

'Of Gods and Men' traces murder and martyrdom

by [Richard Yeakley](#)

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(RNS) The Rev. James Martin has seen a lot of religious movies in his life. But the Jesuit priest and author says a new film has sprung to the top of his list.

Martin calls "Of Gods and Men," a film based on the kidnapping and murder of seven Algerian monks in 1996, "the greatest movie on faith that I have ever seen."

That's high praise from a priest whose cultural acumen has led to a regular gig as chaplain-in-chief to "The Colbert Show," and a stint as theological adviser to an off-Broadway play.

But movie buffs don't have to take Martin's word for it. "Of Gods and Men" garnered top prizes at the Cannes Film Festival in France, and was named the best foreign language film of 2010 by the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures.

The film opened in New York on Feb. 25 and will soon roll out to other venues in nationwide. The movie's website, www.ofgodsandmenmovie.com, has a full list of the location release dates.

In the film, Catholic monks decide to remain in their monastery in violence-torn Algeria and serve their Muslim neighbors, despite strong incentives to flee the country -- not least their personal safety.

"It's the best explication of what martyrdom means I have seen in a film," Martin said. "An average person can find themselves understanding why these monks would give their lives. To convince the viewer of the validity of martyrdom in one movie is miraculous."

The film's French title is "Des hommes et des dieux" and it has subtitles in English. It stars Lambert Wilson, perhaps best known to American audiences for his performances in the "Matrix" trilogy.

The pace of "Of Gods and Men" is intended to draw the audience into the lives of the monks, with long periods of unbroken silence and significant amounts of time dedicated to the monks' distinctive liturgical chants.

Henri Quinson, a French monk, served as an adviser to "Of Gods and Men" and translated the book "The Monks of Tibhirine," by John Kiser, on which the film was loosely based.

Director Xavier Beauvois tried to make the film as true to monastic life and the culture of Algeria as possible, Quinson said. "It is part of the exotic feel to the movie, in fast-paced America," Quinson said.

To help produce this feel, the movie is about 15 percent liturgical chants, Quinson said.

Although the monks decided as a group to stay and serve in Algeria, the film focuses on the individual choices made by each monk that led to the unified decision.

The monks would vote on whether to stay or leave about every six months, said Quinson, who knew four of the monks personally and had been given one monk's prayer book before he left for Algeria.

The film also focuses on the relationship between the Catholic monks and the Muslim neighbors whom they served.

"It was touching how the citizens were not at peace with the missionaries leaving, and said, 'We are the birds on the branch; you are the branches,'" Quinson said.

For Martin, the depiction of how members of religious communities are called to live was powerful. "It made me think about the way I live my life in a religious order, and I wonder if I could be as faithful they were," he said. "I spent the next day thinking about the movie, and the next prayer session praying it about it. That doesn't usually happen."

Quinson said he was surprised by the film's popularity and accolades. His only goal, he said, was to "maybe make a beautiful movie."

"The greatest gift I wish to pass on is an experience of God," Quinson said.