



Doubt

“Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone.” Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman) speaks these words in a sermon to his flock in the Bronx at the very start of *Doubt*. In doing so he sets up the extremes that the movie will explore: doubt and certainty. Little does he know he is really preaching to himself.

Doubt was one of the best films of 2008, certainly one of the most thought-provoking. John Shanley takes his Pulitzer Prize winning stage play, rewrites it for the big screen, and then takes the helm as director. It is clear that this was birthed as a play. The movie plays out mostly with conversation; there is little action. But that is part of the mystique.

The screenplay is excellent and the script gives meaty dialogue to the cast. And the cast is outstanding. With Hoffman, Meryl Streep, Amy Adams and Viola Davis as the four main characters, the film is built on a firm foundation. So good is this quartet that all four were nominated for Oscars (although none won).

It is 1964. Kennedy is dead and the winds of change are blowing across the country and even in the Catholic Church. Sister Aloysius (Streep) is the head nun and principal at St. Nicholas parochial school. Iron-fisted, she is a disciplinarian who lives strictly by the rules. Modernity is an enemy in her eyes. Father Flynn, on the other hand, is a liberal priest who wants to see change come to the church. Compassionate and caring, he has embraced modernity.

One scene highlights the differences between these two adversaries, Flynn and Aloysius,

by juxtaposing their dinners. In the school, the nuns sit silently around the dinner table drinking milk and eating a bland meal with small bites. You can almost sense the tension, as the other nuns look to Sister Aloysius and her non-verbal communications. With subtle gestures she conveys her disdain. In contrast, Father Flynn eats a succulent roast rowdily with two other priests. Drinking beer and wine, smoking and laughing together, theirs is a picture of life appreciated and accepted.

Enter Donald Miller, the school's first black student, friendless and conspicuous, Father Flynn makes him an altar boy. Acting as a protector of sorts, he takes special interest in this one student.

When Sister Aloysius tells the other nuns to keep an eye open for unusual behavior she sets the tone for what follows. Sister James (Adams) sees something and reports it to Aloysius, who immediately believes Father Flynn is acting improperly. With the anachronistic backdrop of 21st century hindsight, we can see the portentous emerging crisis: pedophilia in the priesthood.

Sister Aloysius' confrontation of Father Flynn with Sister James present is the declaration of war. Flynn denies any involvement and declares

his innocence. “You haven’t the slightest proof of anything!” Sister Aloysius replies, “But I have my certainty.”

In this trio of characters, Father Flynn seems to have some struggles with doubt. His is a very human character, flawed but faithful. Sister Aloysius has certainty despite lack of hard evidence. Sister James has her faith: “I don’t think Father Flynn did anything wrong,” she says to Sister Aloysius who retorts caustically, “You just want things to be resolved so you have simplicity back.” The innocence and naivety of the younger nun contrasts with the elder’s experience and cynicism.

At the center of the situation, Donald Miller is lost in the ensuing political struggle. Sister James wants to avoid conflict and get back to her untroubled life. Sister Aloysius ostensibly wants to protect him as one of the children under her

care, but really wants to get Father Flynn fired. Father Flynn seems to be a likeable priest who genuinely cares for his flock. And then there’s Miller’s mother (Davis). In only two scenes, the first is an extended conversation with Sister Aloysius. There she makes it clear that life is not black and white. To her, compromise, even when inexpressible sin is involved, is sometimes necessary. She clearly has her son’s best interest at heart but is willing to turn a blind eye, and does not want to get caught up in Sister Aloysius’ personal vendetta.

What makes *Doubt* so intriguing is that we really don’t know what happened. With no actual portrayal of the events hinted at, we have to listen to people’s observations and their interpretations. This is so much like life. We often don’t know all the facts but still form an opinion and take action based on that opinion. In fact, of all the cast, director Shanley only told Hoffman the truth of



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Father Flynn's actions, whether guilty or not. No one else on set knew.

Opinion can easily translate into gossip. In *Doubt*, Sister Aloysius starts a smear campaign against Father Flynn. Gossip is a deadly sin that cannot easily be undone. Once spoken it acts like a virus that propagates beyond control. The book of Proverbs describes the results of gossip: secrets betrayed (11:13); friendship destroyed (16:28); quarrels incited (26:20). Other books in the Bible give warnings against gossip (Rom. 1:29, 1 Tim. 5:13). Paul says, "I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder" (2 Cor. 12:20). We need to heed these warnings. Father Flynn himself preaches a sermon in his self-defense addressing the insidious nature of gossip.

Another issue raised in this film is intolerance. Correctly characterizing Sister Aloysius as intolerant, Father Flynn jots the word down in his pocket diary so he can remember to build a sermon around it. Certainly most of us would view intolerance as a negative quality. Yet when does tolerance become codependence or complicity? Does Aloysius' intolerance of things modern color her view of Flynn? Should she have waited for evidence, or would that have been too late?

Fundamentally, though, *Doubt* focuses on the impact and consequences of doubt. When suspicions arise, how do we deal with them? How should we deal with them? In America, we hold that a person is innocent until proven guilty. Do we have the right to be certain without proof? Moreover, are we tolerant and open-minded enough to listen to others' opinions in a genuine search for truth? Our system of justice and even fairness would demand that we cannot convict on the basis of our own innate sense of certainty, regardless of who we are. Even biblically a person could not be convicted apart from the evidence of two witnesses (Deut. 17:6); one alone was insufficient (Deut. 19:15). And a person who was not a witness, who simply "felt certain" a person was

guilty, would cut no mustard in a court of law.

Doubt itself causes self-questioning. This is highlighted in the two nuns. Both are plagued with worries and dreams. Once doubt takes hold, it can emotionally cripple a person. It can lead to guilt and remorse and worse. Doubt caused Peter to sink into the lake when he lost his perspective and his faith, as he walked on water to be with Jesus (Matt. 14:31). Perhaps that is why Sister Aloysius grips so firmly to her "certainty." She does not want to think about doubt.

But doubt can also be positive. It can help us see the holes in our beliefs. It can cause us to further explore and investigate to seek truth. Sometimes, our doubts and unbelief can lead us to cry out to our God, "help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

Doubt is the flip-side of faith. Faith is only as good as its object. Blind faith is no better than unfounded certainty. Inquisitive doubt is a healthy side-kick to faith. It will tend to strengthen that faith. But unquestioning doubt will lead to a weakening of any faith present. In Jesus we can have a rock-solid faith that can stand up to the probing yet sincere questions of doubt. Where are you on the faith-doubt-certainty spectrum?

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