

DOUBT

Directed by John Patrick Shanley
Produced by Mark Roybal and Scott Rudin
Distributed by Mirimax Pictures
Released in 2008

Two-thirds into *Doubt*, Meryl Streep's character, Sister Aloysius Beauvier, has this to say: "I will do what needs to be done, though I'm damned to Hell." That is quite profound.

It seems that Sister Aloysius is saying that she clings to her convictions about Father Flynn more than she does her faith. Is it because she cherishes the well-being of young Donald Miller more than her soul? Or is it because, now that she's committed to such a momentous accusation, she cannot lose face? Or is she saying that if the Roman Catholic Church will protect a man such as Father Flynn then it is not the true church and she could go to Hell if she *did* leave this matter to the church's leadership (since the leadership can decide where Father Flynn goes but cannot dictate Sister Aloysius's eternal abode)? But she doesn't seem to be dabbling in irony here. She believes the Church's rules of procedure and hierarchy, and for her to oppose the Church (even if the cause is right) could risk her salvation.

She chooses to interpret every action of Father Flynn that is innocuous or strange as further evidence of his crimes. But he denies everything and Donald Miller hasn't admitted to anything. His mother ignores the abuse she merely suspects, concerning herself primarily with the all-too-real abuse inflicted by her husband on their son. All she will say is, A man's got his reasons. She expects little of the human race. She figures that if someone is going to give something, he expects something in return.

But if Sister Aloysius is willing to give her soul for the benefit of this woman's son, isn't Mrs. Miller wrong?

Well, if Sister Aloysius is victorious, Mrs. Miller's son will lose his protector and, apparently, a great teacher. So Sister Aloysius would be hurting Father Flynn and young Donald, provided the emotional and educational benefits accruing to Donald outweigh the psychological damage resulting from the sexual abuse.

But since we're still not sure that said abuse is occurring, Mrs. Miller's arguments carry great force. Nobody loves this boy more than her. And she's saying, Leave it alone.

Perhaps, if Sister Aloysius doesn't really fear for her soul (it's doubtful that she doesn't value it at all) then she is *not* altruistic. If that is the case then what are her reasons? Does she want more power? Does she want to destroy a man whose zeal to update and reform threatens the traditions she values in the Church? Does she, as Sister James believes, merely dislike him because he likes "Frosty The Snowman," long fingernails, and sugar in his tea?

Even though *Doubt* plays out in the structure of the Catholic Church, could the film really be about the death of morality? Father Flynn is taking, and Sister Aloysius is taking. Mrs. Miller is not benefiting for herself, so her philosophy seems to be endorsed by the film. (These ruminations are only vindicated after *Doubt* is done, for when Mrs. Miller first makes her case we are revolted, just like Sister Aloysius.) But there may be another way to approach this question.

There is still Sister James to consider. She has a sunny view of life. Does she believe in Father Flynn because she doesn't want her view of the world or the spotlessness of the Church to be upended? Could she be sacrificing Donald's welfare and letting a pedophile go simply because she doesn't want to be bothered with unpleasant truths? The key to the film may lie with her character. She is the voice of moderation, kindness, and reason; so when she, at the film's end, embraces Sister Aloysius's crusade and admits that she was wrong we are, temporarily, impressed. For if Sister James, the good-hearted skeptic who has kept her ego out of this slug match between Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius, is convinced, then we are inclined to follow. Can't we also see Father Flynn's departure for Baltimore as a guilt-ridden escape? This isn't the first time he's been forced to leave. Shouldn't that make us feel better?

Well, yes, except for the possibility that he was misjudged on those occasions, too. And then, scattering our thoughts like shrapnel scatters flesh, Sister Aloysius's admission breaks forth: "I have doubts!"

We followed our protagonist in her quest for justice. We marveled at her fearlessness. And now our heroine stumbles.

She will not recover. The movie is over. Thus, we are left to wonder if we judged Father Flynn too harshly. Did we coast on Sister Aloysius's certainties?

Did we let her make the hard choices for us?

What is the moral of the story? Should we make bold accusations when we don't have all the facts? If the stakes are high enough does that make it the right thing to do? After all, though the abuse was never proven, Father Flynn can't hurt anyone at the parish again. Or is the human factor (the trust Sister James has in the leadership and humanity in general and the many good things Father Flynn is accomplishing) more important?

In the end, Sister Aloysius has doubt because the fight is over and she is free to ponder these developments calmly. No one admitted anything; certainly she hoped they would. And if her suspicions were right, what has she accomplished? The abuser can now extend his perversions to new victims in Baltimore.

But what recourse was left to her? Could any of us, constrained by the same limitations of our heroine, do any better?

So what of it, then? Should we just leave well-enough alone?