

## OBITER

THE ends, we are always being told, do not justify the means. But after seeing *Le Désert de Pigalle*, the most recent film of Léo Joannon, it is difficult not to suspect that this is the argument employed by the director to justify his particular genre of film-making. Unless, indeed, he does not really mean to justify it at all, but only to sell it: this suggestion is so furiously denied by many competent Catholic critics abroad that one hesitates to persist in it, but the suspicion nevertheless obstinately endures.

However, Joannon's attitude to religion remains ambiguous, to say the least of it. One reads that he was educated by the Jesuits and 'reçu d'eux un christianisme profond, viril et totalitaire', and that his whole aim in making films on religious subjects is to make sure that his audience remain engaged. That may well be so, but the methods he employs are apt to make one feel that the audience remain engaged for dubious reasons. All intelligent Catholics deplore the kind of St-Sulpicien film which reduces religion to favour and to prettiness, removing any element of dilemma, and suggesting that all you have to do is to be good and let who will be clever. Thus, for instance, the French *Sorcier du Ciel* or the popular American *Come to the Stable*. At the opposite pole come films of uncompromising intellectual honesty and limited commercial appeal, such as Bresson's *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* or Paddy Chayevsky's *Marty*. In between, in uneasy equilibrium—or so it seems to English eyes—lies the type of film made by Joannon.

The first to come our way was *Le Défroqué*, that savage, sensational study of a man who deliberately turned his back on the priesthood because of intellectual pride. The two sequences which made one anxious were the by now notorious consecration of the wine in a nightclub, and the inexcusable violence of the climax, with its febrile cross-cutting and the shocking final murder with the crucifix, which was, incidentally, cut from the London version; even the wonderful performance of Pierre Fresnay as the unfrocked Morand failed entirely to neutralize the inherent unwholesomeness of the film's atmosphere. After this came *Le Secret de Soeur Angèle*, which has never reached London at all, but which caused a certain amount of eyebrow-raising when it was shown at the Berlin festival in 1956. This was not so much on account of its theme, which was the interesting one of a nun who is also a qualified doctor, and who takes her own line when involved not only in a murder but also an outbreak of plague: since her Superior

has ordered her to travel south in plain clothes she is also, not surprisingly since she is very personable, exposed to emotional complications as well. This is handled sensibly, but what appeared less forgivable is a sequence in a waterfront brothel which really seemed gratuitous, as much aesthetically as anything else.

With the latest film, one's discomfort is more pronounced, for the subject is even more sensational. Pierre Trabaud, who took the part of the young man in *Le Défroqué* (and is currently playing Cliff in the Paris production of *Look Back in Anger*), here plays Janin, a young Mission de Paris priest who is posted to the tough Pigalle district specifically to deal with the prostitutes. During the day he works as barman or whatever but, work over, he goes back to say Mass in his bare little room with a curious collection of devout and recollected locals for his congregation. This is faultlessly presented, as is the interesting sequence of the meeting of the priests when their bishop first waits on them and then speaks of the special dangers of their work. Joannon himself plays the leading 'caïd', who runs a set of girls in the district, and the enchanting Annie Girardot is Josy, the girl who, sadly, finds in the priest the first man really to take her fancy. The neighbourhood is cynically aware of the priest's identity and aims, but the more his influence over the girls grows, the more resentful is the reaction to his presence. Eventually he interferes more drastically, and the 'caïd' moves into action; with his gang he calls on Janin to threaten and then to beat him up—first with scientific blows and then proceeding neatly to dislocate his vertebrae—altogether a most sickening scene. In the end Janin totters out of hospital in answer to a call for help and, because she will not give away his whereabouts, Josy is fatally stabbed, and dies to the childish voices of the little girls who go singing to their solemn communion up the steps to the Sacré Coeur.

Now, one can quite see that this is the kind of picture that a great many people would pay to see; and, too, that they would certainly be introduced to a conception of Christianity as a working practical framework to life which might be quite novel to them, clearly an admirable result. But all the same this *is* a shocking film, because of the violence as well as the carnality; because of the sentimentality of its climax as much as the grossness of its dialogue. Does the apostolic end justify the doubtful means? I find it difficult to say an unequivocal 'Yes': but I may be quite wrong.

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