

Encountering Dragons

Bernie Villegas reviews **THERE BE DRAGONS**, an epic film by Roland Joffé, narrating the lives of two childhood friends, Josemaría Escrivá and Manolo Torres (a fictional character) who get separated by the agitated political events of the Spanish Civil War and choose opposite roads. The film will show in Philippine Theaters in November 2011.

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MANILA, Philippines — "There Be Dragons" were words written on ancient maps on territories unknown to the cartographers. They were warning of possible dangers. A very apt title for a Hollywood film that will soon be shown in several theaters in Manila and in other cities in the Philippines.

Directed by two-time Academy Award-nominee Roland Joffé, director of such films as *The Mission*, *The Killing Fields*, and *the City of Joy*, "There Be Dragons" stars Charlie Cox (*Stardust*, *Casanova*), Wes Bentley (*American Beauty*, *Ghost Rider*), Olga Kurylenko (*Quantum of Solace*, *Max Payne*), Derek Jacobi (*Gladiator*, *The Golden Compass*), Dougray Scott (*Mission Impossible II*, *Ever After*), and Rodrigo Santoro (*300*, *Che*).

The film is a historical epic full of action, adventure, passion, and love set in the turbulent period of one of the most cruel civil strifes in modern history, the Spanish Civil War of 1936 to 1939. It narrates the lives of two childhood friends, Josemaría Escrivá (Cox) and Manolo Torres (Bentley) who get separated by the agitated political events just before the Civil War and choose opposite roads when the war breaks out. Josemaría chooses the way of love and peace: he becomes a priest and later Founder of Opus Dei, a way of sanctification of ordinary life.

Manolo, on the other hand, chooses the way of hatred and violence, ending up as a spy in the Republican Army. During this time, he becomes infatuated with a beautiful Hungarian revolutionary, Ildiko (Kurylenko) who joins the Republican Army motivated by her noble ideals to free the working class

from the abusive capitalists of those times.

But when Ildiko rejects his advances and gives herself instead to the courageous leader of a Republican militia group, Oriol (Santoro), his jealous fury leads Manolo to a disastrous and murderous path of treason and betrayal.

Roland Joffe meets the challenge of interweaving in the plot the real life story of St. Josemaría Escrivá, canonized in October, 2002, by Blessed John Paul II, and the fiction of Manolo and his son Roberto, a modern-day journalist who was assigned to write a book on St. Josemaría, which task eventually led to his discovering the secret and dark past of his father.

As I reviewed the movie in a pre-screening show, I decided to write this article to help movie goers understand the complexity of the

intertwining plots. There are times when there are too many plots and subplots that some confusion can arise. Thus, this short explanation.

An underlying theme of the film is that every saint has a past. The director, who also wrote the script, captured very well the reality that St. Josemaría was not born with a halo around his head. Like the rest of ordinary human beings, he had defects which he had to overcome by dint of repeating virtuous acts and by prayer and sacrifice.

He is shown in his childhood as an ill-tempered and impulsive individual, throwing a dish against a wall during a moment of fury; almost hurting others while driving a horse carriage with wild abandon; and bloodying the nose of a classmate in a typical teenagers' rumble.

As he grew up and applied the human and supernatural means to

struggle to be a saint, he became a true sower of peace and joy in every environment in which he lived. When he was fifteen, he decided that God was calling him to be a priest upon seeing the footprints on the snow of a barefoot monk. The obvious sacrifice of this monk moved him to give himself completely to God in apostolic celibacy.

As a young priest, he worked untiringly to comfort the poor and the sick in some of the most depressed areas of Madrid. He endured all the sufferings of a hunted priest in the midst of the persecution by the communists who murdered thousands of priests and religious.

When he was finally persuaded, against his will, to try to escape from the communist zone by crossing the Pyrenees to go to France, he was in constant anguish because he felt

guilty for abandoning his family and the remaining members of Opus Dei in Madrid.

Only when he found the sign that he had asked God to send him did he realize that it was God's will that he should cross the border to France. The sign was a wooden rose that was part of a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in a mountain shrine destroyed by the communists. The strongest message I got from the film is the value of forgiveness. One can forgive even the most heinous offense if he knows how to love truly.

As St. Josemaría often said, love consists more in understanding than in giving. Joffe captured very well the appropriate attitude that a true Christian should have adopted during the civil war of Spain.

As repeated often by St. Josemaría in his advice to the youthful members of Opus Dei then, there were good

and evil people on both sides of the war. Among the Republicans were well-meaning social reformers and aggrieved workers who were just clamoring for social justice.

It was not a matter of black and white: the Republicans were bad because they included Stalinists and communists who were burning Catholic churches and assassinating priests and religious and, on the other hand, the Nationalists (led by Franco) were good because they were protecting the Church.

This was an oversimplification. On the side of Franco, there were also sympathizers of the Nazis who were guilty of summary executions of their leftist enemies. In other words, there were both good and evil individuals on both sides of the struggle. St. Josemaría could really talk about being a sower of peace

and joy because he lived to a heroic degree the virtue of understanding.

The movie's ending dramatically illustrated this virtue and the power of forgiveness to break the chains of the past. Those whose tears flow easily should be ready with abundant napkins or handkerchiefs.

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MANILA BULLETIN

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