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# Diary of a Country Priest: The Transcendent on Film

## **Abstract**

Recognized as a masterpiece of French cinema, Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) dramatizes a young priest's encounters with grace during the months he spends in his first parish in the rural village of Ambricourt. During this time, the priest keeps a journal in which he records both the outer events of his life in Ambricourt and his inner experiences of a transcendent reality. The art of this film lies in its dramatization of these mystical experiences, making viewing the film a spiritual experience for many viewers.

## Religious Perspective

Many distinguished critics and reviewers have praised *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) by Robert Bresson (1901-1999) as a masterpiece of French cinema because of the depths of feelings it stirs in the viewer vis-à-vis a mysterious transcendent reality. André Bazin, one of the first of those critics, points out in his essay on *Diary*, that "probably for the first time, the cinema gives us a film in which the only genuine incidents, the only perceptible movements are those of the life of the spirit."<sup>1</sup>

*Diary* is based on the novel by the same name by Georges Bernanos, a major figure in French literature in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Bernanos once stated that his books were merely means of revealing to certain chosen souls, for whom he believed he had been born, his own understanding of the mysteries of God and man.<sup>3</sup> Bresson said something similar in a 1976 interview. "I want to make people who see [*Diary*] feel the presence of God in ordinary life," Bresson said. "You can feel there is something, which, of course, I don't want to show or talk about. But there is a presence of something which I call God, but I don't want to show it too much. I prefer to make people feel it."<sup>4</sup>

*Diary* is sometimes called a Catholic film, but one no more needs to be Catholic to appreciate it than one needs to be Lutheran to appreciate Bergman's

films. Rather, the film speaks to everyone - Catholic or not, Christian or not, believer or not - of a transcendent reality behind and within everyday reality. The film is not concerned with dogma but with personal experience of this transcendent reality. The poet Philip Lopate, who calls himself an "American Jew," writes eloquently of how the movie changed his life. It did so, he says, "by putting me in contact with a habit of mind that I may as well call spiritual, and a mental process suspiciously like meditation."<sup>5</sup>

Although *Diary* falls into the genre of the religious film, it differs radically from a conventional religious film like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*. Both *Passion* and *Diary* are structured by the Stations of the Cross.<sup>6</sup> However, the two movies differ in the ways by which they evoke the transcendent, with a consequent difference in the kinds of feelings each stirs in viewers. In *Passion*, Gibson relies on hairy devil babies, demonic crows, and cataclysmic events in nature to suggest the presence of the supernatural. In *Diary*, Bresson evokes the transcendent within the confines of everyday reality. Because the events in Gibson's film are outside viewers' experience, they can rationalize these events as belonging to an order of experience different from their own, and their emotions are consequently stirred only at the superficial level. Bresson's realism, in contrast, forces viewers to confront the transcendent in their own lives, stirring their emotions at their highest level of sensitivity. As a result of these differences, *Passion* has been criticized as

being religious without being spiritual, while *Diary* has been praised for being spiritual without being religious.

### **Ambricourt as Spiritual Wasteland**

At the beginning of the film, a white sign post with the name "Ambricourt" written on the cross-piece announces the particular place in the universe in which most of the events of this film will take place. When the priest arrives in the village one chilly November day in the 1930s, no one welcomes him. Indeed, the crumbling, mildewed walls of the rectory, as well as the broken glass in one of the panels of the front door, indicate at once the little regard that the villagers have for their new priest. Confirming this first impression, an alderman informs the priest a few days later that the town council has agreed to provide the rectory with electricity, but perhaps not for four months. This means, of course, that the priest will spend the winter without heat or hot water.

The priest soon learns that it is not so much indifference but hostility that the villagers feel toward him. After a few weeks in Ambricourt, the priest receives an anonymous note advising him to immediately seek a transfer to another parish, to "get out." Even the village children ridicule the priest. His star pupil in catechism class, Seraphita Dumochel, tells him that she is so attentive in class because he has such beautiful eyes, and she then runs off with her giggling classmates.

The main reason for the villagers' meanness is perhaps their poverty. Their physical poverty makes them resent those, like the priest, who have never had to toil as they have done. "You do have a soft time of it. There's no excuse for exploiting the poor. You like your money easy, Father," an old widower tells the priest, contemptuously, when the priest tells him how much his wife's funeral will cost. But the poverty of Ambricourt is above all a spiritual poverty. The villagers seem to have lost all hope of any spiritual transformation, either in this world or in the next.

The pain the hostility of his parishioners causes, however, is nothing compared with the pain the priest feels when his mentor, the Vicar of Torcy, criticizes him for his ineffectuality. "I'm wondering what have you young men got in your veins these days. In my time they made men of the church leaders of parishes, real masters! Seminaries these days send us choirboys, young ragamuffins ..." And later the vicar says, "The bishop must be hard up for priests, to put a parish in your hands." The priest meekly accepts this criticism as well-deserved.

Compounding the misery brought on by feelings of loneliness and failure, the priest suffers from intense stomach pains that force him to forego all meat and vegetables. His stomach can tolerate only hard bread soaked in sugared wine, which leads the villagers to gossip that the priest is an alcoholic.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the priest falls into a pathological depression. The nadir of his despair came one stormy night when, unable to sleep, he had tried desperately to pray. He had needed prayer, he writes in his journal, like he needed air in his lungs or oxygen to fill his blood. But he cannot pray. "Behind me there was nothing and before me was a wall. A black wall," he writes. "There was no obstacle, so no hope of breaking through the obstacle. There's no obstacle. Nothing ... God has left me. Of this, I'm sure."

The next morning, the priest is shocked to hear that his only friend in Ambricourt, Dr. Delbende, had committed suicide. The doctor had apparently experienced the same void that the priest had experienced the night before. The doctor had been very disheartened, the Vicar of Torcy confides. "He had lost his faith and couldn't get over not believing." To the priest, the vicar's words are like molten lead poured on an open wound.

### **Encounters With Transcendent Reality**

It is in the context of spiritual desolation in the outer and inner worlds that the priest has various encounters with grace, the Christian term for transcendent reality. The fruits of these encounters - peace, joy, equanimity, and especially compassion - authenticate their spiritual origin. As William James points out, those who have received grace share a single fundamental and identical spirit of piety and

charity. In all times and in all places, James says, the saint is characterized by "an inner state which before all things is one of love and humility, of infinite confidence in God, and of severity for one's self, accompanied with tenderness for others."<sup>7</sup>

In the priest's first encounter with grace, he witnesses the conversion of the countess, a proud woman estranged from her family and from God because she cannot reconcile herself to the loss of her infant son years before. The priest had gone to the chateau on behalf of Chantal, the countess's daughter, who had confided to the priest her great distress at her father's plan to send her away, so that he can better pursue his affair with her governess. The priest acts with great trepidation, knowing that the Church may regard his action as undue interference in the spiritual life of a member of the Church, but his compassion for Chantal prompts him to take the risk.

At first, the countess dismisses the priest's fears that Chantal may commit suicide and accuses him of being over dramatic. She declares that she does not care about her husband's infidelities, having lived with them for years, and asks why Chantal should not suffer as she has suffered. The priest chides her for her coldness of heart and warns her of the eternal consequences of her pride. But the countess becomes more and more defiant, finally asserting that God no longer matters to her, that she hates God for taking her son from her.



Now understanding the depths of the mother's pain over the loss of her child, the priest rises from his chair and utters an impassioned speech on how it was in compassion for human suffering that God came to earth and was crucified. Feeling that her pain has been recognized, the countess then quietly says, "What must I say?" And the priest answers, "Say 'Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.'" He is no longer the pastor calling a wayward member of his flock to task, but he has become the shepherd guiding the wounded sheep into the comfort of the fold.

But the countess is not so quickly meek. She tells the priest that if there were "in this world or the other, some place free from God, if it meant suffering a death every second, eternally, she would carry her son to that place and she would say to God, "Do your worst and crush us!" She expects the priest to consider her statement monstrous, but he tells her that he too has felt that way at times, later writing in his journal that, at that moment, Dr. Delbende's image was before him.

Strengthened by the feeling that her suffering is shared, the countess throws the medallion containing the picture of her dead son into the fire, in symbolic detachment from his memory. Then, in a sudden gesture of submission, she falls to her knees and covers her face with her hands. It is as if a stone wall has fallen, the hardness in her heart has broken down, and a flood has washed away all her pride and defiance. Struck by the sense of the presence of God in the room, the priest can only raise his hand in blessing, a look of wonder on his face. Later, the countess

sends a letter to the priest thanking him for leading her out of despair into peace. "All is well," she writes. "I didn't believe resignation was possible and, in fact, it's not resignation that's come over me. I'm not resigned. I'm happy. I desire nothing."

At key moments during this verbal duel between the priest and the countess, the sound of the raking is heard, and twice the camera shifts to the park outside the window, showing the gardener raking leaves. This shift from highly charged moments to the ordinary world outside the room serves to ground the mystical in everyday reality. As Paul Schrader has pointed out, in the definitive text on Bresson's transcendental techniques, the disparity between this surface reality and the mystical events taking place behind the surface intensifies the emotional impact of the film.<sup>8</sup>

A short time after witnessing the countess's conversion, the priest has a kind of religious epiphany, a sudden perception of the meaning of his life in relationship to God. It happens during a conversation with the Vicar of Torcy. After the vicar has made his usual criticisms of the priest - he does not dress properly, his diet is a disgrace, and he does not pray enough - the vicar begins to explain what he thinks is his rather fanciful idea that every priest receives his vocation at that point in his spiritual past when he met Jesus in the Garden of Olives. The priest suddenly realizes that he has often returned to that olive grove, though he has never before been consciously aware of it. He later writes in his journal, "Suddenly Our Lord

had shown me grace and revealed through my old master's lips that nothing could tear me from my chosen place in eternity. I was a prisoner of the Holy Agony.” Tears rolling down his cheeks unawares are the only outward sign of the cataclysmic impact of this epiphany on the priest's inner world. Grounding the epiphany in reality, as well as intensifying the emotional impact of this scene, the priest blows his nose noisily into a handkerchief, which makes him appear somewhat ridiculous. A dog barks in the background.

The vicar tries to continue in the old mode, demanding impatiently to know what the matter is, and then begins to harangue the priest on "the foolish way" he had dealt with the countess. "Melodrama!" the vicar says contemptuously. The vicar repeats some of the accusations that Chantal, who had been listening outside the window, has made against the priest. However, the priest can no longer be intimidated. He has found his center. He can stand his ground now, no matter what criticism anyone makes of him, and he realizes with a kind of joy that he need explain nothing. In the end, the vicar senses the priest's inner transformation, and in a reversal of their usual roles, the vicar asks for the priest's blessing.

The third mystical experience dramatized in this film is the priest's vision of the Blessed Virgin. The priest had become ill during a sick call, after two female relatives of the invalid had given him a poisoned drink. (This was a joke the women liked to play on visitors, Seraphita later tells him.) Continuing on his rounds as

darkness falls, he becomes so ill that he faints several times. The great fear that he will be found lying half-dead (yet another scandal) makes him repeatedly try to struggle to his feet. The image of the Virgin is constantly before him, as the words of the Vicar of Torcy reverberate in his head. "She was of course the mother of mankind," the vicar had said, "but she was also the daughter. The ancient world, the world before grace, rocked her in its cradle. For centuries, its old hands protected this wondrous little girl, this queen of the angels, which she still is to this day."

Feeling himself standing upright, though he can still feel the frozen earth against his cheek, the priest sees the hands of "a sublime creature," which would appear and then disappear. As his pain grows more extreme, he takes one of the hands into his. "It was the hand of a poor child already roughened by hard work and washing." The priest awakens to find himself lying on straw in the Dumouchel's barn and Seraphita, who has brought a basin of water taken from the pond, tenderly cleaning his face.

At one level, it was, of course, Seraphita's hand that led the priest to safety, when he imagined that he was holding the Virgin's hand. But at a deeper level, the hand was surely that of the Virgin. The belief that the mother of Jesus was always a virgin and that she was bodily assumed into Heaven is a matter of religious

dogma. However, the belief that compassion, which the Virgin personifies, is a manifestation of the divine is a matter of individual experience.

The priest's final illumination takes place immediately before his death in the apartment of his friend from seminary days, Louis Dufrety. Realizing that he is seriously ill, the priest had gone to a nearby city to see a specialist, where he learned that he has stomach cancer and only a short time to live. Before returning to Ambricourt, the priest decides to look up Dufrety, whom the priest believes to be on a leave of absence from the ministry because of illness. When the priest sees a sign outside Dufrety's apartment announcing Dufrety as a drug salesman, however, he realizes that Dufrety has left the priesthood.

The priest's horror deepens upon entering Dufrety's disorderly apartment, where baskets and straw-filled crates are piled up in the corners of the room, and bottles and pitchers and dirty eating utensils litter the table tops. As Dufrety talks about his intellectual interests and the business activities he pursues, he says, only out of a sense of obligation to his woman companion, the priest becomes more and more ill and finally loses consciousness. When he awakes, he finds himself alone, lying on the bare mattress of a narrow camp-bed. In panic he cries out, "I don't want to die here. Get me out of here, anywhere!"

When Dufrety's woman companion comes to sit beside his bed, though, he becomes reconciled to his fate. In a soft, gentle voice she comforts the priest, serving as yet another incarnation of the compassionate feminine. As Keith Reader points out, "Her voice, her language, cradle the dying priest at his moment of greatest need."<sup>9</sup> The woman apologizes for the disarray of the apartment, explaining that she has to leave for work before dawn to work as a cleaning woman. Further, she does not feel well, alluding to the fact that she has contracted tuberculosis from Dufrety. In response to the priest's question, she says that she had refused to marry Dufrety because should he wish to return to the priesthood, she did not want to be in the way. As she talks, she shows herself to be not the fallen woman who has committed the grievous sin of distracting a priest from his duty, as the Church would regard her, but a woman who has achieved saintliness through her compassion for others.

It is in this context that the priest has a final vision. Sitting on a chair, wrapped in a tattered blanket, the priest looks up at something out of the range of the camera, with an expression of awe upon his face. What he sees, we are never told, but this vision seems to inspire the priest's last words: "What does it matter? All is grace."

At the end of the film, the Vicar of Torcy begins to read from Dufrety's letter announcing the priest's death. The shadow of a white cross is superimposed

on a close-up of the letter. Gradually, the shadow becomes darker and darker and the letter fainter and fainter, until only the cross remains, symbolizing the priest's transcendence of earthly suffering. Apart from its historical meaning in Christianity, the cross is an archetypal symbol of the conjunction of the world of the spirit (the vertical piece) with the world of phenomena (the horizontal piece).<sup>10</sup> As the white signpost announcing Ambricourt had filled the screen at the beginning of the film, the shadow of the white cross fills the screen at the end. The film has come full circle.

### **Impact of Film**

For many viewers, Bresson surely achieves his objective of making them "feel the presence of God in ordinary life." The film effects in them a kind of conversion experience, making them aware of the presence of the transcendent, which they may or may not call "God," behind everyday reality. As a result, they may experience some of the transformative effects typical of the genuine spiritual experience, especially a greater tenderness for their fellow-creatures and for themselves. For these viewers, *Diary of a Country Priest* is one of those rare films that has a profound impact on their lives for a long time afterwards.

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<sup>1</sup> André Bazin, "Le Journal d'une curé de campagne and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson," in *James Quandt*, ed., Robert Bresson. (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1998), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, trans. Pamela Morris (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1983; originally published in France in 1937).

<sup>3</sup> William Bush, *Georges Bernanos* ( New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1969), p. 142.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Schrader, "Robert Bresson, Possibly," in *Quandt*, p. 487.

<sup>5</sup> Phillip Lopate, "Films as Spiritual Life," *Film Comment*, 27 November-December, 1991, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> André Bazin notes the parallels between the priest's two fainting fits during the night, the fall in the mud, and the vomitings of wine and blood with the falls of Jesus, the Blood of the Passion, the sponge with vinegar on it, and the defiling spittle. In addition, he says, "for the veil of Veronica we have the cloth of Sérahita; then finally the death in the attic--a Golgotha with even a good and a bad thief." "Le Journal," p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Modern Library, 1902), p. 255.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 61-86.

<sup>9</sup> Keith Reader, "Journal d'une curé de campagne," *Robert Bresson* ( Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1962, p. 66.