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For Greater Glory: The True Story of Cristiada

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For Greater Glory: The True Story of Cristiada
DIRECTOR DEAN WRIGHT. DOS CORAZONES FILMS, NEWLAND FILMS, ARC ENTERTAINMENT. 2012. 145 MIN.

It may surprise many to know that a religious war was fought in North America in the 1920s. In the wake of the Mexican Revolution and the Constitution of 1917, a government-led anti-clerical movement tried to contain the sprawling power of the Catholic Church, suspending holy services, burning icons, banishing priests from political involvement, and executing those who continued to provide the sacraments. Those who defied the new laws called themselves Cristeros, and Dean Wright’s film, For Greater Glory, tells the story of their civilian crusades during the Cristero Revolt of 1926-1929.

The movie follows the uprising, training, and marshalling of Cristero forces in preparation for a series of bloody campaigns against the Mexican army. Before recruiting retired general, Enrique Gorostieta (Andy García), the group is a rag-tag bunch. To gain the confidence of his fractured army of civilians, Gorostieta confronts the rebels’ ill-placed confidence, observing that they lack three hallmarks of military stratagem: central command, decent weaponry, and unhindered ammunition supplies.

Other leaders include Catholic priest and warrior Father Vega (Santiago Cabrera), and rogue freedom fighter Victoriano “El Catorce” Ramírez (Oscar Isaac), who don’t want to serve under one chief, be it Gorostieta, or any other. But, they must set aside their reservations if they are to stand against the Mexican army. Weighing their criticisms of the General’s leadership style against his successful track record in battle, the Cristeros choose to serve under him, allowing Gorostieta to teach them how to effectively strike against superior forces and supply lines, with a resiliently precise strategy.

Gorostieta is pitted against his former ally and leader, President Plutarco Elías Calles (Rubén Blades). Torn by his loyalty to country, Gorostieta must balance his ideals and patriotism against worries for the safety of his wife, Tulita (Eva Longoria), and their family. Calles is portrayed as a ruthless man, willing to stop at nothing to crush the rebellion. Ordering a crackdown, Calles’ administration does its best to undermine the power of the rebels by planting false stories about the mass execution of civilians and through shock and brutality, hanging crucified bodies from trees and telegraph poles, and killing children suspected of collaborating.

The Mexican leader is hemmed in on all sides, as peace at home and world opinion are threatened. Their neighbor to the north, the United States, is concerned (as throughout the Mexican Revolution) with protecting oil and economic interests, and harbors suspicions of Bolshevik forces in Mexico. U.S. President Calvin Coolidge (Bruce McGill) wants a diplomatic resolution to the war, and dispatches Secretary of State Morrow (Bruce Greenwood) to meet with President Calles. The Cristeros have a formidable enemy in Calles and his regime, and Calles has a lot to protect, but isn’t backing down. In one of their clandestine meetings, Calles tells Morrow, “In my experience as a revolutionary, a small group of determined men can bring down a government.”

The bulk of the film follows the Cristeros in their war against government forces, who battle not only the guerilla army but also public sentiment. The Cristero women abet the war by smuggling ammunition to their ranks, and even children are willing to fight for the cause, a practice continued from the Revolution of 1910, where children also participated in the struggle and were killed. By slaughtering children who join the opposition, the government has taken the wrong side of justice. The film seems eager to show the system is corrupt when love and common sense are absent from the rule of law.

Yet the movie seems divided on Gorostieta’s stance on faith and practice. A self-described “military man” and atheist, Gorostieta initially accepts the job of leading the rebel army for money and his broad belief in the exigency of religious freedoms. First he encourages the renouncing of religious illusions, saying “Belief will not save you in battle,” but later extols his men to fight the war as a kind
of crusade. “We will fight them with dignity and honor,” he tells the Cristeros, concluding in a fiery speech that, “By the grace of God, we will be victorious.” Only there seems to be an imbalance where the rebels’ motives and actions are concerned. The Cristeros seem to all suffer as martyrs, while the government is portrayed as a ruthless group of schemers who have no problem with mass executions and the slaughter of children. Surely, war brings out the hell in everyone, and we wonder what was going through the minds of both sides as they fought over a religion founded by “the prince of peace.”

Helmed by first-time director Dean Wright, a visual effects producer who has worked on The Lord of the Rings (Peter Jackson, 2004) and The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (Andrew Adamson, 2002), the movie looks great and has some wonderful moments, but these are impaired by a choppy, episodic approach to story-telling and a protracted running time. The film seems to want to be an epic, yet fractures the narrative, end distancing the viewer from the sweep and power of what Village Voice critic Nick Pinkerton calls in his review an “unmined vein of history for its subject matter.” That said, performances are solid and overall effective against the weighty material. Peter O’Toole plays a small role as one of the priests who is executed, and García and others seem up to the task of playing these belatedly venerated characters. The movie contains some fine action and night sequences, which are agreeably photographed and visually-imagined by cinematographer Eduardo Martínez Solares, production designer Salvador Parra, and costume designer María Estela Fernández, who make the wide-screen landscapes, sets, and clothing-styles of Mexico come alive with color, shadow, and light.

Religion and secularization are potent topics in today’s world, where nations and peoples debate the balance between faith and freedom. In a country like the U.S., where the themes of freedom of speech and the separation of church and state are extolled as birthrights and virtues, the movie has some valuable moments, evoking a forgotten sense of the freedom fighter, who is ensconced in our collective imagination of nation-building. As a film, For Greater Glory can be useful in the classroom as a launching point for discussions on religion and the state, and the individual’s responsibility to honor his or her moral compass, as well as to enhance studies of the Mexican Revolution. For those inclined toward faith and the dialogue of spirituality, the movie shares a sense of wonder that Catholics in Mexico had been willing to die for their faith, and provokes a healthy debate on the ideal place of spirituality and human rights in modern society. And the greatest glory can perhaps be found in balance.

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Film and Media Review Editor

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