

Wonder

Volume: 2 Number: 2 Theme: **Preparing for Great Lent**

Title: ***Chocolate and The Great Fast*** Author: **Harry William Reineke**

Editor's Note: The Movie "Chocolat", which this article examines in detail, is rated PG-13 for some scenes of sensuality and violence.

The movie "Chocolat" is set in a very small village called Lansequenet-sous-Tannes in 1959 France, but the town is not unlike what I've always imagined a small American town to look like in the same era. It is a town centered around their small church (which is, in this case, Roman Catholic). The villagers are very traditional, and everyone knows what goes on, who comes in, who leaves, and what is expected of each of them.

The film opens as the Comte de Reynaud, the mayor who we soon learn is a "real Comte" unlike that fictional "Comte de Monte Cristo," is greeting all the villagers as they enter the village church for Sunday Mass. When Pere Henri, the young village priest, arises to the pulpit for the homily, we learn that it is the holy season of Lent "a time of abstinence...of reflection...not a time to stand alone, because we are not alone, it is a time for Christ. Next we meet Vianne Rocher, and her daughter Anouk/Anoushka (along with the imaginary kangaroo Pontoufle), drifters from a long line of drifters. They rent out a patisserie and an apartment. When the Rochers meet the Comte de Reynaud, he lays out the expectations of villagers, and the relationship that will form is laid out very quickly, as one of tension, as the Comte de Reynaud is a very pious man, and doesn't like the idea of opening a shop for sweets during Lent. The interest of all the villagers is piqued by Vianne's shop, the Chocolaterie Maya, opening up. Reluctantly, the villagers begin to enter her shop, and a few even begin to try and purchase items, but the strength of the Lenten idea causes some to shy away. Slowly, they begin to open up, that is, most of them.

Vianne is our main character, and I've already established her as a wanderer. Her specialty is chocolate, and she has a knack for choosing peoples favorites, which is the tool she uses to break down walls with many of the townsfolk. When she first arrives, she is the subject of gossip. The people are even banned from visiting her chocolaterie, which we see causes great tension, with the Comte predicting that she will be out of business by Easter. She begins to make friends with Josephine Muscat, a woman who is in an abusive relationship. Vianne also gets her landlady to begin working with the landlady's estranged grandson, having them rebuild a relationship that seems to have fallen some years before. Vianne shelters Josephine from her abusive husband, Serge, while Serge confides in the mayor. Slowly, Vianne brings the town together in ways they were never together before, even through the scandal that her chocolaterie begets within the town. Both Vianne and Anouk make friends among the gypsies that live along the riverbank, and slowly the townspeople begin to live in a true harmony, not an imaginary harmony based on fear, that the film describes as "tranquilité". But we still haven't examined our other main character.

The mayor seems to be the most scandalized by the introduction of the new chocolaterie, but we begin to pick up hints that his piety is simply for the surface. He seems to very strictly follow the code of the Lenten fast, but he gives himself over to gossip, and we very quickly begin to wonder

if his wife has left him (the villagers reference her being in Switzerland, or Italy, and the stories he tells seem to conflict). The mayor is often seen turning away food all together, clearly abiding in a very extreme to the letter of the law, while missing the point altogether. He sees morality as resisting the winds of change while ignoring the fact that change is inevitable; even further, he sees the protection and teaching of morality as his job, not the priests, even to the point of adding “just a revision, here and there” to a homily which turns out to be a complete rewriting. Toward the end of the film, we see the Comte on his knees before the altar praying to God about his dedication to fasting, but through his emotion the real reason comes out. “I feel lost, I don’t know what to do. Tell me what to do.” FINALLY, we rejoice that he has bowed his will before Christ! Only, not so fast, the Comte looks down and finds in his hand a knife, which he sees and instruction to destroy the chocolate shop, and boy does he! In the midst of chopping up chocolate sculptures, he tastes this delectable treat and begins eating it. He is spotted the next morning in the window by Pere Henri, and awoken by Vianne and Pere Henri, where it is revealed to be Easter Sunday. In the church, we see him sitting near the back, obviously cut into by the words of the impromptu sermon that Pere Henri is preaching. He even begins to see things in a more balanced light, and walks around at the end with a new spring in his step.

Pere Henri’s sermon points out that we “can’t go around measuring our goodness by what we don’t do...and who we exclude... We’ve got to measure [it] by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include.” These are great words to remember during the Fast. Even though we as Orthodox Christians give up much during this holy time, we also give of ourselves, praying, and giving alms, attending services, and most importantly, continuing to love and forgive our neighbor for everything. Just as Vianne brought her town together, the Fast, when done in the right spirit, brings us together. Our spirit of repentance is to put aside that which brings enmity between us and God, and between us and our neighbor, and between us and ourselves. Let us not be like the Comte in the beginning of the film, killing ourselves with an attempt to be holy, but let us love ourselves, our neighbors, and God, enough to know that we get strength not on our own, but from Christ, who died for us, and who feeds us with the Eucharist at every Divine Liturgy. Let us take comfort in the Fast, and look to the light of Pascha with great joy.

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Discussion Questions:

Is Piety always a positive and Christian quality? In what circumstance wouldn't it be?

Is being scandalized a Christian response to a situation? What guidance does scripture give on this subject?

What is morality from our Church's perspective? Why is it necessary and where does it come from?