God made them to be, that by collaborating together, we may move the human family a little closer to the peace and justice, freedom and human dignity for which God created it.

1. *"An Immense Spiritual Power,"* Address of Pope John Paul II to policy makers in television, radio, motion pictures and the print media, September 15, 1987, Registry Hotel, Studio City, par. 8.
2. *Inter Mirifica*, December 4, 1963, Second Vatican Council. This Decree was then followed by a "Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication," *Communio et Progressio*, January 29, 1971. And this year, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications issued "A New Era," *Aetatis Novae*, a Pastoral Instruction on Social Communications on the 20th Anniversary of *Communio et Progressio*, February 22, 1992.
3. Since film is a collaborative art form, by film makers I mean primarily the writer, director, producer and performer--which is not in any way to minimize the contribution of the cinematographer, scenic designer, composer, editor, studio or network executive.
4. *Ibid.* Par. 1.
5. I am afraid many TV commercials give this impression. Implicitly they say "Unless you have what we are selling, you are a nothing, a failure as a human being. " This is idolatrous--and may explain the rage that afflicts so many of our young people.