

There be dragons



RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was a bitter, bloody and cruel engagement between the Spanish left and right. It profoundly divided Spain at the time and for a number of decades afterward. The divisions, fueled by deep hatreds, were ideological, with the Nacionales, the religious, authoritarian right fighting the republican, socialist, anarchist or communist left. It pitted sons against their fathers and brothers against brothers. Roland Joffé, the agnostic British director, whom we remember by his Oscar-winning movie, “The Mission,” or by “The Killing Fields” or “City of Joy,” chose the Spanish Civil War as the setting for his newest film, “There Be Dragons,” which will begin to be shown in local theaters this month.

The title is taken from old medieval maps, which marked the unknown or uncharted areas as “Hic Sunt Dracones” or “There Be Dragons.” It seemed appropriate to Joffé because the film would take him into the uncharted waters of saintliness and the bitter history of a country that wasn’t his own. It is also a metaphor for a theme that runs throughout the movie: the need to face up to hate and rejection, or the thirst for vengeance or justice.

The plot is structured around the experiences, in the context of the Spanish Civil War, of two childhood friends whose lives bifurcate in late adolescence, one going into the seminary and becoming a priest, the other (Manolo) into a relaxed lifestyle and the family business. When the Civil War envelops them, Manolo takes up murder to avenge the murder of his father by the republicans and becomes an undercover agent for the Nacionales; his friend doesn’t take sides, but is persecuted as a priest by the republicans. Eventually, Manolo comes up against his friend, who is trying to get away from Spain. The denouement shows us that forgiveness is the way to escape conflict and violence.

To set the movie deeper into the historical context, Joffé chose as the priest the young Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, who later would go on to establish Opus Dei. He came upon Josemaría through a videotape he saw in South America, which impressed Joffé as to his wisdom and sincerity. When his friends heard he was involving

Escrivá in the movie, they came down hard on him, Da Vinci Code style. “Opus Dei is a fascist organization,” one of them said. “They have slaughtered thousands of people,” said another. Others charged that Opus Dei “controls” the Church; that “hundreds” of cardinals and “thousands” of bishops are members; that their membership is kept secret, and so on.

Here is Joffé’s response to the litany of preposterous charges:

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“I hate to break this to you, but there isn’t really such a thing as Opus Dei—in the sense of some kind of society with an opinion about something. I investigated Opus Dei, and I began to find a very important thing: Opus Dei is a group of people who come together to work on their spiritual life, to work on their relationship with God. But Opus Dei doesn’t have a point of view, other than to say that what you believe you must stand up for—and you must take responsibility for your choices.

“Beyond that, Opus Dei doesn’t tell people what to think and, in some sense, that is very beautiful. It also is shocking to a culture that is used to large political and ideological groups. Here, you have a group that shares some things, but not everything. We know that when you belong to a party, most of the time, you are being told to toe the party line, in one way or another. There isn’t an Opus Dei party line.

“That means some people won’t like the conservative

members of Opus Dei they meet, or they may not like the liberal members of Opus Dei they meet. I can assure you that all those sorts of opinions do exist inside Opus Dei.

“In a way, it was Josemaría’s very ‘controversiality’ that made him interesting. I don’t think an uncontroversial saint is a very good idea. I’m not quite sure how you could be an uncontroversial

saint, because...if you are a saint, that means you stand for something.

“What did Josemaría stand for? The key to the saint’s principles was found in his times—particularly the political upheaval of the Spanish Civil War, an era of ‘mass production of politics.’ Josemaría’s resistance to the ideological pressures of his era was an act of supreme courage and grace.

“Each saint is asked a different question by his period of history, and that question becomes the central thing of his life. When the world was splitting up ideologically, this man fought very hard for the idea of freedom of choice, but the importance of choice—the importance of owning every choice you make in your life. Making your choices in such a way that you feel proud of them.

“Suddenly, and maybe for the first time in human civilization, we were required to be the Model T of your particular ideology. Freedom of choice wasn’t the issue. The question was: Will you be this kind of human being, acting in this kind of way? One began to see this sort of division occurring in Spain in an extraordinary way—a precedent for what was going to happen in Europe in the following years.

“[I]n this moment of time, there comes this young man who resists that pressure, who says, among many profound things, ‘Own your own acts, and never allow your decision-making to dehumanize others.’ That was a powerful thing to do at the time. I admired that message about him. I hope I could be that kind of human being.

“Though science may try to tell us we are some result of chemicals and electrical impulses, and that we have no free will, what should we do? At the very worst, we have ‘free won’t’—which means we have decisions about doing something besides not to do it. For all your lives, there will be choice, and there is something about us human beings that is capable of exercising that choice.

“When you think about a saint, you aren’t really thinking about a sort of continuum. You are thinking about lots of acts—lots of times when different things could have been chosen, but certain things were.

“So, I felt, with Josemaría’s life, what I was looking at was a series of choices. If you imagine those like beads on a necklace, you could say that after many choices have been made, this man was a saint. But it was each individual act that counts.” ■



Rafael Hernández Colón is a three-term (12-year) former governor of Puerto Rico (1973-76 and 1985-92). He served as Justice secretary (1965-67) and Senate president (1969-72). He was president of the Popular Democratic Party for 19 years. Comments on this article are welcome at caribbeanbusiness.pr. Go to [Sign in](#) link on the homepage. Emails also may be sent to column@caribbeanbusiness.com.