

Of Gods and Men

Feature films that seriously treat religion--or faith--are rare: the subject is too risky, too ethereal, too personal to assure entertainment, which is, after all, the purpose of most movies. This doesn't mean that they cannot succeed, as dramatic inspiration if not exactly entertainment. Witness, the splendid new French film "Of Gods and Men" (*Des Hommes et des Dieux*).

The narrative follows a true story: the fate of a small group of French Cistercian monks in 1996 living in the monastery of Tibhirine outside an Algerian village during that country's grim civil war. The monks, long established in the community and interwoven into its humble life, become—as Christians—targets of an Islamic terrorist band and are first threatened, then rounded up to be slaughtered (seven of the remaining monks die, two escape).

But "Of Gods and Men"—while it does depict the threat to the group—focuses much more fully on the daily life of the men. The threat is that of a terrorist cell led by Ali Fayattia (Farid Larbi), which, at one point, bursts into the serenity of the monastery seeking medical assistance, knowing that one of the monks, Brother Luc (an unimpeachable Michael Lonsdale) is a healer. While that invasion is headed off, the group senses that their time is short, and they must consider whether to flee--to go home and survive--or to remain--and probably die.

The decision is wrenching, and some of the men clearly desire to leave. The leader of the group, Brother Christian (a beatific Lambert Wilson), applies no pressure on his small flock but rather asks each to plumb the depths of his soul to make his own decision. In the end, the weight of their communal experience, their commitment to their faith--and the practical fact that the monastic life defines their very being—leads them all to stay. Their end comes swiftly as the local fanatics raid the monastery again and, rudely, march the monks off. The film, demure to the end, does not show us their grisly assassination but fades to white.

The film is as contemplative, as restrained as the days of the monks themselves. The director, Xavier Beauvois, gives us both precise and sedate vignettes of the men at work, study (including the Koran), and, especially, prayer. He contrasts these with more fluid scenes of them interacting, without cowl and habit, in the town, doing good works, selling honey in the market, dispensing medical help—even offering lovelorn advice. We catch the rhythms of what a monastery commitment demands: giving oneself over to God and to man.

Those rhythms are exquisitely captured by Beauvois and his crew--without being precious. Though potentially claustrophobic, the movie avoids it by the offhand tours around the monastery which define its space and make the moviegoer identify with the monks even more. Most striking are the periodic conferences of the monks around a simple, bare table, discussing their daily business, and, eventually, their fate. The sequences, shot straight on (though interspersed with delicate close-ups), recall 15th century Renaissance paintings, spare images that bestow a timeless resonance.

Tellingly, the music of "Of God and Men" comes mostly from the monks themselves, chanting in French, not as some heavenly chorus but in the actors' own

firm voices. Recorded music does, however, make one indelible appearance. After the contingent has finally decided to remain at Tibhirine, they gather for a modest evening meal. Brother Luc, at 80, more worldly than the others, brings out two bottles of the best wine, and, wordlessly, turns on the cassette player. The last strains of "Swan Lake" cascade over the scene as the monks eat and reflect. It's a Last Supper that breaks the heart.

(The film is rated "PG-13" and runs 120 minutes.)

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