

By the Grace of God

Regular moviegoers will remember the Oscar-winning “Spotlight” (2015), a superb chronicle of investigative journalism revealing a heinous history of sexual abuse among Catholic priests in Boston and elsewhere. While hardly a cheery subject, the film provided a riveting, suspenseful narrative with justified retribution at its end. Now, from a different angle, we have a French film, “By the Grace of God,” which turns a recent case of similar abuse into another grim but compelling story.

This tale is told just as convincingly but from a different optic: the once-abused children fight back decades later as thoughtful yet dogged searchers for justice, for themselves and their compatriots. It is labeled “a fiction but based upon fact.”

The film begins in June 2014 in Lyon, when Alexandre Guérin (Melvil Poupaud), abused when he was a boy of 12, is moved to confront the priest who molested him, Father Bernard Preynat (Bernard Verley), by writing to the head of the city’s diocese, Cardinal Philippe Barbarin (François Marthouret). Unsatisfied with the church’s response, he files to investigate the priest. A separate victim, François Debord (Denis Ménochet) hears of the case, remembers his own abuse from the same priest and resolves to lead a campaign against the Church itself. Debord, along with another victim, Gilles Perret (Eric Caravaca), mount a Lyon movement “Lift the Burden,” aiming to round up as many child victims as they can. The movement’s growing publicity reaches another wounded figure, Emmanuel Thomassin (Swann Arlaud), who signs up both to confront his old oppressor and to fight the diocese’s cover-up.

This film, investigating the scandal over two years, shows a steady, inexorable momentum, with each phase of the three principals’ experiences played out in a most natural, even restrained, style. Much like “Spotlight,” the film deals with the most sordid of themes yet avoids wallowing in them as standard US commercial output might do. The victim’s vile experiences are recounted but in an unvarnished, and almost chaste, way. The actual acts themselves are delicately represented in unsettling flashbacks that suggest the boys’ initial seductions at various Scout camps.

The true strength of Ozon’s film, besides his superlative writing, lies in his patient directing of his three leads. Alexandre is a calm and cautious man, a father of five but still a believer and fully practicing Catholic. François, a gregarious father of three, quick to laugh and to bristle when offended, has forsaken the church entirely. Emmanuel is the most damaged of the three, a fellow whose personal and sexual life has been thwarted since his abuse and who looks to the movement as a means to redeem his stolen life.

Ozon, known for a range of distinctive dramas (“Swimming Pool,” “Potiche,” “Frantz”), originally intended to make a documentary about the case but shifted his focus and opt for more directorial freedom. Thus, he takes on a “ripped-from-the-headlines” story for the first time and nails it. He achieves it in the underplaying of his scenes, the

distinctive and discreet character of his leads, and the peopling of his story with a large and artless cast, which enriches the film by giving a full sense of the families surrounding these victims. The portrayals of the men's children, wives and lovers, and parents offer up a resonant collection of believable characters, some wonderfully supportive, some befuddled, and some riddled with guilt.

As for being ripped-from-the-headlines: "By the Grace of God" is amazingly up-to-date. Since the film was finished, the actual Cardinal Barbarin was convicted in March 2019 for failing to report Preynat's alleged sex abuse and served a suspended six-month prison sentence. Preynat himself was finally defrocked by the Archdiocese of Lyon just this past July after determining he was guilty of criminal acts on minors. It has been invoked that "the wheels of Justice grind slowly" but they can, sometimes, lead to closure.

(This film has English subtitles and runs 137 minutes. While not formally rated, it clearly merits an "R.")

(October 2019)