

The Movie 'Conclave' Shows the Film Industry Steeped in Ghastly, Woke, Infantile Self-Righteousness

By Conrad Black

Some readers must surely share my view that a break from the intensity of political discussion is sometimes welcome. So I offer a slight *divertissement*: Frequent readers would have some recollection of my low opinion of the vulgarity, self-obsessive vanity, and political and social posturing of the American film industry.



Brían F. O'Byrne, left, and Ralph Fiennes in a scene from 'Conclave.' Focus Features via AP

While there is no denying the talent of cinematographers and some actors, it is as steeped in ghastly, woke, infantile self-righteousness as ever. However, because a film about a

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conclave to select a new pope had been highly praised, and because I am a fairly observant Roman Catholic who has had the privilege of meeting the previous two popes and of knowing many cardinals, two of them closely, I thought it was worth a look.

"Conclave" is a distinct commercial success and has won much professional recognition, including eight Academy Award nominations, and it won the award for best adapted screenplay. I should stress that this is a British film. I am cautiously hopeful that even Hollywood, which has lavished honors on it, would have some reservations about actually producing such a plot.

The set and the acting were commendable and the presentation of liberal and conservative Catholic viewpoints, while a bit of a caricature in places, was a plausible superficial airing of some of those issues. It soon emerged, though, that one of the leading candidates for elevation to be supreme pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church had effectively bribed 40 of the cardinals to support him for the papal succession.

This rather naughty and self-interested candidate for succession to the headship of the church which Jesus Christ allegedly asked St. Peter to found also caused the presence at the conclave of a religious sister, who had borne out of wedlock the child of another papal contender, serving Spartan meals to the cardinal-electors. Isabella Rossellini, who knows Rome well, was plausible as a senior nun organizing the logistics of the conclave.

Everyone who has any religious views or practices any religion is accustomed to mockery of the subject, and all Christians and Jews are tediously familiar with the brickbats constantly hurled at every aspect and tenet of religious belief and practice as primitive and superstitious humbug.

In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, the approximately

three quarters of a billion of us who do attach some credence to it as an institution and as an agent of a divine intelligence, are tiresomely accustomed to having the leaders of our church reviled as aged celibates or closet queens scolding the world about its sex life while covering up a great excess of sodomy within the Church.

In fact, having scandalously failed to combat these behavioral problems adequately in many places for many years, and finally, under intense secular scrutiny and prosecution, the churches have comprehensively addressed these issues. The major Christian churches are now among the safest institutions in the world for people who could be vulnerable to sexual predation.

As it happens, I have made a considerable study of the history of the Roman Church, and there have been many scandalous conclaves and many popes who have been extremely corrupt and depraved in their personal conduct. Yet for many centuries there has been nothing remotely like the outrageous burlesque of the selection of a pope as was depicted in this film.

There have been terrible schisms and at times competing popes, sometimes as many as three operating at the same time and excommunicating each other, but not in modern times, and at the base of it all there was always a foundation of sincere and dedicated people who adhered to their vows, and sought to bring comfort and benefit to the co-religionists whom they served and the faith that they espoused.

There has remained for more than 1,500 years a vast and persuasive body of intellectual analysis and advocacy that retains the confidence of a sizable echelon of the most distinguished intellectuals of all serious civilizations. When Catholicism fields its first team intellectually, from St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to modern figures like Cardinal Newman and Jacques Maritain, it always defeats the atheists.

More successfully and at times more artfully than any other institution, the Roman Catholic Church unites worldliness with spirituality and abstract virtue; in that great house indeed, "there are many mansions." There has never been a precedent for so outrageous a result of a conclave as that which emerged in "Conclave."

The cardinals, reeling from the disclosures of the corruption and moral turpitude among them, elected a transexual pope, of whose existence they were not aware until he arrived at the conclave from Afghanistan. Cardinals are named "*in pectore*," that is their names are not publicly divulged to spare them oppression from secular regimes, but their identities are known to their cardinalitial brothers.

Approximately 60 years ago, when some Danish film portrayed Christ as a homosexual, a Vatican spokesman issued a fiery condemnation that began with the words "Denmark is the pigsty of Europe." Obviously, slagging off Christ Himself is a more blasphemous enterprise than any denigration of the cardinals, but that was an obscure Danish film which no one outside that country would have been aware of had it not been so severely condemned by the Vatican.

At that time, if anything like "Conclave" had been produced in Hollywood the legions of serious Roman Catholics in that industry at that time, such as Sophia Loren, Ann Blyth, Loretta Young, Jane Wyman, Irene Dunn, Gregory Peck, Rosalind Russell, Spencer Tracy, and even Rita Hayworth, would have raised an uproar of seismic proportions.

There are not the same sensibilities in Britain where the papacy was disembarked 500 years ago in favor of that great religious leader, husband, father, and self-proclaimed "Defender of the Faith," Henry VIII. Yet there seems not to have been the slightest suggestion in the American film industry that "Conclave" is a little over the top and in questionable taste.

It would have been just as interesting a film and much more realistic if it had presented a less depraved picture of the institution which for all its shortcomings, is the greatest repository of ecclesiastical intelligence and spiritual faith in the world, and has been so for nearly 2,000 years.

In some ways, perhaps it is a good thing we are so accustomed to such outrageous and fatuous cynicism that almost no one notices. Yet I am afraid I have difficulty chinning myself on the belief that this is progress, and I think I would feel that even if I were an atheist – we should respect serious institutions even if we don't agree with them.

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