

Christians in Hollywood: the crucial role of parents and the Church

Camera operator shooting handheld.

Zoe Romanowsky | Sep 15, 2016

Part 2 of Aleteia's conversation with screen writer, Barbara Nicolosi

This is the second installment in Aleteia's two-part interview with Barbara Nicolosi (Part I [here](#)) about Christians in Hollywood. Nicolosi is founder and chair emeritus of Act One, Inc., a nonprofit program to train and mentor Christians for careers as Hollywood writers and executives. She's been a script analyst, production company executive, and consultant on scores of entertainment and media projects and written screenplays for production companies in and beyond Hollywood. Her most recent project is a feature-length adaptation of the memoir *A Severe Mercy* for Origin Entertainment. Her screenplay *Fatima* is scheduled to be shot in late 2016 in Rome. She is currently an Associate Professor in the Honors College at Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California, and will receive her Ph.D. in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University in the UK in February 2017.

A lot has changed for Christians in Hollywood over the past two decades. In [part one of our interview](#), Nicolosi spoke about how Christians have influenced the entertainment industry in the past two decades — the good,

the bad, and the ugly. Today, we discuss what she's learned about teaching young Christians to work as screen writers, her advice to Catholic parents, and what she thinks the Church needs to be doing in Los Angeles.

Zoe Romanowsky: What have you learned about training and teaching storytellers since you cofounded the Act One program?

Barbara Nicolosi: Conspicuous in my bio now is the fact that I teach as an associate professor in the Honors College at Azusa Pacific University, just outside of Los Angeles. I teach in a Great Books program that utilizes the Socratic method. And that is absolutely intentional. One of the things I learned running Act One — and I love my Act One alumni and the people involved — is that it's not enough to take people who are Christian and teach them how to do story. They need a deeper formation than that.

So, we give young people a rigorous writing program and compel them to engage the big ideas, through the Great Books. We help them become aware that modernism is a freak, and help them understand the particular lostness of the people of their time — the confusions that are deeply infused in them by the water we're all swimming in. Then, once they have a good solid foundation, we identify the good writers among them and work with them so that they can learn the basics of visual storytelling. I did an intensive this summer with nine writers — three were our APU students — they have talent and they get it and they're interesting.

Interesting story comes from interesting people. And being Christian by itself doesn't make you interesting. You need to be Christian *and* thoughtful. So when we talk about the Church addressing this problem about the dearth of story-telling, it's not going to be a quick fix.

What does a Christian artist need to succeed today?

The same as they've always needed. Flannery O'Connor, when asked why she wrote, said "because I'm good at it." The thing is, are you talented? Now, everyone should be an artist — that's Joseph Pieper, that we all need to cultivate something that allows us create and focus on details — but people

who are meant to be professional artists to edify the broader culture need to be talented. You might love the stuff and not have talent, but that might mean you're meant to support artists in any number of ways. We need that.

Number two, get great training. Again, this should include training that will enable the artist to be able to diagnose the problems of the modern era and what it is that people are thirsting for and why. It's not enough to just be compassionate or empathetic, you have to actually understand what's wrong. That's not to say you're going to make message art, but you're going to take the whole person you've become and pour it into your art. We've made the mistake in our art in the Church over the last 50 years thinking that the response to secular propaganda is holy or godly propaganda, but the response should be the beautiful, from our worldview.

After you're formed, go to a top school with the best secular instructors. There's a reason the top schools have that reputation, they can offer you better access, exposure to equipment, and successful pedagogy. But you need to be inoculated against the errors you're going to find. I went to Northwestern, which was a top ten film school, although the faculty were completely Marxist; they used to call us the Proletariat! But I put my head down because they had a lot to teach me.

I know that is really scary to a lot of Catholic parents. But one of the things our people haven't figured out in the modern era is that every time we go deeper into the cave to find some kind of safety, we not only don't find it because our families reflect all the errors of the times, but the world just keeps getting worse. We don't have the grace to thrive in a cave somewhere, we have the grace to thrive in this culture, where we're supposed to be the yeast.

There's a reason I'm not teaching at one of what I call the "Catholic Catholic schools." These are schools where Catholic orthodoxy is still important, and where the Great Books are pretty much required reading. I went to all of them over the last two decades and recruited a number of students to come out to Hollywood. I hate to say it, but almost universally they have been

failures at engaging this industry, mainly because they haven't had the energy, creativity, and courage to engage it. Too often they ended up creating a new cave, finding a little group of like-minded people out here and then never producing anything.

So I'm now teaching at the largest non-Catholic Christian university in the country for a reason. About a third of the faculty and students here are Catholics, but the main thing is it's okay to presume truth and faith, *and* they have really good sports and music and a large variety of majors. I've found I have to start with students who aren't afraid of, or don't despise, their own cultural moment.

Let's talk about that for a minute. You give Christian parents a lot to think about when you say that we should be parenting our kids to be disciples of their own time.

If your child has talent — real, artistic talent — then the world desperately needs them and they've been given to this time. That vocation is such a special gift that if they run from it, it will destroy them. So you can't take that kid and tell them be safe, to be a DRE, or a nurse, because you'll just lose them in another way. Maybe they won't stop going to church, but they will lose their joy in life.

Isn't that about parents helping their children to understand that they are meant to be in *this* particular time, that God created them to be here right now?

That's the key. Our kids are meant to shine in this time, they are meant to be the lighthouses for what is going to be a dark time. We are all bemoaning the fact that the Church is going into a time of persecution, like that's something new. I remember studying ecclesiology with a nun back in the late 80s and she said persecution is the fifth mark of the Church. The truth is that persecution is where the Church finds out who she is. Because then we are most closely mirroring Christ. So I would say, "How are you equipping your child to be the lighthouse in the storm of what's coming? If you're teaching

them to look for a lighthouse to shelter under, or if you're teaching them to take their light and go deep into the recess so no one will see it, you're screwing up. We have to teach them to look into the future, clear-eyed and fearless without haughtiness, but certainly without any kind of perverse longing for some kind of safer time. In my favorite book, *The Brothers Karamazov*, there is a great line in which the holy elder Fr. Zossima counsels sensitive-souled Alyosha that he must learn to find joy in suffering. Seems to me that's where Catholic parenting should be geared today.

There still seems to be a lack of a Catholic presence in Hollywood — why?

Well, there are plenty of Catholics here, but most are either not really orthodox, or else not clear about what they're supposed to be doing as disciple artists. Why? Well, as we say in Italian, it's because "the fish stinks from the head," because the formation for Catholic artists and storytellers is not coming from the top. The bishops of the United States should have founded a narrative institute here in Hollywood in 1927 or 1935 or 1946, or how about at the height of the sexual revolution, or during the blockbuster era where it became clear that Hollywood had lost its ability to tell a story? In separating the worlds of faith, virtue, and philosophy from the story telling world, all we had left was spectacle. That was obvious by the late 80s to me. But there has never been any kind of real pastoral approach to the arts and entertainment world.

I gave a speech at Catholic University of America years ago, and at the end they told me it was the last class they were having on screen writing — they were shutting it down. And I thought, "Did I miss the memo? Are movies going away?!" So at the bishops' university there was no emphasis on how important story telling is in a culture and society, and there still isn't. If you had to pick the top 20 film schools in the world, not one Catholic university would be on that list. It's a pastoral sin.

So give me your plan. Let's say the American bishops come to you and say, Barbara, send us your strategic plan for how this could be tackled. What's your outline?

We would need about 100 million dollars to begin. We'd build a center out here in Hollywood, with access to the creative community. It would have several components — a huge one being educational, and another where we highlight works of beauty coming into the culture — not necessary from Christians — and help people understand why it is good. That's another thing I've been decrying for years... just because someone is nice or holy or pro-life doesn't mean we hold their movie up as the goal. This has really derailed us.

The center would have a huge chapel to the Holy Spirit for the arts where everyone from Hollywood is welcome to come and offer their projects for prayer. The center would function as an institute, a think tank, where we're talking to the industry, offering them ideas and guidance and training. We are inviting scholars from around the world to come, upping the conversation about art and story in the culture. We build production space in the center to welcome industry projects. We have a state of the art theater to workshop new plays. We strive to have at least half as many events to serve the industry as the Church of Scientology does. Good grief.

Imagine if the Catholic Church decided to have a missionary movement in the arts and entertainment arena. I would keel over and faint. We have a chaplaincy in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles to the dock workers of San Pedro, but we don't have one to the entertainment industry. How stupid is that? So let's do this thing that is hosted by the Church, open to the world, where we say we love and support you and understand your needs as artists and we're going to assist you in the way we are meant to, which is not by making movies, by the way. The Church is supposed to commission art, not make it. We should be nurturing artists.

That's an incredible dream, but you note yourself that money has dried up for the arts, and that seems to be true everywhere. In lieu of 100 million dollars and the ideal you've laid out, what's the next-best alternative?

I'd like to see individual Catholics – in their families and parishes – embrace the beautiful in art and storytelling again. It should be a dynamic part of every Catholic child's upbringing – writing and literature, music, dance, painting, theater and performance, and of course, movies. Teach them to recognize what is good and beautiful. Teach them to find good everywhere without the fear or haughtiness that too often makes us in the Church look ridiculous before the secular world. Challenge your kids to not just be in this culture, but to be important in this culture. Inspire them to want to give some kind of gift to the future. Chances are, it will be how God saves them.

To read the first part of Aleteia's interview with Barbara Nicolosi, check out [Christians in Hollywood: The good, the bad, and the ugly](#)

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