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MOTION PICTURES

**Encyclical Letter
of
His Holiness, Pope Pius XI**



NATIONAL CATHOLIC WELFARE CONFERENCE
1312 Massachusetts Avenue
WASHINGTON, D. C.

Encyclical Letter

(*"Vigilanti Cura"*)

TO OUR VENERABLE BRETHREN,
THE ARCHBISHOPS AND BISHOPS
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
AND TO OTHER ORDINARIES ENJOYING PEACE
AND COMMUNION WITH THE APOSTOLIC SEE

On Motion Pictures

POPE PIUS XI

VENERABLE BRETHREN

GREETINGS AND APOSTOLIC BENEDECTION

IN FOLLOWING with vigilant eye, as Our pastoral office requires, the beneficent works of Our Brethren in the Episcopate and of the faithful, it has been highly pleasing to us to learn of the fruits already gathered and of the progress which continues to be made by that prudent initiative launched more than two years ago as a holy crusade against the abuses of motion pictures, and which was in a special manner entrusted to "The Legion of Decency."

It is an excellent experiment, that now offers Us a most welcome opportunity, manifesting more fully Our thought in regard to a matter which touches intimately the moral and religious life of the entire Christian People.

GRATITUDE EXPRESSED TO HIERARCHY OF U. S.

First of all, We express Our gratitude to the Hierarchy in the United States of America, to the faithful who cooperated with them, for the important results already achieved, under their direction and guidance, by the "Legion of Decency." And Our gratitude is all the livelier for the fact that We were deeply anguished to note with each passing day the lamentable progress, *magni passus extra viam*, of the motion picture art and industry in the portrayal of sin and vice.

Part I

As often as the occasion has presented itself, We have considered it the duty of Our high office to direct to this condition the attention not only of the Episcopate and clergy, but also of all men who are right-minded and solicitous for the public weal.

In Our Encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri*, We had already deplored that "potent instrumentalities of publicity (such as motion pictures), which might be of great advantage to learning and education, were they properly directed by healthy principles, often unfortunately serve as an incentive to evil and passion and are subordinated to sordid gain."

In August of 1934, addressing Ourselves to a delegation of the International Federation of the Motion Picture Press, We pointed out the very great importance which the motion picture has acquired in our days, and its vast influence alike in promotion of good and insinuation of evil. We called to mind that it is necessary to apply to the cinema a supreme rule which must direct and regulate even the highest

art in order that it may not find itself in continual conflict with Christian morality, or even simply with human morality based upon natural law. The essential purpose of art, its *raison d'être*, is to assist in the perfecting of the moral personality, which is man. For this reason it must itself be moral.

And We concluded, amid the manifest approval of that elect body—a memory still dear to Us—by recommending to them the necessity of making the motion picture “moral, an influence for good morals, an educator.”

And even as recently as April of this year, when We had the happiness to receive in audience a group of delegates of the International Congress of the Motion Picture Press held in Rome, We again drew attention to the gravity of the problem, and warmly exhorted all men of good will, in the name not only of religion but also of the true moral and civil welfare of the people, to use every means in their power, such as the press, to make of the cinema a valuable auxiliary of instruction and education rather than of destruction and ruin of the soul.

The subject, however, is of such paramount importance in itself, and because of the present condition of society, that We deem it necessary to return to it again, not alone for the purpose of making particular recommendations as on past occasions, but rather with a universal outlook, which while embracing the needs of your own dioceses, Venerable Brethren, takes into consideration those of the entire Catholic world.

It is, in fact, urgently necessary to make provision that in this field also, progress of art, science and human technique in the industry, since they are all true gifts of God, may be ordained to His glory

and to the salvation of souls, and may be made to serve in a practical way to promote the extension of the Kingdom of God upon earth. Thus, the Church bids us pray that we may all profit by them in such manner as not to lose the eternal good: *sic transeamus per bona temporalia ut non amittamus aeterna.*

LEGION OF DECENCY IS WARMLY PRAISED

Now, then, it is a certainty which can readily be verified that the more marvelous is the progress of the motion picture art and industry, the more pernicious and deadly has it shown itself to morality, religion and even to the very decencies of human society.

The directors of the industry in the United States recognized this fact themselves, when they confessed that the responsibility before the people and the world was their very own. In the agreement entered into by common accord in March, 1930, solemnly sealed, signed and published in the press, they formally pledged themselves to safeguard in the future the moral welfare of patrons of the motion picture.

It is promised in this agreement that no film which lowers the moral standard of spectators, which casts discredit on natural or human laws, or arouses sympathy for their violation, will be produced.

Nevertheless, in spite of this wise and spontaneously taken decision, those responsible showed themselves incapable of carrying it into effect. It appeared operators were not disposed to stand by principles to which they obligated themselves. Since, therefore, the above-mentioned undertakings proved they have but slight effect, since the parade of vice and crime continued on the screen, the road seemed

almost closed to those who sought honest diversion in the motion picture.

In this crisis, you, Venerable Brethren, were among the first to study the means of safeguarding the souls entrusted to your care. You launched the "Legion of Decency" as a crusade for public morality designed to revitalize the ideals of natural and Christian rectitude. Far from you was the thought of doing damage to the motion picture industry; rather, indeed, did you arm it beforehand against the ruin which menaces every form of recreation which in the guise of art degenerates into corruption.

Your leadership calls forth the prompt and devoted loyalty of your faithful people. Millions of American Catholics signed the pledge of the "Legion of Decency" binding themselves not to attend any motion picture which was offensive to Catholic moral principles or to the proper standards of living. We thus were able to proclaim joyfully that few problems of these latter times have so closely united the Bishops and the people as the one resolved by cooperation in this holy crusade. Not only Catholics, but also high-minded Protestants and Jews and many others accepted your lead and joined their efforts with yours in restoring wise standards, both artistic and moral, to the motion picture.

URGES CONTINUANCE OF FILM CRUSADE

It is an exceedingly great comfort to Us to note the outstanding success of the crusade. Because of your vigilance and because of the pressure which has been brought to bear by public opinion, the motion picture has shown improvement from the moral standpoint: crime and vice are portrayed less fre-

quently; sin no longer is so openly approved or acclaimed; false ideals of life no longer are presented in so flagrant a manner to the impressionable minds of youth.

Although in certain quarters it was predicted that artistic values in the motion picture would be impaired seriously by the reform insisted upon by the "Legion of Decency," it appears quite the contrary happened and the "Legion of Decency" has given no little impetus to efforts to advance the cinema on the road to noble artistic significance by directing it towards the production of classic masterpieces as well as of original creations of uncommon worth.

Nor have financial investments in the industry suffered, as was foretold gratuitously by many. Those who stayed away from the motion picture theater because it outraged morality are patronizing it now that they are able to enjoy clean films which are not offensive to good morals or dangerous to Christian virtue.

UNCEASING VIGILANCE COUNSELED BY POPE

When you started your crusade, it was said your efforts would be of short duration and the effects would not be lasting because, as the vigilance of Bishops and the faithful gradually diminished, the producers would be free to return again to their former methods. It is not difficult to understand why certain of these might be desirous of going back to sinister themes which pandered to base desires and which you have proscribed. While representation of subjects of real artistic value and the portrayal of vicissitudes of human virtue require intellectual efforts, toil and ability and at times

considerable outlay of money, it is often relatively easy to attract a certain type of person and certain classes of people to theaters which present picture plays calculated to inflame passions and arouse lower instincts latent in human hearts.

Unceasing universal vigilance must, on the contrary, convince the producers that the "Legion of Decency" has not been started as a crusade of short duration, soon to be neglected and forgotten, but that the Bishops of the United States are determined at all times and at all costs to safeguard the recreation of the people in whatever form that recreation may take.

Part II

Recreation in its manifold variety has become a necessity of people who labor under the fatiguing conditions of modern industry. But it must be worthy of the rational nature of man and therefore must be morally healthy. It must be elevated to the rank of a positive factor for good, and must seek to arouse a noble sentiment. A people who, in time of repose, give themselves to diversions which violate decency, honor or morality; to recreations which, especially to the young, constitute occasions for sin, are in grave danger of losing their greatest, even their national power.

It admits of no discussion that the motion picture has achieved in these last years a position of universal importance among modern means of diversion.

There is no need to point out the fact that millions of people go to motion pictures every day; that motion picture theaters are being opened in ever-

increasing numbers in civilized and semi-civilized countries; that the motion picture has become the most popular form of diversion which is offered for the leisure moments, not only of the rich, but of all classes of society.

At the same time there exists today no means of influencing the masses more potent than the cinema. The reason for this is to be sought for in the very nature of the pictures projected upon the screens, in the popularity of the motion picture plays and in the circumstances which accompany them.

PECULIAR POWER OF MOTION PICTURE

The power of the motion picture consists in this: that it speaks by means of vivid and concrete imagery, which the mind takes in with enjoyment and without fatigue.

Even the crudest and most primitive minds, which have neither the capacity nor the desire to make the efforts necessary for abstraction or deductive reasoning, are captivated by the cinema. In place of the efforts which reading or listening demand, there is the continued pleasure of a succession of concrete and, so to speak, living pictures.

This power is still greater in the talking picture, for the reason that the interpretation becomes even easier and the charm of music is added to the action and drama. The dances and variety acts which sometimes are introduced between films serve to increase the stimulation of the pageant.

Since, then, the cinema is in reality an object lesson which, for good or for evil, teaches the majority of men more effectively than abstract reasoning, it must be elevated to conformity with

the aims of the Christian conscience and saved from depraving or demoralizing effects.

BAD FILMS OCCASION SIN AND CREATE PREJUDICES

Everyone knows what damage is done to the soul by bad motion pictures. They are occasions of sin; they seduce young people along the ways of evil by glorifying the passions; they show life under a false light; they cloud ideals; they destroy pure love, respect for marriage and affection for the family. They are capable also of creating prejudices among individuals, misunderstandings among nations, among social classes, and among entire races.

On the other hand, good motion pictures are capable of exercising a profoundly moral influence upon those who see them. In addition to affording recreation, they are able to arouse noble ideals of life, to communicate valuable conceptions, to impart better knowledge of the history and beauties of the fatherland and other countries, to present truth and virtue under attractive forms, to create at least the flavor of understanding among nations, social classes and races, to champion the cause of justice, to give new life to the claims of virtue, to contribute positively to the genesis of a just social order in the world.

These considerations take on greater seriousness from the fact that the cinema speaks not to individuals but to multitudes, and does so in circumstances, time, place and surroundings which are the most apt to arouse unusual enthusiasm for good as well as for bad and to conduce to that collective exultation which, as experience teaches us, may assume the most morbid form.

A motion picture is viewed by people who are seated in a dark theater, and whose faculties, mental, physical and often spiritual, are relaxed. One does not need to go far in search of these theaters: they are close to home, to church, to school, and they thus bring the cinema to the very center of popular life.

THEATERS BRING CINEMA TO CENTER OF POPULAR LIFE

Moreover, the acting out of the plot is done by men and women selected for their art, for all those natural gifts, the employment of those expedients, which can become, for youth particularly, the instruments of seduction. Further, the motion picture has enlisted in its service luxurious appointments, pleasing music, the vigor of realism and every form of whim and fancy. For this very reason it attracts and fascinates particularly the young, adolescent, or even the child. Thus, at the very age when moral sense is being formed, when notions and sentiments of justice and rectitude, of duty, obligations and ideals of life are being developed, the motion picture, with its direct propaganda, assumes a position of commanding influence.

It is unfortunate that in the present state of affairs this influence is frequently exerted for evil. So much so that when one thinks of the havoc wrought in the souls of youth and childhood, of the loss of innocence so often suffered in motion picture theaters, there comes to mind the terrible condemnation pronounced by Our Lord upon the corrupters of little ones: "But he that shall scandalize one of these little ones that believe in Me, it were better

for him that a millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

CALLS ON BISHOPS OF ENTIRE WORLD

It is therefore one of the supreme necessities of Our time to watch and to labor to the end that the motion picture be no longer a school of corruption but that it be transformed into an effectual instrument for the education and elevation of mankind.

And here We record with pleasure that certain governments, in their anxiety over the influence exercised by the cinema in the moral and educational fields, have with the aid of upright and honest persons, especially fathers, mothers and families, set up reviewing commissions and constituted other agencies which have to do with motion picture production, in an effort to direct motion pictures, for inspiration, to national works of great poets and writers.

It was most fitting and desirable that you, Venerable Brethren, should have exercised a special watchfulness over the motion picture industry which your country so highly developed and which is a great influence in other quarters of the globe. It is equally the duty of Bishops of the entire Catholic world to unite in vigilance over this universal and potent form of entertainment and instruction, to the end that they may be able to place a ban on bad motion pictures because they are an offense to moral and religious sentiment and because they are in opposition to the Christian spirit and to its ethical principles.

There must be no weariness in combating what-

ever contributes to lessening the peoples' sense of decency and honor.

OBLIGATION WHICH BINDS BISHOPS AND FAITHFUL

This is the obligation which binds not only Bishops, but also the faithful, and all decent men who are solicitous for the decorum and moral health of the family, the nation and human society in general.

In what, then, must this vigilance consist?

Part III

The problem of the production of moral films would be solved radically if it were possible for us to have the production wholly inspired by the principles of Christian morality. We can never sufficiently praise all those who have dedicated themselves, or who are to dedicate themselves, to the noble cause of raising the standard of the motion picture to meet the needs of education and the requirements of Christian conscience.

For this purpose they must make full use of the technical ability of experts, and not permit the waste of effort and money by the employment of amateurs.

But since We know how difficult it is to organize such an industry, especially because of considerations of a financial nature, and since on the other hand it is necessary to influence the production of all films so they may contain nothing harmful from the religious, moral or social viewpoint, pastors of souls must exercise their vigilance over films

wherever they may be produced or offered to Christian peoples.

As to the motion picture industry itself, We exhort Bishops of all countries, but in particular you, Venerable Brethren, to address your appeal to those Catholics who hold important positions in this industry. Let them take serious thought of their duties and the responsibility which they have as children of the Church to use their influence and authority for the promotion of the principles of sound morality in the films which they produce or aid in producing.

The number of Catholics who are executives, directors, authors or actors is not inconsiderable, and it is unfortunate their influence has not always been in accordance with their Faith and their ideals. You will do well, Venerable Brethren, to pledge them to bring their profession into harmony with their conscience as respectable men and followers of Jesus Christ.

In this, as in every other field, the apostolate of pastors of souls will surely find the best collaborators in those who fight in the ranks of Catholic Action, and in this letter We cannot refrain from addressing to them a warm appeal that they give this cause their full contribution and their unwearying and unfailing activity.

From time to time Bishops will do well to recall to the motion picture industry that amid the cares of their pastoral ministry they, as Bishops, are under obligation to interest themselves in every form of decent and healthy recreation because they are responsible before God for the moral welfare of their people, even during their leisure.

MUST PROCLAIM DANGER TO NATION'S MORAL FIBRE

Their sacred calling constrains them to proclaim clearly and openly that unhealthy and impure entertainment destroys the moral fibre of the nation. They will likewise remind the motion picture industry that the demands they make regard not only Catholics, but all who patronize the cinema.

In particular, you, Venerable Brethren of the United States, will be able to insist with justice that the industry in your country has recognized and accepted its responsibility before society.

The Bishops of the whole world will take care to make clear to leaders of the motion picture industry that the force of such a power of universality as the cinema can be directed with great utility to the highest ends of individual and social improvement. Why, indeed, should there be a question of merely avoiding evil? Why should the motion picture simply be a means of diversion and light relaxation to occupy an idle hour? With its magnificent power, it can and must be a light and a positive guide to what is good.

And now, in view of the gravity of the subject, we consider it timely to come down to certain practical indications.

ANNUAL PLEDGES; LISTS IN THREE CATEGORIES

Above all, all pastors of souls will undertake to obtain each year from their people a pledge similar to the one already alluded to which was given by their American brothers, in which they promised to stay away from motion picture plays which were offensive to truth and Christian morality.

The most efficacious manner of obtaining these

pledges promises to be through the parish church or school, by enlisting the earnest cooperation of all fathers and mothers of families who are conscious of their grave responsibility.

The Bishops will also be able to avail themselves of the Catholic Press for the purpose of bringing home to the people the moral duty and effectiveness of this promise.

The fulfillment of this pledge supposes that the people will be made clearly aware of which films are permitted to all, which are permitted with reservations and which are harmful or positively bad. This requires prompt, regular and frequent publication of classified lists of motion picture plays so as to make the information readily accessible to all. Special bulletins or other timely publications such as the daily Catholic Press may be used for this purpose.

REVIEWING OFFICES FOR EACH COUNTRY

Were it possible, it would in itself be desirable to establish a single list for the entire world, because all live under the same moral laws. Since, however, there is here a question of pictures which interest all classes of society, the great and the humble, the learned and the unlettered, the judgment passed upon the film cannot be the same in each case in all respects.

Indeed, circumstances, usages and forms vary from country to country, so it does not seem practical to have a single list for all the world. If, however, films were classified in each country in the manner indicated above, the resultant list would offer in principle the guidance needed.

Therefore, it will be necessary that in each country

the Bishops set up a permanent national reviewing office in order to be able to promote good motion pictures, classify others and bring this judgment to the knowledge of the priests and the faithful. It will be very proper to entrust this agency to the central organization of Catholic Action which is dependent on the Bishops. At all events, it must clearly be laid down that this service of information, in order to function organically and with efficiency, must be on a national basis, that is, it must be carried on by a single central responsibility.

INDIVIDUAL BISHOPS CAN APPLY SEVERER CRITERIONS

Should grave reasons really require it, Their Excellencies the Bishops, in their own dioceses through their diocesan reviewing committees, will be able to apply to a national list—which must use standards adaptable to the whole nation—such severer criterions as may be demanded by the character of the region. They may even censor films which are admitted to the general list.

The above-mentioned office likewise will look after the organization of the existing motion picture theaters belonging to parish Catholic associations, so that they may be guaranteed reviewed approval of films. Through the organization of these halls, which often represent a considerable clientele for the industry, it will be possible to advance a new demand, namely, that the industry produce motion pictures which correspond entirely to our principles. Such films then may readily be shown, not only in Catholic halls but also in others.

We realize the establishment of such an office will

involve a certain sacrifice, a certain expense for Catholics of the various countries. Yet the great importance of the motion picture, the necessity of safeguarding the morality of Christian people and of the entire nation, make this sacrifice more than justified. Indeed, the effectiveness of our schools, of our Catholic associations and even of our churches is lessened and endangered by the plague of evil and pernicious motion pictures.

INFORMATION EXCHANGE AMONG THE COUNTRIES

The office force must be composed of persons who are familiar with the technique of the motion picture and who at the same time are well-grounded in the principles of Catholic morality and doctrines. They must, in addition, be under the guidance and direct supervision of a priest chosen by the Bishop.

Opportune understandings for the exchange of that information among offices of the various countries will conduce to greater efficiency and harmony in the work of reviewing films, while due consideration will be given to varying conditions and circumstances.

It will thus be possible to achieve unity of outlook in the judgments and communications appearing in the Catholic Press of the world.

These offices will profit, not only by the experiments made in the United States, but also by the accomplishments of Catholics of other countries in the motion picture field.

Even if employees of the office—with the best good will and intentions—should make an occasional mistake, as happens in all human affairs, the Bishops in their pastoral prudence will know how to

apply effective remedies to safeguard in every possible way the authority and prestige of the office itself. This may be done by strengthening the staff with more influential men or by replacing those who have shown themselves less capable of performing their delicate duties.

WILL ACCOMPLISH GREAT WORK FOR MORALITY OF THEIR PEOPLE

If the Bishops of the world assume their share in the exercise of this painstaking vigilance over the motion picture—and of this We, who know their pastoral zeal, have no doubt—they will certainly accomplish a great work for the protection of the morality of their people during their moments of leisure and recreation.

They will win the approbation and approval of all right-thinking men, Catholic and non-Catholic, and they will help assure that this great international force—the motion picture—shall be directed toward the noble end of promoting the highest ideals and the truest standard of life.

That these desires which spring up in Our paternal heart may be realized, We implore the help of the grace of God; and in pledge thereof, We impart to you, Venerable Brethren, and to the clergy and the people entrusted to you, Our affectionate and Apostolic Benediction.

Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, the twenty-ninth day of June, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, in the year of Our Lord 1936, the fifteenth of Our Pontificate.

PIUS XI, POPE.

