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The Seminary

A film by Donncha Ó Briain

Prod: John Murray

A Crossing the Line film for RTÉ, 2001

To take a shot at the Catholic church these days would be like shooting video cassettes in a barrel. To shoot an hour-long documentary on some young men who are determined to join one of Ireland's most discredited organisations, on the other hand, is nothing short of admirable, both for a director/film company and the volunteering subjects. *The Seminary*, surely one of the most objective religious documentaries ever to be produced in this country, follows one year in the lives of three seminarians at different stages of their vocation, or lack of vocation as it turns out in two cases. The setting is St Patrick's seminary at Maynooth, Ireland's largest such institution, where there are currently one hundred students studying for the priesthood. One hour of film manages to convey a good sense of what a year's turning means inside these walls.

The establishing shots of the film introduce us to one seventh and final-year seminarian, Jason Murphy, and to two second-year noviciates, Mick Delaney and Eamonn Casey, as they get set in August to face the year. While Murphy already has the behavioural stamp of an earnest young priest, the two younger subjects perform almost as an equal and opposite test case. Delaney must have been a dream for the film team – a cropped red-haired would-be rapper, he distributes his Hip Hop CDs round his new room, pointing out that his *modus operandi* is a 'flecky tracksuit job, not the woolly jumper vibe'. Ruggedly articulate, Delaney relays an unsavoury personal past throughout the film, illustrating the sense of utter desperation that can drive people towards religion. His displaying of his Jesus-is-cool tattoo to some American girls is one of the weirder highlights of his side of the encompassing story. Casey, a Corkman with a Boston twang, also provides some surprises. Expressing hesitancy from the start about returning for his second year, his first step when he moves into his room is to put up his Buffy the Vampire-Slayer poster and one readily gets the sense that his vocation is inevitably doomed.

The film has a reasonably discreet narrator who, along with a handful of interviewees, provides some information to contextualise the progress of these three young men. Half of all recruits to St Patrick's leave before ordination. Fr Stephen Farragher, Director of Formation, provides some statistics, the trend of which we hardly need reminding: while average first-year intake into the early eighties was 330, it is now only 20. Without any hint of preaching or self-righteousness, at certain moments the film nicely reveals some of the elements that contribute to such a fall off in vocations. Appropriately, the camera traces the progress in the seminarians' rehearsals for a staging of Brian Friel's scholastic play *The Enemy Within* (1962); while this activity, director Fr Michael Mullins points out, is intended to encourage self-reflection in his charges, he has a good old-fashioned authoritarian rant at Murphy when, it seems, he isn't performing properly. Much more palatable in this vein is the video-aided instruction of Murphy in altar etiquette, where there is obviously a nerve-fraying emphasis on perfection through repetition.

Part of the honesty of the film is to still suggest that the choice of the priesthood is a peculiar one for any young man. There are tales of restrictive curfews, socialising restrictions, distasteful vows of obedience, endless discussion groups concerning the

scriptures. Nevertheless, the closing sections, which cover Murphy's eventual ordination, also reveal the intense emotionalism, pride and solemn happiness that come with staying the seven-year course. Visually, the film also manages to identify the ascetic attractiveness of the cloistered life. There are shots of the beautiful college chapel, of well-worn corridors, of the college grounds, and there is an impressive sequence that covers the parade of seminarians into the college graveyard. Captivating as all this is, the viewer most eagerly, and inevitably, awaits the where-are-they-now captions at the end. Murphy is now a fully fledged priest, and his story ends with his Fr Trendy stage act at his ordination bash. His co-subjects, however, both leave St Patrick's after their second year, Delaney to become a hotel manager and Casey, whose story particularly involves the quintessential chastity problem, to become a religion teacher in Boston.

Neither a propaganda film for priests nor a prurient exposé, this programme will have led to some further understanding of what it means to want to become a priest, to become a priest, to fail to become a priest. Two moments in particular resonate. There is an inspired quick interview with the gatekeeper at St Patrick's and he insists that the young seminarians are above all else brave. Most poignantly however, there is a glimpse of the seminarians being instructed in the requirements for funerals and the consolation of the bereaved. Death is the great, often unspoken reality that motivates all religions and it is in moments such as this that *The Seminary* gives useful pause for the thought 'What, really, is a priest?'

John Kenny