



3-31-2014

## “Love, What Have You Done to Me?” Eros and agape in Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess*

Catherine M. O'Brien

Kingston University, UK, c.obrien@kingston.ac.uk

---

### Recommended Citation

O'Brien, Catherine M. (2014) ““Love, What Have You Done to Me?” Eros and agape in Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess*,” *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 44.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss1/44>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

# “Love, What Have You Done to Me?” Eros and agape in Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess*

## **Abstract**

Despite its pre-Vatican II setting, Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess* (1953) has retained a notable relevance in the twenty-first century. Although the titular act of confession is unsurprisingly significant, the diegesis actually foregrounds Matrimony and Holy Orders – two sacraments that remain under the spotlight during a tumultuous era for the Catholic Church. Alongside the traditional Hitchcockian theme of “an innocent man wrongly accused,” the plot really hinges on love – a subject that is intelligible to people of all religions and none. While examining the *mise-en-scène* of the director's most Catholic film, this article offers an exploration of *I Confess* as a cinematic reflection on the complexities of *eros* and *agape* for both the laity and the priesthood.

## **Keywords**

Hitchcock, *I Confess*, love, eros, agape, marriage, priesthood, Catholicism

## **Author Notes**

Catherine O'Brien is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies and French at Kingston University, UK, and has published widely on intersections between Mariology and popular culture, including a monograph entitled *The Celluloid Madonna* (Wallflower/Columbia University Press, 2011). She is currently researching Catholicism in New Hollywood cinema.

Despite its pre-Vatican II setting, Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess* (1953) – regarded as the director's most Catholic film – has retained a notable relevance in the twenty-first century. Although the titular act of confession is unsurprisingly significant, the diegesis actually foregrounds Matrimony and Holy Orders – two sacraments that remain under the spotlight during a tumultuous era for the Catholic Church. Moreover, the depiction of a priest as a figure of suspicion – hounded by an angry crowd – also strikes a regrettably contemporary chord.

Having originally been inspired by Paul Anthelme's French play *Nos deux consciences* (1902), which hinges on the confessional seal, Hitchcock reportedly feared that he had allowed his “specialized knowledge as a Catholic to get the better of his judgment as a filmmaker.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, while some scholars have complained that the Catholic subtext of *I Confess* “is too dependent upon conditioning in religious lore and ritual to be accessible to a mass audience,”<sup>2</sup> the story really hinges on love – a subject that is intelligible to people of all religions and none.

Alongside the theme of “an innocent man wrongly accused” that permeates Hitchcock's films (and which is memorably foregrounded in *The Wrong Man* (1956) when Henry Fonda plays another Christ-like protagonist), *I Confess* offers a cinematic reflection on the complexities of *eros* and *agape* –

those aspects of love that have been elucidated so eloquently on paper by theologians.<sup>3</sup> In his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI considered the nature of love as “a single reality, but with different dimensions; at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly.”<sup>4</sup> Although *Deus Caritas Est* was written some fifty years after the production of *I Confess* and evidently has no bearing on Hitchcock’s approach, the analysis of love contained in the pages of the papal encyclical sheds light on the film’s own interplay between the two Catholic sacramental vocations.

In *I Confess*, Fr. Michael Logan (Montgomery Clift) is a wanted man: he is sought by the police, who mistakenly believe him to have murdered the blackmailing lawyer Villette (Ovila Légaré), who once caught him (in his pre-seminary days) in an apparently compromising situation with Madame Ruth Grandfort (Anne Baxter); but he is also desired by Ruth Grandfort herself, despite the obvious impediments of his priestly celibacy and her own marital vows. The title of Hitchcock’s film relates not only to the confession by the real murderer Otto Keller (O.E. Hasse) but also to Ruth’s revelation of her ongoing passion for Michael Logan, her girlhood sweetheart. As a result, Ruth’s marriage – as well as Canon 889 §1 of the 1917 Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law<sup>5</sup> – is at stake. *Eros* (initially in the sense of “worldly love” or being “in love”) appears to give rise to misery and murder in the lives of the onscreen laity; while *agape* (in the form of “love grounded in and shaped by faith”)<sup>6</sup> is most obviously

manifested in Fr. Logan's dedication to the priesthood, despite the threat to his own life. Yet, as the film illustrates, the danger occurs if the two forms of love are completely separated so that "*eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone."<sup>7</sup>

Hitchcock's audiences must always explore the *mise-en-scène* – rather than rely on pictures “of people talking”<sup>8</sup> – in order to understand the nuances of the plot. The conflict between temporal and sacred concerns is witnessed in the establishing shot of Québec City – the location that Hitchcock reportedly chose because the Canadian province was the only place in North America where Catholic priests still wore cassocks at the time of the film's production (given that the cassock as a form of disguise is a key element of the plot).<sup>9</sup> As the narrative progresses, the crucifixes on the walls of the parliament chamber, the court and the jury room reveal the link between Church and State in Québec in the 1950s, and they add an exterior dimension to Fr. Logan's interior journey.

A solitary church spire (belonging to Notre-Dame-des-Victoires) punctuates a skyline that is dominated by the colossal structure of the Château Frontenac hotel that represents a site of worldly pleasures. As the church spire migrates to the right of the frame during the tracking shot across the Saint Lawrence River (Fig.1), the visual dichotomy between earthly and spiritual interests is enhanced aurally as the barely audible lyrics of a woman's haunting

song entitled “Love, What Have You Done to Me?”<sup>10</sup> introduce a romantic motif that will continue to punctuate the narrative.



Fig.1

In his traditional cameo appearance, Hitchcock strides across the top of a long flight of steps set against a glowering sky, so that the spectators contemplate his god-like elevation as the artistic creator. On the one hand, the setting calls to mind the “Stairway to Heaven” in Powell and Pressburger’s *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) as well as Jacob’s dream in the Old Testament (Gn 28:12) – an image that has a notable connotation for the film’s stress on “verticality”<sup>11</sup> (with its high/low angled shots) as well as its interrogation of the theme of love: “In the account of Jacob’s ladder, the Fathers of the Church saw this inseparable connection between ascending and descending love, between *eros* which seeks God and *agape* which passes on the gift received.”<sup>12</sup> However, an awareness that the actual staircase is known under the nickname of “Casse-

cou” (break-neck) adds an additional *frisson* to mortal matters, given that the Canadian penalty for murder was death by hanging at the time of the film’s production – the sentence that may await the innocent Fr. Logan if he does not reveal the perpetrator of the crime. Indeed, the cross-shaped symbols that may be detected in the staircase’s long central banisters (Fig.2) also suggest a cemetery with rows of identical graves.<sup>13</sup> *I Confess* projects *agape* as a love that “means unconditional commitment, which implicitly (that is, when necessary) includes a willingness to go all the way to one’s death.”<sup>14</sup>



Fig.2

The framing of the Château Frontenac at a canted angle forces the audience to observe the world from an oblique perspective, as a foretaste of the manner in which Fr. Logan’s existence is about to be shaken. While the “one-way” traffic arrows literally point the viewer’s gaze towards the murder scene, they also give an indication of which route to take when life has gone askew.

Given that the French “Direction” signs are situated in the city streets that the priest will subsequently navigate knowing that his arrest is imminent, they might also evoke the Psalmic theme of divine guidance: “Show me the path I should walk, for to you I entrust my life” (Ps 143:8).

### **The Power of *Eros***

Romantic love is the cause of suffering in *I Confess*, regardless of the protagonists’ social status. At one end of the financial scale are the Kellers, who are employed at the Sainte Marie rectory where Fr. Logan lives.<sup>15</sup> As the housekeeper, Alma Keller (Dolly Haas) should testify to an “upright way of life.”<sup>16</sup> However, rather than manifesting an “upright” life, Alma’s body is constantly bent in a servile posture as she carries out her household duties. Otto Keller will express despair at his wife’s status as a German refugee (“It was my wife, working so hard. It breaks my heart”) but his purported marital concern results in theft (as he tries to steal \$2000 to improve their existence) and murder. As he admits to his crime, Otto’s tight grip on his wife’s arms and the close framing clarify the power relations at work within the couple. While Alma polishes the crucifix and candlesticks that will stand on the altar during the Mass, Otto speaks to her furtively about the bloodstained cassock that he wore during Villette’s murder, thereby desecrating her act of reverence. Despite his earlier

protestations of love, Otto will eventually shoot Alma when she finally points an accusing finger towards him (“My husband!”) after Fr. Logan’s trial.

Likewise, the second onscreen couple – the Grandforts – do not represent conjugal bliss. It is obvious that Ruth’s true desire is for Michael Logan, as manifested by her recollection of their youthful romance as if it were a film in which she stars: she floats down her home’s outer *casse-queue* staircase into Michael’s arms and they kiss on the lips within the restrictions of the Hollywood Production Code.<sup>17</sup> As Robin Wood points out, “The flashbacks are usually laughed at in a superior, knowing way, on the assumption that it is Hitchcock who is being naive: he is often too sophisticated for the sophisticated.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, the clichéd images in Ruth’s memory (Fig.3) provide a poignant illustration of a love which “is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other.”<sup>19</sup>



Fig.3

Indeed, as she recalls Michael's enlistment during the Second World War that leads to their separation, Ruth's own thoughts of love are markedly possessive: "You don't think of millions of people. You think of yourself and the one you're in love with." In contrast, Michael's feelings are filtered through Ruth's voice over narration: "Because when I said we ought to get married, he said there were enough widows already. He said he loved me too much. He didn't know he could never love me enough."

However, the audience never actually hears Michael utter any such words of devotion – at his trial, Fr. Logan will refer to Ruth as "a good friend" – and their "love story" is viewed through Ruth's subjectivity. As Ruth looks out of the window during Michael's military service, watching in vain for the postman, two priests walk past carrying umbrellas in the rain (Fig.4). At this point she does not realize the double significance to her own story: the rain dampens her hopes; and the priesthood will provide the permanent barrier to her dream of happiness.



Fig.4

Yet, it is Ruth who decides not to wait patiently when there is no news from the army, and her love is clearly not unconditional. In the case of *eros*, “[g]eographic distances create an additional burden, and love must be strong and single-minded in order to withstand it; pledges of love, meant to be eternal, get broken [...]”<sup>20</sup> Given that the exterior view of Ruth’s girlhood home in the pre-war flashback does not suggest an opulent upbringing, marriage is evidently an opportunity for the young woman to attain financial security with an older man. Ruth’s recollection of meeting her “brilliant” husband is accompanied by the appearance of Pierre Grandfort (Roger Dann) as her employer, and the business side of their relationship is reflected in their married life. In Ruth’s recollection of her wedding day, she is attired in a traditional white bridal gown as a symbol of her purity (comparable to the white alb that Michael Logan wears at his Ordination) but there is no religious dimension in her flashback. The bride and groom are shown greeting guests (most notably Villette) at a reception at the Château Frontenac, thereby underlining the social dynamics of their nuptials.

Obviously, the most significant enigma relates to the gap in the narrative during the stormy night that Ruth (now married) spends with Michael straight after his demobilization. Ruth is wearing gloves on the first occasion that she greets the returning soldier on the quayside; and, on their day together on the island, she has removed her engagement and wedding rings – although this fact

must be independently observed by the audience as she makes no verbal allusion to this particular act of deception. She has no interest in Michael's ponderings when they meet – in fact, she complains in her recollection that Michael “talked and talked” – and the flashback reveals that she herself instigates their one onscreen kiss on that fateful day. In her statement to the Crown Prosecutor Willy Robertson (Brian Aherne), Ruth openly admits: “I hadn't told [Michael] I was married,” thereby absolving her companion of culpability in her betrayal of Pierre.

In an earlier draft of the script that was rejected by the Production Code, Ruth and Michael stay at an inn;<sup>21</sup> but in the final version, there is no direct evidence of sexual relations and, when caught in a rainstorm, they shelter in a gazebo. Ruth restricts her recollection of their night together to two sentences: “There was no way I could get in touch with my husband. It stopped raining in the morning.” These words are followed by a shot of Ruth waking up alone on a bench having used Michael's military cap as a pillow; and Michael has apparently slept opposite her, resting his head on a table that acts as a barrier between them. Although the tie at the high neck of Ruth's blouse is undone and she has removed her shoes, she is wearing Michael's jacket around her shoulders as additional cover. Hitchcock's own response to the query as to whether the couple had made love (“I hope so. Far be it from me as a Jesuit to encourage that kind of behavior”)<sup>22</sup> actually receives no precise textual support.

Richard Blake acknowledges that, even if Villette's subsequent innuendo about events on the island had substance, Fr. Logan's "pre-seminary indiscretion would be embarrassing, but scarcely catastrophic,"<sup>23</sup> so that Ruth's concern that "Michael might be unfrocked" is unwarranted. Indeed, it is notable that Ruth and Michael are never alone behind closed doors after her marriage – even the gazebo is open to the elements. Although Larue (Karl Malden) may be convinced of the "unpriestly intimacy"<sup>24</sup> of Fr. Logan's greeting when he meets Ruth on the pavement outside Villette's house, the couple are in public view, as the striking close-up of the inspector's eye clearly proves. However, mistrust is increased by the revelation of Fr. Logan's late-night rendezvous with Ruth on the night of the murder. Canon 133 §1 of The 1917 Code of Canon Law states: "Clerics should take care not to retain or in other ways to frequent women upon whom suspicion can fall." As Blake explains: "By any estimation, 11:00 P.M. does seem an odd time for a priest to conduct business with any parishioner. It would be even more unusual for a priest to meet a woman alone outside the rectory at that hour, especially if it is a woman he once loved."<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, even during this unconventional appointment, the couple are not in a private place: Fr. Logan and Ruth are seen walking together by the river after having travelled there in Ruth's open-top car. Before Fr. Logan's arrest they appear to be having a confidential conversation in Sainte Marie, but when a young boy arrives for confession, the new camera angle reveals that two other women have

been present in the church throughout their assignation. On a previous occasion, when Ruth rings Fr. Logan at the rectory late at night, he is in his shirt sleeves but his clerical collar is tightly fastened during their telephone call – a visual reminder of the priesthood rather than his distinction as her former *beau*. In fact, in the scene when he is painting the rectory study, it becomes clear that he has turned the army shirt from his civilian days into an overall, so that this remnant of his past life (which may be the very shirt that he wore during his last meeting with Ruth before he became a priest) holds no sentimental significance.

The comparison between Fr. Logan's faithfulness to the Code of Canon Law (even at the risk of his own life) and Ruth's lack of commitment to her marriage is one of the key features of the narrative. Ruth is eagerly prepared to ignore the words of Jesus: "Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate" (Mt 19:6) for love of Fr. Logan. However, as she pleads her case on the deck of the Lévis ferry, the priest leans on the back of a bench and has his hands clasped together as if in prayer (Fig.5). This physical gesture will be frequently adopted by Montgomery Clift throughout his performance (including when he wakes in the morning after the night spent in the gazebo), offering a constant visual reminder of his choice of vocation.



Fig.5

When Ruth confesses her love and tries to persuade Fr. Logan that he shares her passion (“You’ve always been in love with me. You haven’t changed”), he responds: “Ruth, do you understand? I chose to be what I am. I believe in what I am. I want you to see things as they are and not go on hurting yourself.” Fr. Logan’s vocation is not presented as a solution to his broken heart (as Ruth would appear to hope); and he will later state under oath in court: “I’ve never thought of the priesthood as offering a hiding place.”

In the days of her courtship with Michael Logan, Ruth wears a small cross on a chain around her neck; and this insignia is visible when she waits for Michael’s letters during the war. However, after her marriage, the plain cross necklace is replaced by pearl earrings, diamonds and an expensive watch; she employs a servant, and is attired in a glamorous evening dress as she entertains

high-powered friends; and in the rooms of the grandiose marital residence there is no visible religious imagery. Ruth's narrative is a literal illustration of C.S. Lewis's description of the dangers of *eros* in *The Four Loves*: "The event of falling in love is of such a nature that we are right to reject as intolerable the idea that it should be transitory. [...] Simply to relapse from it, merely to 'fall out of' love again, is – if I may coin the ugly word – a sort of *disredemption*."<sup>26</sup> As she walks onto the deck of the *Louis Jolliet* ferry in her tailored outfit to meet Fr. Logan, she is overtaken by two Franciscan friars (Fig.6) whose simple habits – which underline the poverty, chastity and obedience that is at the heart of their religious vocation – clash with Ruth's current affluence and represent a dual symbol of a different direction in life.



Fig.6

In comparison to Ruth's description of her relationship with Michael in her misty flashback confession, her feelings towards her own husband are

chillingly articulated. At the party during which the Grandforts learn that Fr. Logan is a murder suspect, Ruth knows the importance of fake vivacity (“We have guests, Pierre”), underlining the skill with which she plays her role as the mistress of the house. Ruth’s own feelings are unambiguously expressed in a subsequent discussion during which she is emptying an ashtray as a conspicuous symbol that her marriage is also crumbling to ashes (Fig.7).



Fig.7

The couple stand on opposite sides of the room: Ruth by the empty fireplace (signaling her coldness) and Pierre by the door (indicating his peripheral position in their relationship). Ruth states, “I’m not in love with you. I’ve never been in love with you. You know that. [...] I’ve never pretended anything with you,” exemplifying a person who chooses “to enter into relationships answerable only to [her] own psychology’s principle of ‘this far and no further.’”<sup>27</sup> Yet, Pierre’s sad response (“But I never wanted to believe it”)

represents a form of *eros* that “is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to ‘be there for’ the other.”<sup>28</sup> In Ruth’s case, these sentiments come to the fore in her love for Fr. Logan when she bravely (if melodramatically) confesses “*her* guilt for his sake” in her statement to the Crown Prosecutor “as if to say, ‘I will undergo public humiliation for you.’”<sup>29</sup>

Although originally presented as a confident figure who debates women’s rights in Parliament, Pierre Grandfort is later depicted with his head bowed and his hands in his pockets. His position within the frame throughout the narrative – in the background or at the side – highlights his relative insignificance in his wife’s considerations before the Vilette murder trial. Whilst childlessness does not equate to a sexless marriage, the formal parameters of the Grandforts’ relationship are suggested by the twin beds (although admittedly favored by the Production Code Administration), the official photograph of Pierre that stands on the dresser, and Pierre’s polite knock on the bedroom door as he announces his name before gaining admittance. When Ruth learns that her statement to the Crown Prosecutor has condemned Fr. Logan (by giving him a motive for murder rather than an alibi), her concern is initially for the priest. Yet, when she eventually questions the effect on her husband (“And you, Pierre. What have I done to you?”), the light that floods into the darkened bedroom through the open

shutters signifies a moment of interior revelation. Significantly, the romantic love song of the credit sequence is never heard again.

### **The Power of *Agape***

In *I Confess*, glimpses into the lives of the Catholic clergy are interwoven with Ruth's secular existence, with her convertible car serving as the antithesis of the errant bicycle of Fr. Benoît (Gilles Pelletier), who is Fr. Logan's fellow curate. When the detectives call at a number of parishes in the process of eliminating the local clergy from the Villette murder enquiry, there are canted angle shots of several churches, foreshadowing the manner in which the Catholic Church itself will be shaken when a member of the clergy is in court. When discussing the murder inquiry, the Prosecutor first states: "Of course, it's absurd that a priest would be involved;" but he subsequently asks Inspector Larue with less conviction: "You don't really think that it could be a priest, do you?" These words have a different resonance in the twenty-first century in comparison to the 1950s – an era when the priest was "portrayed, on T.V. and film, as a man of quiet integrity or even heroism" rather than the "troubled and sometimes malevolent figure"<sup>30</sup> depicted in the media in the wake of the pedophile tragedy.

Victor Perkins dismisses Hitchcock's montage of churches with their varied architectural styles as representing the need to "plod us through a stretch of data."<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, each building reflects the ideals of the architect who

designed it, and the way that the human imagination strives to honor God using earthly materials. Views of the spires pointing towards heaven are followed by interior shots of the rectories that reveal the distinct décor selected by the men who inhabit them, with the choice of iconography in the sitting rooms demonstrating personal taste. In the succession of shots, landscape paintings in the first room contrast with the large portrait of “Marie de l’Incarnation” (the first superior of the Ursulines of Québec) in the second; or with a sculpture of Jesus carrying his cross, as well as a crucifix on the wall, in the third. The priests who are shown shaking their heads are wearing the same outer apparel – a fact that is underlined when the detectives chase after any man in a cassock when they search for Fr. Logan in the city streets – but these men evidently do not have one uniform character.

Fr. Logan is first presented to the audience at his bedroom window, and the church steeple reflected in the glass links his image to the cross in his introductory appearance – a theme that has obvious validity for the priest’s trajectory as a follower of Christ: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Mt 16:24). However, the low camera angle endows Fr. Logan with a lofty status that events will soon strip away. In his initial appearance, he does not pause to refasten the top buttons of his cassock as he hurries to confront the late-night visitor to his church – a visible allusion to the unraveling of his own disciplined existence (Fig.8).



Fig.8

Outside the church there is also a cross erected to celebrate the Holy Year of 1950 (Fig.9) – presumably also the year of Fr. Logan’s ordination as he has been a curate at Sainte Marie for two years (thereby locating the action in 1952



Fig.9

when the film was made). So the Holy Year cross may very well commemorate Fr. Logan’s personal vocation as well as an important event in the life of the

Catholic Church. It is also notable that both the cross and the statue of the Virgin Mary in the garden are absent from the frame whenever Fr. Logan leaves the rectory after he becomes a murder suspect, as if to underline his sense of isolation during his own Gethsemane moment.

The priest's severest test evidently begins with the sacrament of confession on the night of Vilette's death. As Otto Keller enters the church by the side door that brings the visitor to the front of the altar that is illuminated by candlelight, his decision to move to the back reflects a need for sanctuary but also a feeling of unworthiness: "For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed" (Jn 3:20). Interestingly, when Keller falsely relates this sequence of events in the courtroom, he changes the location of the protagonists and places Fr. Logan kneeling at the altar. Even when committing perjury, Keller evidently sees Fr. Logan as more worthy to be closer to the tabernacle.

To emphasize the contrast between the two men, the priest holds aloft a votive candle to guide his way and confirm his status as a man of holiness: "If your whole body is full of light, and no part of it is in darkness, then it will be as full of light as a lamp illuminating you with its brightness" (Lk 11:36). The priest's treatment of the Kellers is a visible sign of *agape*: "Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave."<sup>32</sup> After having served in the war in

Europe – winning the Military Cross – Fr. Logan now helps the German émigrés (“You gave my wife and me a home, a job, even your friendship”) and he strives to offer Keller the spiritual consolation that he desires through the sacrament of reconciliation. Yet, Keller’s betrayal of Fr. Logan might serve as a reminder of Jesus’s warning to his disciples: “One’s enemies will be those of his household” (Mt 10:36).

While it is unsurprising that critical analyses have focused on the penitential sacrament,<sup>33</sup> Keller’s confession is brief and curtailed, lasting less than a minute and not shown in its entirety. Its significance resides in the dilemma that the confessional seal subsequently poses for Fr. Logan – a development that Hitchcock himself famously regarded as problematic: “We Catholics know that a priest cannot disclose the secret of the confessional, but the Protestants, the atheists, and the agnostics all say, ‘Ridiculous! No man would remain silent and sacrifice his life for such a thing.’”<sup>34</sup> Yet, the plot hinges on the fact that Fr. Logan’s vocation is unconditional: “In the old ritual for the ordination of the priest there was the disturbing phrase: *Sat periculosum est hoc*, what you are starting on is extremely dangerous.”<sup>35</sup> These words have a particular resonance for the narrative of *I Confess*. The architecture of the confessional contains a criss-cross grille which casts a shadow on Fr. Logan’s forehead that might suggest a crown of thorns – a portent of the suffering that the confessor will bear when he is wrongly accused of Keller’s crime (Fig.10).



Fig.10

Fr. Logan is shown in a sacramental role on four occasions: during the critical confessional scene; as he divests himself of his vestments at the end of a morning Mass; at his Ordination (remembered in Ruth's flashback); and as he gives the Last Rites to Otto Keller. However, Hitchcock's audience must pay close attention to observe the priest's priorities in life, noting, for example, the shot of Notre-Dame de Québec Cathedral in the film's opening montage. While the cathedral dominates the screen, the framing incorporates a number of business premises on the left-hand side, with two of the more conspicuous signs at the periphery indicating a restaurant and a clothes store. The presence of these establishments on the sidelines might evoke the Gospel passage when Jesus tells his followers to abandon their earthly concerns: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat [or drink], or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" (Mt

6:25). There is no doubt that the physical space allocated to sacred and to temporal interests within the frame offers a visual representation of Fr. Logan's own concerns (Fig.11).



Fig.11

Food plays little part in his onscreen existence, and on the one occasion that he is seen at the breakfast table on the morning after the murder, he merely drinks a cup of coffee. Under Canon 808 that was still in force in the 1950s it was “not licit for priests to celebrate [Mass] without having observed a natural fast from midnight.” As Fr. Logan has just said the early morning Mass, it is clear that he is surviving on a meager diet. The fact that the priests are dining beneath a reproduction of Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (Fig.12) might also recall the religious belief “that man's real food – what truly nourishes him as man – is ultimately the *Logos*, eternal wisdom: this same *Logos* now truly becomes food for us – as love.”<sup>36</sup> The painting – which would be a traditional

choice for a rectory dining room – also acts as a reminder of Holy Orders. “*Ordination* communicates the Spirit in the way Christ communicated it to the Twelve through giving them communion at the Last Supper and by breathing on them after his Resurrection – that is, to make them able to act *in persona Christi* toward the rest of the faithful, in binding and loosing sins, in teaching, and in consecrating the Eucharist.”<sup>37</sup>



Fig.12

It is Ruth who recollects Michael’s Ordination in her statement in the Prosecutor’s office. In contrast to the memory of her own marriage, Ruth concentrates on the sacrament and the “laying on of hands” – the external sign of Ordination “that transmits to him the power to bless and consecrate, it is as though he were being given the hands of a priest, the hands of Christ.”<sup>38</sup> As an insignificant member of the congregation – seated even further back in the

church than Vilette – Ruth looks up towards the altar and witnesses the moment when Michael Logan makes his ultimate commitment to celibate love.<sup>39</sup>

The Christ-like symbolism is most obvious when Fr. Logan is confronted by Keller in Sainte Marie before the court case. There are crucifixes in every shot, as well as the Stations of the Cross visible on the wall of the church, and the non-diegetic drum beat indicates a funeral march.<sup>40</sup> Keller taunts the priest with his questions, just as the Devil tormented Jesus in the desert, or the crowd mocked Jesus on Calvary: “He trusted in God; let him deliver him now if he wants him” (Mt 27:43). On hearing that Fr. Logan has left the rectory, Inspector Larue fears that the priest has fled – but the audience can see that Fr. Logan has taken nothing with him, not even a hat, and he is clearly deep in thought: when a traffic policeman raises his hand to stop the pedestrians, Fr. Logan is unaware of the signal. As he passes a cinema that is screening Bogart’s *The Enforcer* (Bretaigne Windust, 1951), he looks at a lobby card of a man in handcuffs between two detectives – a foretaste of his own future. A headless dummy in a tailor’s shop window (Fig.13) also symbolizes the options facing the priest: should he remain silent and risk execution; or should he break the promise that he made at his Ordination and exchange his cassock for a layman’s attire?



Fig.13

However, an audience familiar with Québec City would realize that Fr. Logan is walking away from the direction of the bus and train station (visible in the background in one shot), so that escape is apparently not on his mind. As C.S. Lewis points out: “Of all arguments against love none makes so strong an appeal to my nature as ‘Careful! This might lead you to suffering.’” Yet, he goes on to explain: “When I respond to that appeal I seem to myself to be a thousand miles away from Christ. If I am sure of anything I am sure that His teaching was never meant to confirm my congenital preference for safe investments and limited liabilities.”<sup>41</sup> Fr. Logan’s demeanor as he walks through the streets would indicate that he is conscious of the dangers. As he nears the fortress walls, the architecture is reminiscent of the old city of Jerusalem (Fig.14), and the biblical link is underlined by an outdoor sculpture of one of the Stations of the Cross



Fig.14

seen in a subsequent shot – a directorial decision that Robin Wood rejects as “pretentious.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, in reality, these Stations of the Cross are actually located at the shrine of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, miles away from the city, so they would not form a natural part of Fr. Logan’s trajectory. As a result, they offer a symbolic parallel that is emphasized by the framing (Fig.15).



Fig.15

Blake suggests that Fr. Logan “expresses no awareness of the statue, and in fact the shot exaggerates the separation between Logan and the image of Christ with his cross,”<sup>43</sup> but the high angle also indicates that Fr. Logan is a disciple of Christ, taking forward the message in a more humble capacity.<sup>44</sup> The theory that Fr. Logan “is preoccupied not with thoughts of his eternal salvation, but with possible plans to escape prosecution”<sup>45</sup> is countered by the fact that the priest next visits the very church in which he was ordained. Fr. Logan gazes at the altar as if seeking confirmation of his vocation in the face of fear – a visual illustration of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s attestation: “By leaving everything in God’s hands, the love that bears all things carries us further; it achieves more in the extreme suffering of not ‘being able to go on any further’ than in potent, self-assured action.”<sup>46</sup>

In the courtroom scenes, it is clear that “defense procedures hardly exist in the trial as presented;”<sup>47</sup> and, as Michel Cieutat argues, the final screenplay makes the priest more Christ-like.<sup>48</sup> The crucifix on the wall above the jury benches serves as a constant parallel with the Passion of Christ as Fr. Logan is “assuming the sin of another and being willing to stand and fall in his place.”<sup>49</sup> On the one occasion that the priest responds with a raised voice to the Prosecutor’s accusation, there is muttering in the court and the crucifix appears distant, at the edge of the frame. Indeed, as Fulton Sheen underlines, “Pilate declared [Jesus] innocent (Priest) and yet condemned Him as guilty (Victim);”<sup>50</sup>

and, in *I Confess*, Fr. Logan is declared innocent but ostensibly condemned as guilty by the judge when he expresses his disagreement with the verdict. Bystanders are observed from Fr. Logan's point-of-view in a framing that recalls filmic recreations of the Via Dolorosa – comparable with Julien Duvivier's *Golgotha* (1935) or Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). As Lloyd Baugh explains in his analysis of Christ-figures in the cinema: “On the one hand, the reference to Christ clarifies the situation of the Christ-figure and adds depth to the significance of his actions; on the other hand, the person and the situation of the Christ-figure can provide new understanding of who and how Christ is”<sup>51</sup> – the scene evokes Calvary and “all the mocking hostility that once and for all nailed down his inconceivable movement of self-abasement [...]”<sup>52</sup> However, the film has a particular twenty-first century resonance as the abuse from the hostile crowd (“Take off that collar!” and “Preach us a sermon, Logan!”) indicate a contempt for the clergy that would be very recognizable to a present-day audience in the wake of the scandals that have beset the Catholic Church in recent decades.

However, in *I Confess*, the Catholic priest is innocent. Love will triumph in the end when Alma Keller, distressed to see Fr. Logan being assailed by the crowd, tries to restore justice at the risk of her own life (the ultimate form of *agape*).<sup>53</sup> Her actions lead to the denouement that takes place in the ballroom of the Château Frontenac hotel that dominated the film's opening shot. As Inspector

Larue and Fr Millais (Charles Andre), the Parish Priest, come to understand that Fr. Logan has maintained the seal of the confessional in the face of death, Ruth also experiences enlightenment as she “must discover not that she loves Michael, but that she loves Pierre and that her place is with her husband. Her acceptance of her former lover’s innocence arrives simultaneously with her acceptance of his vocation.”<sup>54</sup>

In the final scene, Keller continues to taunt Fr. Logan: “You have no friends. [...] They mob you, they call at you. It would be better if you were as guilty as I. Then they would shoot you quickly.” Indeed, amongst the spectators in the courtroom there appear to be no relatives to support the priest, although Ruth’s flashback has earlier indicated that they grew up together in the city. However, although his Irish name and American accent (reportedly “one of the *Boys Town* touches” that the Warner Bros. studio demanded<sup>55</sup>) have already indicated that Fr. Logan is displaced amongst his French-speaking fellow priests at Sainte Marie, they represent his family. Fr. Millais evidently believes in his curate (“I have no idea where he was or what he did. But I’m perfectly sure it’s all right”) and stands by his side as he faces Keller for the last time.

As Keller is fatally wounded by a policeman’s bullet, his dying words are: “Father help me, quickly. Forgive me.” Canon 892 §2 of the 1917 Code of Canon Law states: “In urgent necessity, all confessors are bound by the obligation of charity to hear the confessions of the faithful, and in danger of

death all priests [are so bound].” Fr. Logan holds Keller in his arms and absolves him, his hand shaking as he makes the sign of the cross – it is a visible demonstration of *agape* towards the dying man and one that offers hope of Salvation. Perkins suggests that Fr. Logan says the words “only in their official, impersonal version”<sup>56</sup> (rather than also expressing forgiveness in the vernacular) but just because the priest speaks in Latin does not mean that the sentiments are not heartfelt; and the gesture is gentle as he closes Keller’s eyes.

In the film’s concluding shot, the camera tracks back across the Saint Lawrence River, receding from the Château Frontenac and allowing the spire of the Catholic church of Notre-Dame-des-Victoires to begin to move slowly back from the edge of the frame. The haunting “Love, What Have You Done to Me?” lyrics have been replaced by a triumphant musical cadence that proposes redemption for all concerned.

When Ruth is left bitter and bereft by Fr. Logan after their meeting on the Lévis ferry, it appears to be a vindication of Saint Augustine’s warning about earthly suffering (as encapsulated by C.S. Lewis in *The Four Loves*): “This is what comes [...] of giving one’s heart to anything but God”<sup>57</sup> – a rather gloomy prognostication for most mortals. The film appears to promote a vision of *agape* that may be “lived in its wholeness either according to the laws of marriage or according to the laws of the Christian renunciation of marriage, this latter understood as a more explicit call from Christ to a more explicit (and therefore

more expressive) following of him.”<sup>58</sup> Yet, the final onscreen appearance of the Grandforts is an effort to restore the balance. Not all critics have been convinced by the plausibility of Ruth turning her admiring eyes away from Fr. Logan to gaze tenderly at her husband and say, “Take me home, Pierre.” However, as this scene takes place in the very location where the couple held their wedding reception, it becomes a suitable setting for a renewal of their commitment to each other. On second viewing, the street sign for “St. Pierre” in the film’s opening montage draws attention to the rock-like figure who supports his spouse, despite the public scandal into which the couple are drawn. While Ruth earlier acknowledges the precariousness of her situation (“I’m in no position to ask any favors of you, Pierre”), her husband remains by her side in a remarkable demonstration of *eros* transformed into *agape*: “Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved; it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.”<sup>59</sup> As a result, *I Confess* continues to provide cultural material for reflection on religious and secular vocations as different expressions of love. Some sixty years after its release – in the light of debates over priestly celibacy and the sanctity of marriage – the film has taken on an additional poignancy that Hitchcock could not have envisaged in 1953.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Cf. Richard A. Blake, *Afterimage: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000), 60.
- <sup>2</sup>Paula Marantz Cohen, *Alfred Hitchcock: The Legacy of Victorianism* (Kentucky: The University of Kentucky, 1995), 97.
- <sup>3</sup>The Swedish theologian Anders Nygren (1890-1978) offers one of the most extensive studies of the topic in *Agape & Eros*, trans. by Philip S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1982).
- <sup>4</sup>Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2006), 12. My article also draws on the writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar and C.S. Lewis.
- <sup>5</sup>“The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore a confessor will diligently take care that neither by word nor by sign nor in any other way or for any reason will he betray in the slightest anyone’s sin.” All quotations from Canon Law are taken from *The 1917 or Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law in English Translation with Extensive Scholarly Apparatus* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001) that was in force at the time of the film’s production. The Code was extensively revised in 1983.
- <sup>6</sup>Benedict, *Deus Caritas Est*, 10.
- <sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>8</sup>David Sterritt, *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 33.
- <sup>9</sup>Cf. Amy Lawrence, *The Passion of Montgomery Clift* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2010), 95.
- <sup>10</sup>Cf. Jack Sullivan, *Hitchcock’s Music* (New York: Yale University Press, 2006), 163-4.
- <sup>11</sup>Murray Pomerance, *An Eye for Hitchcock* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 210.
- <sup>12</sup>Benedict, *Deus Caritas Est*, 11.
- <sup>13</sup>Cf. Neil P. Hurley, *Soul in Suspense: Hitchcock’s Fright and Delight* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1993), 98.
- <sup>14</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love alone is credible*, trans. David C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 117.
- <sup>15</sup>The actual church in which the film was shot is called Saint-Zéphirin-de-Stadacona. At the time of writing, the church is run by the Fraternité Saint-Pierre, which has a particular

mission to use the Tridentine Rite in the form that was current prior to 1969:  
<http://www.fsspquebec.org/>

- <sup>16</sup>Canon 133 §2 of the 1917 Code states: “It is permitted to [clerics] to cohabit only with the sort of women whose natural bond places them above suspicion, such as a mother, sister, aunt, and others of this kind, or others whose upright way of life in view of maturity of years removes all suspicion.”
- <sup>17</sup>A memo from the Breen office (Production Code Administration) in December 1948 states: “The picture’s acceptability under the Code would, of course, depend on it containing nothing that would be offensive to the Catholic Church.” Cf. Amy Lawrence, “Constructing a priest, silencing a saint: The PCA and *I Confess* (1953),” *Film History*, Vol.19 (2007): 60. A priest named Fr. Paul La Couline was hired as a technical consultant.
- <sup>18</sup>Robin Wood, *Hitchcock’s Films Revisited* (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), 84.
- <sup>19</sup>Benedict, *Deus Caritas Est*, 10.
- <sup>20</sup>Balthasar, *Love alone is credible*, 63.
- <sup>21</sup>Cf. Lawrence, “Constructing a priest,” 8.
- <sup>22</sup>Cf. Blake, *Afterimage*, 62.
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup>Victor Perkins, “*I Confess*: Photographs of People Speaking,” *CineAction* No.52 (June 2000): 32.
- <sup>25</sup>Blake, *Afterimage*, 63.
- <sup>26</sup>C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: HarperCollins, 1960), 138-9.
- <sup>27</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, Vol.1, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 27.
- <sup>28</sup>Benedict, *Deus Caritas Est*, 10-11.
- <sup>29</sup>Lawrence, *The Passion of Montgomery Clift*, 109.
- <sup>30</sup>Aidan Bellenger, “Grace is Everywhere” in *Priesthood: A life open to Christ*, ed. Daniel P. Cronin (London: St Pauls, 2009), 16.
- <sup>31</sup>Perkins, “*I Confess*,” 33.
- <sup>32</sup>Benedict, *Deus Caritas Est*, 21.

- <sup>33</sup>Cf. Barry C. Knowlton and Eloise R. Knowlton, "Murder Mystery Meets Sacred Mystery: The Catholic Sacramental in Hitchcock's *I Confess*" in *Roman Catholicism in Fantastic Film*, ed. Regina Hansen (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2011), 196-208.
- <sup>34</sup>Cf. François Truffaut with the collaboration of Helen G. Scott, *Hitchcock by Truffaut: The definitive Study* (London: Paladin, 1986), 302.
- <sup>35</sup>Benedict XVI, *Ministers of Your Joy: Reflections on Priestly Spirituality* (London: St Pauls, 1989), 46.
- <sup>36</sup>Benedict, *Deus Caritas Est*, 16.
- <sup>37</sup>Stratford and Léonie Caldecott, "Divine Touch: A Meditation on the Laying on of Hands in the Church," *Communio*, Vol.38.3 (Fall 2011): 429.
- <sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup>Cf Denis Hart, "Priesthood – An Experience and Communication of Love" in *Priesthood*, ed. Daniel P. Cronin, 75-76.
- <sup>40</sup>Cf. Sullivan, *Hitchcock's Music*, 162.
- <sup>41</sup>Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 146.
- <sup>42</sup>Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, 82.
- <sup>43</sup>Blake, *Afterimage*, 68.
- <sup>44</sup>In the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar: "the standard that God lays down becomes the standard that I must lay down, and thus the standard by which I myself am measured. This is not a principle of 'mere justice', but the logic of absolute love." Cf Balthasar, *Love alone is credible*, 113.
- <sup>45</sup>Blake, *Afterimage*, 68. An Ordination would ordinarily take place in the city's cathedral but the church of Saint-Jean-Baptiste was used for the shooting of the scene.
- <sup>46</sup>Balthasar, *Love alone is credible*, 116.
- <sup>47</sup>Perkins, "*I Confess*," 31.
- <sup>48</sup>Hitchcock initially wanted a screenplay in which Fr. Logan is executed but later found innocent. Cf. Michel Cieutat, "La Loi du silence: Le mal aimé d'une filmo," *Positif*, No.470 (Avril 2000): 88.

- <sup>49</sup>Lesley Brill, *The Hitchcock Romance: Love and Irony in Hitchcock's Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 104.
- <sup>50</sup>Fulton J. Sheen, *Those Mysterious Priests* (Mumbai: St Pauls, 2009), 43-44.
- <sup>51</sup>Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-figures in Film* (Lanham: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 112.
- <sup>52</sup>Balthasar, *Love alone is credible*, 102.
- <sup>53</sup>Cieutat, "La Loi du silence", 88. Several critics, including Cieutat, mention the poignant fact that Hitchcock gave the character the name of his own loyal wife, Alma.
- <sup>54</sup>Brill, *The Hitchcock Romance*, 106.
- <sup>55</sup>Cf. Patrick McGilligan, *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light* (New York: Wiley, 2003), 457. *Boys Town* (Norman Taurog, 1938) featured an Oscar-winning Spencer Tracy as the Catholic priest named Fr. Flanagan.
- <sup>56</sup>Perkins, "I Confess," 35.
- <sup>57</sup>Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 145.
- <sup>58</sup>Balthasar, *Love alone is credible*, 136.
- <sup>59</sup>Benedict, *Deus Caritas Est*, 9.

### References

- Anon. *The 1917 or Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law in English Translation with Extensive Scholarly Apparatus*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001.
- Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *The Glory of the Lord*, Vol.1, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982.
- Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *Love alone is credible*, trans. David C. Schindler. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004.
- Baugh, Lloyd, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-figures in Film* (Lanham: Sheed & Ward, 1997).
- Bellenger, Aidan, "Grace is Everywhere" in *Priesthood: A life open to Christ*, ed. Daniel P. Cronin. London: St Pauls, 2009, 16-18.
- Benedict XVI, *Ministers of Your Joy: Reflections on Priestly Spirituality*. London: St Pauls, 1989.

- Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*. London: Catholic Truth Society, 2006.
- Blake, Richard A., *Afterimage: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000.
- Brill, Lesley, *The Hitchcock Romance: Love and Irony in Hitchcock's Films*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Caldecott, Stratford and Léonie, "Divine Touch: A Meditation on the Laying on of Hands in the Church," *Communio*, Vol.38.3 (Fall 2011).
- Cieutat, Michel, "La Loi du silence: Le mal aimé d'une filmo," *Positif*, No.470 (Avril 2000), 88-90.
- Cronin, Daniel P. (ed.), *Priesthood: A life open to Christ*. London: St Pauls, 2009.
- Hart, Denis, "Priesthood – An Experience and Communication of Love" in *Priesthood*, ed. Daniel P. Cronin, London: St Pauls, 2009, 75-76.
- Hurley, Neil P. *Soul in Suspense: Hitchcock's Fright and Delight*. Metuchen, N.J: The Scarecrow Press, 1993.
- Knowlton, Barry C. and Eloise R. Knowlton, "Murder Mystery Meets Sacred Mystery: The Catholic Sacramental in Hitchcock's *I Confess*" in *Roman Catholicism in Fantastic Film*, ed. Regina Hansen. Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2011, 196-208.
- Lawrence, Amy, "Constructing a priest, silencing a saint: The PCA and *I Confess* (1953)," *Film History*, Vol.19 (2007), 58-72.
- Lawrence, Amy, *The Passion of Montgomery Clift*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2010.
- Lewis, C.S., *The Four Loves*. London: HarperCollins, 1960.
- Marantz Cohen, Paula, *Alfred Hitchcock: The Legacy of Victorianism*. Kentucky: The University of Kentucky, 1995.
- McGilligan, Patrick, *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light*. New York: Wiley, 2003.
- Nygren, Anders, *Agape & Eros*, trans. by Philip S. Watson. London: SPCK, 1982.
- Perkins, Victor, "*I Confess*: Photographs of People Speaking," *CineAction* No.52 (June 2000), 28-39.
- Pomerance, Murray, *An Eye for Hitchcock*. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004.
- Sheen, Fulton J., *Those Mysterious Priests*. Mumbai: St Pauls, 2009.

Sterritt, David, *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Sullivan, Jack, *Hitchcock's Music*. New York: Yale University Press, 2006.

Truffaut, François with the collaboration of Helen G. Scott, *Hitchcock by Truffaut: The definitive Study*. London: Paladin, 1986.

Wood, Robin, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*. London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989.