

An Irish cross

By [David Heim](#)

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The Irish film *Calvary*, directed by John Michael McDonagh, is one of the most satisfying portrayals of Christianity and Christian ministry I've seen in a long time. Judging from [his public comments](#), McDonagh is not all that interested in Christian theology, but he is a sure-footed storyteller.

The movie is about a priest in a town near Sligo whose people are mostly contemptuous of priests and the Catholic Church. They think the church is corrupt, its faith absurd, and its ministers fools if not child abusers. They rather delight in scoffing at Father James and pointing out how little influence he has. The local atheist doctor enjoys pointing to the suffering of the innocent and asking: So where is God?

Father James is wise enough to stay mostly silent in the face of such attacks. He knows there is no way to answer that kind of question from that kind of questioner. Occasionally he does toss the question back: Why does it bother you? In such exchanges, Father James is bracingly testy: he is a pastor to sinners, but he doesn't pretend to like them anymore than they pretend to like him.

As Father James stalks through town in his cassock and paces across the windy beaches, he calls to mind the priest in the *Ryan's Daughter* (1970), another film set in western Ireland. But that priest served as the conscience of the community—he wasn't liked, but he was respected. Father James evokes no such regard.

One character's reference to the novelist Georges Bernanos indicates that McDonagh knows his cinematic and literary forerunners. Bernanos's novel *Diary of a Country Priest* was devotedly made into a 1951 movie by Robert Bresson.

Again the contrast is striking: whereas Bernanos's priest is sickly, awkward, and self-doubting, Father James is burly, fearless, reckless, and sarcastic. When a crooked financier with money to burn tries to shock the priest by peeing on his own art collection, James sneers: "You've pissed on everything else, you might as well piss on that." When the same man offers the church a gift of 20,000 Euros, James knows

it is a weak attempt at salving his conscience and says, "Make it 100,000," and then offers a studiedly insincere "Thank you."

Philip Jenkins notes in [his excellent *Century* review](#) that *Calvary* is about a world that has rejected the truth that might save it. But the movie doesn't enforce this insight. One is left to judge for oneself whether Father James is throwing his life away or losing it in order to find it.