

FRIENDLY AND FUN-LOVING ARE NOT ENOUGH

A Theological Critique of the Latest Jesus Film

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The history of the “Seventh Art,” the cinema, is one hundred and seven years old. In 1897, two years after the debut of cinema, the first Jesus films appeared. They were brief—lasting five minutes—very primitive productions that limited their plots to a few scenes of the passion of Jesus. This first genre of cinema, clearly the forerunner of many other film genres, developed rapidly, and became ever more popular. The first major breakthrough was D.W. Griffith’s three and a half hour epic, *Intolerance* (1916), in which one of the four episodes is wholly dedicated to the Jesus story. The uncontested high point of the silent Jesus movies was Cecil B. DeMille’s two and a half hour, monumental *The King of Kings* (1927). In the early sixties, in the full sound and color era, Hollywood produced two more epic Jesus films: in 1961, Nicholas Ray’s *King of Kings*¹ and, four years later, George Stevens’ *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

If these spectacular *vitae Christi* today seem outdated and somewhat embarrassing, the two Jesus musicals released in 1973 are only

¹Ray intended to capitalize on the popularity and fame of the DeMille epic by calling his film *The King of Kings*, but he was sued by DeMille’s producers: Ray conceded, and dropped the article.

slightly less odd and perhaps equally problematic: Norman Jewison's *Jesus Christ Superstar* and David Greene's *Godspell*. There are two scandal films in the Jesus tradition: *Monty Python's The Life of Brian* (1979) and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). The two major classics of the Jesus genre are Italian: Roberto Rossellini's *The Messiah* (1975) and Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977). The universally acclaimed high point of the cinematographic *vita Christi* is also Italian: Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (1964). When it was first released, this last film raised the ire of Catholic film critics and the Vatican: the Church could not accept that a film made by a Marxist-communist and declared homosexual might have religious value. More recently the film has been rather spectacularly rehabilitated by the Church.² In 1997, a young Italian director, Alessandro D'Alatri made a film entitled *I giardini dell'Eden* (The Gardens of Eden) which, in a very honest and respectful way, focuses on the so-called hidden life of Jesus and seeks to understand what his religious formation might have been like.

Film producers continue to sponsor and directors continue to make films about the life of Christ. When the most recent Jesus film was released last year, carrying the rather unoriginal and somewhat presumptuous title, *Jesus*,³ I screened it for three groups of young people, first in two parishes in Rome and then one in Toronto. The first reactions were glowing: "*È un Gesù molto simpatico.... Questo Gesù è amico di tutti.... È bello vedere un Gesù che sa ridere e scherzare....*"⁴ "This

²Pasolini's masterpiece is the only Jesus film appearing in a document prepared by the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for Social Communications, listing the 45 greatest films of all time, published in the prestigious Italian daily, *Corriere della Sera* (26 Feb 1996). To the chagrin and public anger of Zeffirelli, his *Jesus of Nazareth* was omitted from the list.

³The film, an Italian-German-American co-production directed by the American Roger Young, premiered on Italian television in Dec 2001. Since then it has been shown worldwide, and has now been released and is extremely popular on videocassette.

⁴"This Jesus is great.... He is the friend of everyone.... It's nice to see a Jesus who can laugh and fool around."

Jesus is so authentic, and so unjudgemental.... It's refreshing to see Jesus enjoying life.... I like him because he is so different from the Jesus proposed by the Church.”

Evaluating a film about Jesus that has inspired such positive comments behooves me to begin by mentioning some of the merits of this film. The director, Roger Young, is quite respectful of the person of Jesus; he avoids, for example, the pitfalls of excessive psychologizing common to many of the films in the Jesus tradition. The film is very nice, easy and pleasing to watch, it is filmed in a popular style, with capable actors, in North African locations that suggest first-century Palestine. For the viewer of limited religious education, or who does not know anything about Jesus, this film could serve as an introduction to the story of the man who, for us Christians, is the Son of God. The popular appeal of the film is well attested to by the very high audience share it acquired and held for the two evenings of its premiere in Italy.

If *Jesus* pleased television viewers, a more select audience had a very different reaction to the film. A group of forty theology students at the Gregorian University viewed *Jesus* in the context of a course I offer on “The Image of Jesus in Film,” and their reaction, virtually unanimous, was very negative. In this article, I should like to indicate some of my doubts about this popular film. The approach will be scientific-critical, it will take into consideration the style of the film, as well as its content, and the analysis will be done against the background of most of the other films in the Jesus tradition.

The Film's Soap Opera Structure

Perhaps the first thing that strikes one on viewing *Jesus* is its carefully structured plot and its easy-to-follow storyline. The problem, of course, is that this well-structured and smooth dramatic plot is in strong contrast—in fact, in contradiction—with the structure of the four Gospels. The Gospels are not novels, nor theatrical dramas, they are not even narratives in the strict sense. These testimonies of faith have their own particular structure, marked especially by the ellipse:

time is condensed; details that connect one episode to the next are missing; emphasis is placed mostly on the words of Jesus; and often the concrete circumstances of his preaching and miracles are not described.

All of this, of course, does not translate easily into the film medium. In the more than one-hundred years of the cinematic lives of Christ, only one director has had the courage to respect both the text and the style of the Gospel: Pasolini, in his *Gospel*. Roger Young, the director of *Jesus*, chooses the path of least resistance and creates a very loose adaptation of the Gospel in the style of the typical narrative for television, the soap opera. Thus, the structure of the film is characterized by brief, narrative blocks, few longer than three minutes, and each with its own minor dramatic conflict, always resolved in the time of the self-contained block itself. There is a remarkable balance between action and dialogue—no one speaks too much, and certainly Jesus does not preach too much—and the soundtrack serves as a neat and smooth system of punctuation both within narrative blocks and between blocks.

Young exerts great efforts to remove the minimum narrative awkwardness, the least ellipsis, from his film text. He builds smooth and elegant bridges between episodes. He explains and justifies events that, in the Gospel, remain without explanation. For example, in the film, Jesus is a friend of Lazarus, Martha and Mary because, before beginning his public ministry, he worked at their place as an itinerant carpenter; Jesus goes to the wedding at Cana because, we are told earlier by Mary his mother, the groom is his cousin Benjamin.

Another technique developed by Young to render the biblical text more appealing to the general public is to add to the main plot of the film an elaborate series of subplots, overloaded with fictional material which, with their dramatic content—"melodramatic" content would be more accurate—buttress the main plot. Young, for example, includes many episodes of the guerrilla war being waged by Jewish Zealots in order to develop the characters of Barabbas and Judas; he elaborates at length the story of the conversion of Mary of Magdala to the absurd point of having her introduced to Jesus by his

mother: “Jesus, this is my friend Mary.” From the opening of the film, Young dedicates much time to the domestic problems of the weak Herod and to the political problems of the cold and venomous Pontius Pilate and, over several episodes, he develops the romantic interest of Mary of Bethany in Jesus.⁵

In a further parallel to the soap opera, events in *Jesus* are very often developed more for their emotional power than for their fidelity to the biblical text. The most shocking example of this is the episode of the temptations of Jesus, repeated three times in the film, at the beginning, in the middle and in the conclusion. All action, drama and special effects, these temptations are light years away from the profound spiritual significance of the temptations of Jesus in the Gospel. Further, the subtexts of power, conflict and violence that dominate the complicated relationships of Herod, Pilate and Caiaphas from the beginning of the film, become a dangerous distraction from what should be the primary consideration of the film, the story of Jesus.

These manipulations of the biblical text, anything but a “poetic contribution,”⁶ have the disastrous effect of domesticating the text of the Gospel. In the end, Roger Young’s *vita Christi* offers little more than the typical narrative fiction seen everyday on television: good feelings, romantic developments, conflicts, high emotions, some violence and digital special effects. All sense of the transcendent power of the life of Jesus and of the Christ-event is gone.

⁵Young’s version of this fictional relationship is not in the key of scandal, as is that of Scorsese, in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. But the banal quality of the representation—Martha, a classical matchmaker, explains her sister’s situation to Jesus: “Mary is a woman, she needs a man”—offers absolutely nothing new or of interest.

⁶The terminology is that of the film director Franco Zeffirelli, who did a similar operation of fiction in his *Jesus of Nazareth*, but with infinitely greater capacity and infinitely better taste than Roger Young. Franco Zeffirelli, *Il mio Gesù* (Sperling & Kupfer, 1992) 122.

The Tradition of “the Bizarre” Upheld

There are few films in the Jesus tradition which do not include several scenes invented by the director in search of novelty or variety that, he hopes, will please the public. Inevitably, these elements clash terribly with the text and the spirit of the Gospel narratives, and the desire of the director to be original results in bizarre episodes that range from simple, laughable bad taste to clear and dangerous heresies. In *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, for example, Judas Iscariot does not hang himself but leaps into an open fiery furnace in the courtyard of the Temple; in *King of Kings*, the table for the Last Supper is three-winged, in the form of a “Y,” so that, says the director—oblivious to the liturgical anachronism—the Lord can distribute communion to each of the disciples personally. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Scorsese includes an episode of pure *grand guignol*, in which, thanks to special effects, Jesus reaches into his chest and rips out his bleeding heart, offering it to his stunned disciples: it is Scorsese’s bizarre homage to the image of the Sacred Heart in his grandmother’s living room in Brooklyn.

The director of *Jesus* does not resist the temptation to develop some of his own original and bizarre concepts. As has already been said, he submits Jesus to three episodes of temptation: in the opening of the film, Jesus has a nightmare-temptation that anticipates the later classical scene; then in that later scene, actually more bizarre than classical, Young represents Satan as a seductive woman who then is digitally transsexualized into an equally seductive man; and finally, during the agony in the garden, there is the final temptation, which repeats elements from the previous episodes.

The day after the Sermon on the Mount, an episode filmed in the style of the television talk show, and in the same spectacular mountain-and-lake scenery of that episode, Young represents the call of the twelve apostles as if it were a university graduation ceremony or the selection of contestants for a quiz show on television. Jesus, on the spectacular natural stage created by the amphitheater-hillside, calls the apostles one by one. At the call, each stands up, receives the

applause of the people around him (Levi-Matthew, the former tax collector, gets hisses and boos), and then proceeds to join Jesus on stage. When the last apostle is called, the group on stage is reminiscent more of a championship sports team with its coach, than of the nascent Church. In the first part of the film, Jesus humiliates Judas by obliging him to retribute to the poor the money he has collected from them, thirty pieces of silver, that Judas then throws at a group of poor people shouting, "Here's a gift from the Messiah." Clearly, Young wants to establish very precisely Judas's motivation for his subsequent betrayal of Jesus in exchange for thirty pieces of silver. But the episode is entirely artificial, banal and unnecessary.

The director of *Jesus* does not resist the temptation to use digital special effects: the result, at least in one instance, is a most bizarre scene, to which even the young people who liked the film so much, reacted with laughter. At the end of the episode of the baptism of Jesus, which Young extends over two days, and at the moment of the epiphany of God, the sun shifts from its position in the sky, descends as a many-pointed star in a zig-zag pattern toward Jesus, stops dramatically in front of him and then enters his chest. The effect is as kitschy and vulgar as it is inexplicable and superfluous.

Since Roger Young includes so many digital special effects in his film, a brief digression concerning the inappropriateness of such effects in a film with religious content—be it a life of Jesus or a life of one of the saints—might be helpful at this point. In recent years, the technology of digital electronics applied to the cinema art has made it possible to represent literally anything on screen: the dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park* (1993), the "live" appearance of John F. Kennedy in *Forrest Gump* (1994), the nightmare phantom city of *The Matrix* (1999), the martial arts as unearthly ballet in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). After almost ten years of viewing such effects in cinema and now almost daily on television, today's audience on the one hand expects such effects and, on the other hand, has become somewhat jaded to their impact, recognizing them immediately as special effects generated by engineers in the electronics laboratory. The audience marvels at these representations of *virtual* reality, while recog-

nizing implicitly or explicitly that they are not representations of *actual* reality.

This is not particularly a problem when the virtual reality represented is Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet on the prow of the *Titanic* (1997), or Russell Crowe facing vicious tigers in a packed Roman Colosseum in *Gladiator* (2000), but it becomes a serious problem—theologically, and pastorally—when techniques of virtual reality are used in a Jesus film to represent the miracles of Jesus or the moments when Jesus' divine nature is manifested: the epiphany of God at his baptism, the transfiguration, and especially the resurrection. The miracles, real events expressing God's mercy and the Kingdom in Jesus, are perceived by most of the movie-going public as virtual events, confected in the laboratories of the Hollywood dream factories. The resurrection—which, for the believing Christian, is the absolutely real turning point in human history, the absolutely real inbreaking of life and hope for the whole world and for all time—becomes a visual trick, to be discussed as the fruit of the skill of a computer engineer while eating the post-cinema pizza. When digital “virtual reality” techniques are employed to “recreate on screen” and so, materially, the great mysteries of the Christian faith, these mysteries are diminished, vitiated, violated. The holy mystery of God and of God's love for the world, expressed in the mystery of the Word Incarnate in Jesus who is the Christ, the Messiah, is rendered immanent and thus emptied, tragically, of its real transcendent significance for a world and for human beings who desperately need to experience that mystery in their lives.

Who is Livio?

There is no doubt that the most insidious invention of Roger Young is the character of Livio. A totally fictitious Roman citizen, Livio appears thirteen times in the film, and thus becomes one of its dominant figures: in some occasions he is in the presence of Jesus, but most of the time he associates with Pontius Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas. The director presents Livio as “Caesar's historian... his spy,”

and the man understands better than Pilate the political-religious situation in Palestine, and so serves as Pilate's advisor. Furthermore, Livio dominates Herod—it is Livio rather than Salome who demands the head of John the Baptist “on a silver platter”—and manipulates Caiaphas. This clever association of an entirely fictitious figure with three historical-biblical characters is an insidious operation because, in the mind of the typical spectator, Livio thus becomes an authentic Gospel figure.

The role of this entirely fictitious character becomes crucial during the passion. When Jesus is facing Herod, it is Livio who accuses: “He threatens the nation, he encourages rebellion... he proclaims himself king.” When Jesus is presented to the crowd by Pilate, it is Livio who incites all to demand the liberation of Barabbas and, on Calvary, when Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” Livio responds with a smirking statement that is as violent and cruel as it is vulgar: “We know exactly what we're doing, Messiah, we're killing you.”

It is absolutely clear that Young creates the fictional character of Livio and then inserts him repeatedly in the text of his film in order to remove from the Jewish religious authorities the responsibility for the death of Jesus. There is a precedent for this particular operation of cinematographic fiction in *Jesus of Nazareth*. In Zeffirelli's film, the one responsible for the death of Jesus is the fictional Zerah, a Jew associated with the assembly of priests. In *Jesus*, by making Livio a Roman and an anti-Semite, Young creates a much larger distance between the responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus and the Jewish authorities, and thus a greater falsification of the Gospel text.

Homages to Other Jesus Films

In the film art, as in all the arts, it is more than licit for a director to make a reference to another film which, for example, represents themes parallel to those of his film. The homage is a brief reference, a single shot, the name of a character or an exchange of dialogue. It is transparent and has two purposes: it underlines the thematic cor-

respondence between the two films, and it recognizes the quality and importance of the film to which the reference is made.

It is easy to imagine that in a recent film on the life of Jesus, the director might wish to pay homage to one or more films in the long tradition of this genre. In fact, Roger Young repeatedly makes references to other Jesus films; however, they are not at all brief citations, but rather extended elements in his film, the design of which comes from other Jesus films. This procedure, which results in a kind of collage or pastiche typical of the postmodern style, is problematic especially because the elements that Young chooses to imitate come from the most limited films of the Jesus tradition and they are chosen not because they are crucial to an authentic portrait of the Gospel Jesus but rather for a variety of motives which, at the very least, are questionable in a film about Jesus.

In the opening of his film, for example, Young is inspired by two films in the tradition. The first spectacular film about Jesus, *The King of Kings*, made by the great showman-impresario Cecil B. DeMille, opens with an episode that is entirely fictitious. A scantily-clad Mary Magdalene, rich courtesan and fiancée of Judas, leaves a lavish reception at her luxurious villa to go reclaim her "man" from the negative influence of "that young preacher from Nazareth"; when, in a chariot pulled by four zebras, she comes into the presence of Jesus, seven demons spontaneously leave her body (thanks to primitive special effects) and she undergoes a sudden and dramatic conversion. DeMille, not very trusting of the Gospel text, intends to guarantee the attention of the viewing public with this dramatic and sexy (for 1927, at least) sequence. Nicolas Ray begins his *King of Kings* with a prologue which ostensibly represents the pre-history of the life of Jesus and establishes the yearning of the Jewish people for a Messiah; in fact, the sequence, a series of most violent massacres of Jewish Zealots by Roman soldiers, has the same *panem et circenses* purpose as the soft-porn opening of *The King of Kings*.

Roger Young, like DeMille and Ray, opts for the "sex and violence" and fiction approach for the opening of his film. The first thirty minutes of *Jesus* are a montage of brief scenes which mix to-

gether a few vaguely biblical elements—e.g., Mary at the Nazareth well, Joseph and Jesus at their carpentry work—with elements of a violent political-military nature: the arrival in Jerusalem of Pilate and the Roman army and their violation of the Temple; the first clashes between Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas; and even an attack by Roman soldiers on the home of Joseph and Mary where the soldiers seek payment of the tribute. Then Young adds a few dashes of sentimentalism: Mary of Bethany, supported by both Lazarus and Martha, falls in love with Jesus, and Joseph dies in the arms of Jesus. Young has little real faith in the biblical text and, like his predecessors, he inserts this extrabiblical material to tease, capture and hold the attention of the public.

Young is obviously inspired by Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* as can be seen in the overall pleasant tone of his film, in its high quality photography, in the carefully designed costumes and sets, and in the undebatable beauty of its actors and actresses. But the most specific Zeffirellian influence on Young's film, as has already been pointed out, is his invention of the non-biblical, non-historical character, Livio.

Young is beholden to Scorsese's scandal film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, for several elements of his film. The violent nightmare of Jesus with which he opens his film comes directly from *Last Temptation*. After *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which includes women among the disciples of Jesus, Scorsese further elaborates on this extra-biblical element by giving women a dominant role in his film: in the temptations, in the unbalanced sentimental life of Jesus, at the Last Supper, and in the infamous "Last Temptation" sequence. Even if the director of *Jesus* removes from his women the least breath of scandal—fitting and just, and a good business move, in a film that aspires to world-wide distribution⁷—he still gives them a dominant role: one

⁷It was reported to me that at a pre-premiere screening of the film for clergy in Rome, the film's producer, Ettore Bernabei, said that his people had worked most assiduously to ensure that in their film there would be nothing that would offend either Catholics or Protestants or Jews or Moslems.

of the identities of Satan is feminine, and Mary of Nazareth, the two sisters of Lazarus and Mary of Magdala follow Jesus everywhere. Yet, a curious fact: in a moment of rare Gospel orthodoxy—but of narrative inconsistency—Young does not admit women to the Last Supper.

Further, if Scorsese interrupts the agony of his Jesus on the cross with the extended sequence of the “Last Temptation,” Young does exactly the same thing during Jesus’ agony in the garden, inserting there the anti-evangelical final visit of the tempter. The episode, which proposes in Jesus the fear of dying in vain, contradicts the biblical and theological fact: in the Gospel, Jesus is afraid of dying, but he understands and accepts with full conviction the salvific-redemptive significance of his death.

To the recent film, *I giardini dell’Eden* by Alessandro D’Alatri, *Jesus* owes the dimension of relevancy that characterizes the various episodes of the temptations, namely, a Jesus who is shown the various social and economic problems of the future world, fruit of human violence against other human beings. To the colossal *King of Kings*, *Jesus* owes the strange and anti-evangelical portrait of Mary of Nazareth as a prescient know-it-all: she knows more than Jesus does about his mission, and she acts as spiritual director both to him, to the disciples and to Mary of Magdala. *King of Kings* also inspires Young’s bizarre version of the Sermon on the Mount: in both films, Jesus walks through the crowd doing a kind of soft catechesis through a far too informal dialogue with his interlocutors; in Roger Young’s more recent version, with its humorous repartee and laughing, one has the impression of watching a television talk show.

One of the Jesus films to which Young does not make reference is *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, and it is easy to understand why. Pasolini’s film is challenging, filmed in a difficult and demanding anti-spectacular, anti-Hollywood style, a film requiring attention and commitment, and its Jesus is strong, eloquent, demanding, totally coherent and without compromise in calling people to conversion and to the right path, in his tough critique of the Jewish religious establishment, and in his message of the love of God and of

the salvation that God offers to humanity. It is symptomatic of the deep malaise that afflicts Young's film that he avoids the minimum reference to Pasolini's *Gospel*.

The other film to which Young avoids making reference is Rossellini's *The Messiah*, a fact rendered ironical by the repeated, and rather exaggerated, use of the term "Messiah" in Young's film. Rossellini's film is made in a sober, didactic style, and from the very beginning Jesus is the good Master who, through his words and actions, guides and teaches with moral power and conviction. Roger Young in his film does not want to teach, and he certainly does not want his Jesus to be a wise and effective teacher. His film is primarily one of light entertainment, developed and structured for a television or videocassette audience, a film which only pretends to be a serious *vita Christi* with the purpose of teaching and edifying.

This Jesus is the Messiah?

Roger Young's life of Christ suffers much from the many manipulations of the biblical text that the director perpetrates. They have the effect of creating a soap-opera narrative very popular with the public but void of any correspondence to the text or to the spirit of the Gospel. The film suffers even more from the portrait of Jesus that Young paints, one that makes him into little more than a pale reflection of the Jesus of the Gospel.

In the Gospel, Jesus is the Messiah, and Roger Young uses the word "Messiah" many times and in the mouths of many people, but it is precisely the exaggerated use of the word that is the problem, the exaggerated but also informal and even humorous use. When the first two disciples insist that Jesus is the Messiah, he laughs about the idea, saying, "Are you sure about that?" Later, when Simon, following the instructions of Jesus, prepares his boat for the miraculous catch, he teases Jesus, saying "Come aboard, Messiah," and then, commenting on the recent miracle at Cana, he asks ironically if Jesus intends to transform the waters of the lake into wine. In the end, even Jesus is laughing.

Even though the word “Messiah” is often heard in *Jesus*, the only specific significance it is given is that of the Zealots: Messiah as a political-military leader who is to liberate the people of Israel from the domination of the Romans. Strangely enough, this seems also to be the model of Messiah held by Mary and Joseph. Even if Jesus, at times, denies any interest in a political-military leadership role, he never proposes in any specific way what his role will be and what kind of Messiah he intends to be. He makes statements like “I have to go my own way” and “My life does not belong to me,” and he speaks all too vaguely of bringing “freedom” to the people.

The Limited Preaching of Jesus

Beyond the above-quoted, vaguely New Age banalities, and in clear contrast to the Jesus of the Gospel, Young’s protagonist never speaks of the great prophets of the Old Testament who foretold and prefigured the Messiah. He never speaks of Moses and John the Baptist and clearly, he never identifies himself with them; he does not speak as a prophet and he does not give the slightest hint of having to die as a prophet. Conspicuously absent from the film is the passage from the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus reads from the book of Isaiah in the synagogue—“The Spirit of the Lord is on me...” (Is 61:1-2)—and then announces that “This text is being fulfilled today even as you are listening” (Lk 4:21).

The Jesus of Young’s film does not speak of the law of Moses, of the new law, or of himself as the fulfillment of the law. Not even once does he make a radical demand on his disciples and his listeners. He does not come into conflict with the doctors of the law regarding his way of living the Sabbath, or regarding their hypocritical way of imposing impossible burdens on the people, and he certainly never condemns the Pharisees.

Surprisingly, and in strong contrast to the Jesus characters in the *Gospel* of Pasolini and *The Messiah* of Rossellini, Roger Young limits the preaching of his Jesus to a few phrases from the beatitudes—

certainly not those tough ones—pronounced almost jokingly in an informal dialogue with the crowd, and then to the opening words of one of the parables: “The kingdom of heaven is like a hidden treasure...” This Jesus does not speak of prayer and he proposes no moral teaching; he does not challenge the rich young man, and he makes no hard statements about the fate of the rich.

Young’s Jesus pronounces the word “sin” only once in the whole film. He does not indicate sinfulness as the universal human condition from which humankind needs to be saved. He does not speak of the justice of God, he calls no one to responsible moral action and to conversion, and he gives no sign of having the mission of saving humankind from their sinfulness. Among his few miracles, he does not perform one in which physical healing is associated with the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus’ Miracles as Signs of the Kingdom?

In his film, Young directly represents four miracles of Jesus, but he obfuscates the spiritual power of these prophetic actions which, in the Gospels, demonstrate the love and mercy of God and are signs of the Kingdom of God already present and active in Jesus. During the wedding at Cana, for example, Young’s Jesus resists for the longest time the aggressive insistence of his mother that he perform the miracle, and when he finally capitulates to her wishes, he does so not as a gesture of mercy towards the newlyweds, but rather to convince the first two disciples—he invited them along to the feast—that he is the Messiah. The spiritual power of the miraculous catch of fish, as has already been mentioned, is diminished by the joking atmosphere that surrounds it. The healing of the legs of a young man, accompanied by magical gestures—Jesus inexplicably covers his legs with a cloth—and the incomprehensible screams of the subject, reflects more an atmosphere of circus than the thaumaturgical intervention of a loving and merciful God.

The great miracle of the raising of Lazarus is reduced in signifi-

cance by a whole series of elements that distract the spectator from the profound theological significance of this action of Jesus: the Grand Opera *mise-en-scene*, clearly in imitation of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*; the psychological-affective dynamic between Jesus and Martha and Mary; the silly drum rolls on the soundtrack—these in fact accompany all the miracles—creating a circus atmosphere; and the terrified look on the face of Jesus after the miracle, that recalls the unbalanced Jesus of Scorsese's film. Roger Young makes references to three other miracles—the exorcism of a little girl, performed at a distance by Jesus, the multiplication of loaves and fish, and the healing of a leper—but the fact that they are not represented directly, and that the last two miracles are reported to Pilate by Livio, drastically diminishes their spiritual power and meaning.

The Interiority of Jesus and His Relationship with the Father

Young's Jesus does not give the minimal sign of having an interior life. The few times he seems to reflect briefly on himself, moments limited to the initial part of his public life, he is in fact lamenting to his mother and making jokes—in bad taste—about his being the Messiah. This Jesus never goes off to a lonely place to reflect, and he never prays: the protagonist of Pasolini's film, and the Jesus of D'Alatri's *I giardini dell'Eden*, are the only Jesus characters in the *vita Christi* tradition who pray.

In the Jesus of the Gospel, the critical dimension that distinguishes his interior life and his mission from the very beginning is the relationship he enjoys with the Father. In the protagonist of *Jesus*, this rapport with the Father does not exist. In the entire film, which lasts three hours, Jesus refers to the Father very few times, and these are formal references, as if Jesus were reading an already-prepared script. His contact with the Father is not something felt and lived; it is certainly not the profound existential reality that gives form, specificity and significance to his life. This last point is particularly evident when Mary his mother says to Jesus, "Your father would be

proud of you.” Jesus with an ironic smile, retorts, “Which one?” and not to be outdone in the witty repartee department, Mary answers, “Both.” The relationship of Jesus with God the Father becomes a clever witticism, a joke.

If Young’s Jesus does not demonstrate any authentic rapport with his Father, neither does he demonstrate anything of the experience of being authentically the Son of this Father. He does speak once of the “Good News” but he certainly does not identify himself with his “Good News.” Furthermore, even when he does speak of his mission, he speaks of it in the most general and universal terms. He says, for example, to the tempter, that God has sent him “to nourish human beings with freedom.”

The director does not permit his protagonist to reveal God as the Father of all human beings. He does not have him preach the love of the Father, the justice of the Father, the mercy of the Father. He does not have him tell the parable of the prodigal son, nor any other parable that might represent the rapport between God the Father and Jesus, and between God the Father and human beings. This Jesus does not announce the Kingdom of God and, perhaps the most surprising omission of the entire film, he does not teach the “Our Father.”

A Passion without Passion

Strangely, in a film that so easily slips into sentimentalism, there is very little talk about love in *Jesus*. Jesus does not propose the great commandment of love as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, and he does not demonstrate, either in his rudimentary preaching or in his behavior, how this commandment is to be lived. Young does not permit his Jesus, at the end of his life, to have the minimal awareness that the experience that he is about to live is a direct consequence of his commitment of salvific love in favor of humankind. In this film, Jesus does not make a conscious and decisive turn towards Jerusalem; there is none of the more decisive and controversial preaching that is witnessed in the Gospel; and Jesus does not go

freely to his death as an act of redeeming love for humankind, for the forgiveness of sins and for human salvation.

If, in the Gospels, the episode of the Last Supper is the high point of the life and mission of Jesus, an experience he lives with full awareness and total commitment, the Last Supper staged by Young is emptied of all authentic significance. Inexplicably reduced to the words of institution, plus a reference to Judas's betrayal and a vague comment of Jesus about the resurrection, this Last Supper is not a Jewish ritual meal.⁸ It includes neither a priestly prayer nor any didactic actions and words of Jesus, as in the Gospel of John.

The director of the film also seems intent on giving little real meaning to what follows the Last Supper. The prayer of Jesus in the garden is brusquely interrupted by the digital-technology last temptation, and the way of the cross, by a violent fight between Peter and Judas along the road. Finally, the spiritual power of the crucifixion is completely vitiated by the truly bizarre choice of the location for the episode: Calvary is not a hill but rather a valley between two mountains, and directly behind the cross of Jesus, Young digitally constructs a massive multi-arched aqueduct which joins the two mountains and totally dominates the scene. When Jesus pronounces his final words, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23:46), the central span of the aqueduct explodes and a spectacular cascade of water tumbles down.

The Resurrection

In the long tradition of the Jesus film, the episode of the resurrection is always the most problematic. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, there is no resurrection; in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, it is suggested by a strange photographic effect at the end of the film; in the American

⁸Other than his two visits to the Temple, the Jesus of this film is barely Jewish. Young makes no effort—as does Zeffirelli in his film—to represent an authentic Hebrew environment.

Jesus colossals of the 1960s, the resurrection is always represented in spectacular ways that are, in the end, unsatisfactory. The one exception to the rule is *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, in which the resurrection has a great dramatic and spiritual power. The director of *Jesus*, on the other hand, opts for the popular approach: a brief sentimental encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the garden, an endless discussion in the upper room between the ever-skeptical Thomas and everyone else. Jesus appears, brings about Thomas' conversion and proclaims a rather vague universal mission to all: "Go now into the world and preach what you have heard."

In the Gospels, the universal mission is strong: in Matthew, Jesus announces the authority that he has been given and sends the disciples to teach all nations, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:16-20); in Mark, Jesus associates this baptism with salvation and says "whoever does not believe will be condemned" and he promises exceptional powers to the one who believes (Mk 16:15-18); in Luke, Jesus, quoting Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms, explains the redemptive-salvific meaning of his death and resurrection, and promises the Holy Spirit (Lk 24:44-49); and in John, Jesus confers the Holy Spirit and gives to his disciples the mission to forgive sins (Jn 20:21-24). In contrast to these, the soft little speech of the resurrected Lord in *Jesus* is terribly superficial and totally lacking in authentic Gospel significance.

Even for the conclusion of his film, Roger Young chooses the popular approach. Wanting to create a resurrected Jesus with universal relevance especially for young people today, Young replaces the ascension of Jesus to heaven with the descent of Jesus—again thanks to digital effects—into today's port of Valetta, Malta. There, dressed in jeans and a sporty shirt, Jesus salutes the camera with a wry smile, and then meets a group of young people of various ages and ethnic backgrounds,⁹ and full of joy they skip along the wharf, with sailboats and yachts in the background, while on the soundtrack, the

⁹One of my students commented ironically: "Jesus meets the 'United Colors of Benetton.'"

American LeAnn Rimes sings the sentimental-popular love song, "I Believe in You." It is a happy ending that pleases some people, but in opting for sentimental-popular pseudo-relevance, the director has totally lost the authentic relevance of the resurrected Christ for the world of today, a world that desperately needs to hear the "Good News" of the Gospel proclaimed with moral, spiritual and artistic power.

Conclusion

It might seem harsh and inappropriate to criticize so strongly a film about Jesus. But I feel duty bound to do this, precisely because this film *Jesus* is so popular, because it has been seen and will be seen by so many people. I want to point out with clarity the weaknesses of the film, because when it is seen by the television audience or presented in parishes by catechists or youth group leaders who, at times, lack a critical eye with regard to a film so well designed and constructed and publicized, this film might cause to be accepted without question a false Jesus, thus distracting attention from the authentic Jesus Christ, human being, Messiah, Son of God, and infinitely more interesting, stimulating and attractive than the hunky, sympathetic and light-hearted Jesus of this film, who in the final analysis is a superficial, banal and empty figure.