

A BRIEF ON FILMMAKING
For Catholic Parishes Who Just Might Want To Make A Movie
(I mean, Baptists are doing it.)

Stanley D. Williams, Ph.D.

Dear Fr. Mike:

It was good to talk with you by phone yesterday afternoon. In response to your question about how films are made and how much they cost, I've written a description below.

I'm asked this type of question a fair number of times each year, so I'm going to post it on one or more of my websites. I've written a lot about film, but never such an capsulation of the production process. As of yet, I've not found a Catholic parish to act on the process, and, like the Sherwood Baptist Church, continue to touch the world from Albany, Georgia with their films like *FACING THE GIANTS* and *FIREPROOF*. With a HUGE volunteer effort of perhaps every parishioner, they've managed to produce two very good theatrical movies that have made back their budget plus, with cash outlays of less than \$1,000,000. Very impressive. Now, where is the Catholic equivalent? Perhaps the following will help spur such an effort.

So, here is a very brief discussion of the strategic processes and costs involved in making films, and how your particular idea of a story fits.

(Links about my activity as a filmmaker, producer, writer, and Catholic distributor can be found below my signature.)

Your story about how a pharmacist comes to understand God's Will and Natural Law about artificial contraception could be told in what we call a "short" — a movie less than 40 minutes in length. In order to get it aired on non-commercial television, which most Christian television stations and networks are, you'd best target its length for 28 minutes, so it can be used in 1/2-hour time slots. It can also be distributed, of course, on DVD by a variety of supporters.

A "feature film" is defined as something longer than 60 minutes. Films we see in theaters are typically no shorter than 90 minutes, and a few are as long as 3 hours, with the 120-min length, or slightly less, best suited for local cinemas where two screenings can be scheduled in a single evening. To take your story idea and develop it into such a longer film would require the addition of dramatic elements or sub plots. Such subplots, for a film of any length to be successful, require that every story line be about one thing at a psychological or spiritual level, although at the physical level they may appear to be about entirely different things. This is the subject of my Hollywood screenplay structure book *THE MORAL PREMISE: Harnessing Virtue and Vice for Box Office Success* (link below). So, a longer film can be about the same themes and issues, with the explicit story you pitched to me being one of them. It could, for instance at the psychological-

spiritual level, be about how one cannot confront natural law and win.

There's a well-known Hollywood film that touches on these themes. It won critical acclaim although its performance at the box office was marginal because it was rated (hard) R. The film is *MAGNOLIA* (1999, Paul Thomas Anderson). It's a morality play, essentially, where the world is portrayed by a bunch of immoral characters who all suffer the consequences of their decisions. The one character that comes out unscathed is a lapsed Catholic-Christian who sincerely tries to be Christian in the midst of the horrific sub-plots. I think there are seven parallel story lines in *MAGNOLIA*.

Now, I'm not suggesting that your movie should be R-rated or as complex as *MAGNOLIA*. But, if you want your story to appeal to a broader and secular audience you have to develop a screenplay that goes considerably beyond the story you pitched to me. I would love to see such a story developed that could embrace and challenge the larger public space with a pro-life, miraculous sensibility that explored the human condition and celebrated the unchangeable facts of natural law and grace. (c.f. *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE*)

You reasonably told me, however, that you wanted to simply target Christian-Churched families with the message that contraception isn't a good idea. You told me the "grace" side of that story. But there are probably a few other angles that could be explored, like the medical issues of the pill (and other devices) becoming abortifacients, and the increased risk of certain types of cancers. And then I heard last night from another Catholic apologist that whereas typical families that practice artificial contraception have high divorce rates (50%), those families that practice NPF have extremely low divorce rates (3%).

But, if you keep the movie small, it obviously becomes much less expensive, and there's a greater chance of it being shown on Christian television. (I have relationships with most of the major Christian television networks and get my shows aired regularly, so I know something about that.) Also the shorter film can more easily fit into parish meetings or events at conferences. The longer film could not be used so easily. Of course, I suspect, that the people attending small group meetings in parishes are not your intended audience, that is, the Catholics using artificial contraception are not bothering coming to Bible studies, prayer groups, or catechism classes. [This gets me onto one of my bully pulpits about Faith Formation in Catholic parishes. I think we go about FAITH FORMATION ineffectively when there are common methods used by Evangelicals which Catholics refuse to adopt out of prejudice or tradition (and that's with a lower case "t"). See my SWC Films link and the link on the home page about BEST PRACTICES OF FAITH FORMATION.]

All of this begs the question, why make a film that only the "choir" is going to see, and further suggests that the longer, more engaging film for secular audiences would more likely be seen by Catholics on the Pill who would never come watch the film at the parish. Longer films are more expensive, more risky, et al, but then also have the

chance of getting to a larger and more strategically important audience with a convincing message.

DISTRIBUTION CHOICES

So far I've hinted that there are three types of films in which your story might find a distribution home. And with films, like so many other things (including Catholicism), to be successful you have to start with the END in mind. In the movie business the issue is how is the film going to be distributed. In your case you have three choices:

1. Theatrical (which eventually will find its way to television and DVD)
2. Television (a "made for television movie" that can be released simultaneously on DVD)
3. A short, that goes directly and only to DVD and websites like YouTube.

There's a good natural law rule here that applies: "You can make any decision you want, but you have no control over the consequences." The wider the audience you go after, the greater the risk, financially and in terms of distribution. The smaller the target audience the less risk financially and in terms of distribution.

STEPS IN THE MOVIE MAKING PROCESS

1. Development: During which time the story is developed, the screenplay is written, and distribution and funding are sought. All three of these have to come together at the same time with equal enthusiasm for the project to go forward. This step overlaps with Step 2.

2. Pre-Production: During which cast and crew are attached, available funding is matched to the script (which means the script changes or you have to find more money. Note: you never have to find "less" money), locations are secured, and contracts are written for financing and distribution.

GREEN LIGHT: You've heard the term "GREEN LIGHT" perhaps. There are actually two such moments. The first happens between Step 1 and 2 when the "Deal Memos" (very short list of deal points between stakeholders) are agreed to, and planning begins to make the film. The risk here is that the contracts are not really signed, and everyone is operating on a gentlemen's agreement and some deal points literally scratched on table napkins and newsprint. The second Green Light occurs when all the contracts are signed (usually at midnight or 3 AM) before the morning that production is to begin.

3. Production: The weeks of actually shooting the movie. A 30-minute narrative as you described, could be shot in 5-10 days. A typical theatrical release, well planned out shoot with no special effects, can be shot in 4-12 weeks. The more locations, the more chase scenes, and the more special effects require that the word "weeks" be replaced with "months". Production represents a text-book example of the economic 80/20 rule.

In 20% of the schedule, 80% of the budget is spent.

4. Post-Production/Finishing: These days this step significantly overlaps with Step 3. As each day's "dailies" come in, an editor can be transferring the original footage to a non-linear editing system, often located near the shooting locations, and cutting together scenes -- and as the shoot progresses, a rough cut of the entire film emerges. But weeks or months are required to fine-tune the film after production. Not only are there creative delays in finessing the sequences of shots and scenes, but sound effects (such as the sound of people walking, something called Foley replacement), dialogue (where the original dialogue is obscured by unwanted sounds of the cement mixer just off screen that you didn't plan for—dialogue replacement), and music -- all must be added and mixed.

“A FILM IS MADE THREE TIMES” is something you will hear in the industry. That means a film is made one time when the script is written (by the writer and producer), a second time when the director gets involved and shoots the film, and a third time when the editor adds his or her creativity to the mix. The best films are very collaborative between everyone that works on the project, whether it be a “short” produced by less than a dozen folks, or a “feature” that employs hundreds.

5. Marketing/Distribution -- is something that honestly begins with the first Green Light decision sometime during the end of Step 1, and it doesn't end for years, well after the film is finished. The importance of marketing and distribution is no different in the film industry than it is in any other manufacturing launch. And that importance is never more clear than when you realize that 50% of the over all budget must be dedicated to marketing and distribution. [The 80/20 rules above refers only to the production budget (also known as NEGATIVE COSTS, because film is shot on film-negative stock), not Marketing and Distribution funding.] In less expensive films, more (60-70%) is needed for marketing, and in the most expensive films, less (20-30%) is required.

Because of the dollars involved, the less expensive film actually spends fewer dollars than the larger films. That is, a feature length film that cost \$1 million to make may spend \$2 million in marketing and distribution—200% of the film's over all budget. While a \$100 million in negative costs may require \$30 million in marketing and distribution—30% of the budget. The biggest portion of Marketing and Distribution, in terms of budget, is for the prints or copies of the film (PRINTS) and for advertising (ADs). So this budget is often referred to as the P&A budget, something that a distributor promises to the producer to spend, in exchange for the rights to the film. Now, in a direct to DVD release, the PRINT budget refers to the cost of manufacturing the DVDs and it's packaging. (1,000 DVDs and packaging can be produced for about \$2.50 per copy, and subsequent runs can cost less than \$2 per DVD, and if you make over 10,000 copies at once, obviously the cost decreases further.

ROUGH BUDGETS

Okay, so how much already?

First the budget can be divided, and acquired in chunks related to the 5 steps described above. So, 10% of the budget can be acquired early on just to do script and story development, and see what comes out of that effort. If the script is good enough, then funding can be found for production. Before production begins, you don't have to have all the money for post, but you should have it all in escrow for the shoot.

A movie can be made for nothing, if you have the talent and equipment for free. Some filmmakers have paid for their equipment through other projects and get their friends and family to act or print up advertising. So, while there is a "real" cost, such a filmmaker doesn't have to "find" money to make his story. He writes, directs, shoots, edits and promotes the film himself. He pays for his effort by selling DVDS to everyone that was in the film, and their relatives. If the families are big enough, the filmmaker can cover his costs. (This sarcasm is really not sarcasm but closer to reality.) The reason the filmmaker cannot get anyone beyond his extended family to buy the DVDs, is because those are the only people the film has any value for. Unless you're extremely talented, and headed for Hollywood by virtue of sheer imagination and talent. It has happened that by sheer dumb luck you make such a bad but strange movie it gets picked up and released theatrically. That is what happened with THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT which was made for \$35,000 and grossed worldwide \$248,000,000.

The creative and funding parameters are mind-boggling in number, and coming up with a cost to make a "good" film is not easy, even with an approved script in front of you. While it may be easy for a Production Manager (PM) to breakdown a script and budget it, the PM must make several hundred assumptions about how the film will be made, and who gets paid what. The producer may or may not be able to find the money necessary, and then all sorts of good or crazy decisions are made in order to get the film shot, and then finished.

There's an adage in manufacturing that applies to filmmaking. It goes: "You can have it good, fast, or cheap... pick two." But experience has taught me that that's a misleading statement, it should be: "You can have it good, fast or cheap... pick ONE."

The numbers below, are for straight ahead dramas, with no (or very few) special effects, vehicle chase scenes, or much of anything elaborate, and certainly not gun fights or stunts where the liability insurance alone can bankrupt a budget.

Okay, with all those "qualifications" here are some arena numbers (ballparks are too small):

For a 30 minute narrative film designed for:

-- going straight to DVD, to be shown only in parishes or in Catholic home school families that care only about the message and not the filmmaking craft or cinematic

quality: \$10,000-\$30,000. (Shot on standard definition video cameras, edited in Jake's basement between popcorn binges.)

-- for television and DVDs, to be used for Christian television networks, and DVDs, where a broader audience must buy into the story -- and filmmaking craft is more important: \$100,000 to \$250,000.

-- for theatrical release and a chance at an Oscar for Best Short, and a chance at a mainstream network or cable channel, as well as DVD: \$250,000 to \$1,000,000.

For a 60-90 minute narrative film designed for:

-- for television and a generally broad, mainstream audience: \$750,000 to \$3,000,000. (Shot on film or high-definition (HD) video, but film for best quality)

For a 60-90 minute narrative film designed for:

-- for theatrical release: \$1,500,000 to \$5,000,000. (Shot on film or HD video, but film for best quality)

[I have purposely avoided in this brief, major motion picture efforts which begin at \$7.5 million and average \$20-\$25 million, not counting P&A.]

FIRST STEPS (moving to each successive step requires approval by appropriate stakeholders)

1. Find someone to fund a writer to draft the outline and narrative treatment for the story.
2. Write the screenplay.
3. Attach director and actors.
4. Find production funding
5. Pre-Production Planning
6. Shoot
7. Edit
8. Buy popcorn and watch, and if you like it....
9. Agree to distribution

TAX INCENTIVES AND REBATES:

A final note about budgets. Many states offer production companies major incentives to spend the production money in their state. Georgia offers producers of major theatrical or television projects who spend at least \$500,000 a 30% tax credit. I'm not sure of the details in Georgia; it may be that the 30% credit can only apply to tax liabilities incurred during work in the state. The most aggressive tax incentive in the country (as of this writing) was launched last year by Michigan (where I live and work.) Here, up to 42% of the production costs over (only) \$50,000, will be either credited to the production's tax liability or returned to the produce in the form of a rebate check. This means that in Michigan, using the 40% figure, a \$100,000 project would only cost \$60,000, and a \$1 million dollar expenditure would cost only \$600,000. Obviously, a number of restrictions apply, and there are expenses that do not qualify. So my incentive numbers are high.

Oh, yeah! Did I mention, that the producer will learn a whole new way to pray; and if this is a Catholic effort, it's cool to have Mass on the set everyday before shooting begins.

May God's Providence Guide You,

Stan

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CATHOLIC BLOG - <http://www.CrossingNineveh.blogspot.com>

TRYING TO FLY WITH ONE WING: <http://tryingtoflywithonewing.blogspot.com/>