

Pope Pius XIII (Jude Law). Still: HBO.



EARS TO HEAR, EYES TO SEE

The Search for Holiness in *The Young Pope*: An Orthodox View

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The HBO series *The Young Pope*, directed by Paolo Sorrentino, generated unexpectedly involved and heated discussion among Orthodox Christians in Russia. It seemed as though every self-identified believer in Russia watched it. Some spat and condemned it. The majority admired it. But nobody remained indifferent or reserved judgment until the first season's end.

“Jump!”

The subject of the series is the Vatican, that is to say, the Roman Catholic Church. Russian Orthodoxy has long taught that Moscow is the Third Rome, the center of the Christian *oikoumena*, the only true church, and that Russian Orthodox believers are the leaders of the entire Church. Catholics have accordingly been viewed as

heretics who have conformed to the world and abandoned understanding of the essence of Christianity. On the other hand, the children of the Roman Church, with its own centuries-old traditions, see themselves as the center of the Christian *oikoumena*. They consider the Orthodox, if not quite schismatics, then at least an ethnic and historical curiosity. Russian Orthodoxy only appears in *The Young Pope* in one of the last episodes, in a scene lasting just a couple of minutes. We see a fictional patriarch granted an audience by Pius XIII, an obviously comic character, accompanied by a boisterous folk melody and unable to utter a single word.

Even more mysterious than the image of Russian Orthodoxy in the series is the character of a kangaroo who, released from its cage, jumps around

the Vatican gardens like some kind of extraterrestrial. Enchanted by his encounters with the kangaroo, seeing something prophetic in them (a mystical destiny of the Church? himself, his fate, his soul . . . ?), the Pope commands him, "Jump!" The Pope (or rather the director, Paolo Sorrentino) thus performs a miracle. The kangaroo jumped and the series captivated Russian viewers—and made many of them ponder the cultural, political, and everyday differences between Christians of different regions. How important are the differences between Christians of various countries and confessions, after all? How different are the problems faced by an ordinary person from problems faced by the Church of Christ?

Real Or Fictional

People both want and expect a conversation about the pressing problems of the contemporary Church. This desire creates a market for films about the Church that are not marked with the official seal. Every now and then on social media, I come upon indignant comments by Orthodox laity and clergy who say, "We started watching *The Young Pope*. At first everything seemed to be interesting and relevant, but then a kind of nonsense began. Life is not like this. We were not expecting it!" That is, people reacted to the series as if it had really been conceived as an actual conversation about the problems of the Church. Yes, the conversation does happen in a way, but still *The Young Pope* is first and foremost a spectacle, a series created with knowledge of its subject, but by a completely secular man.

Nevertheless, perhaps the "secularity" and the cinematic glamor, great entertainment value, and fascinating narrative serve as an effective coat-

ing for a pill with serious contents. The show's conversation is about *us*, and through us about the Church; it is about our faith and our doubts. "Pope Francis said recently that faith cannot be complete unless tormented by doubts," Sorrentino remarks. "In the series you can see not just doubts: there is a second, dark side of faith. Holiness and hypocrisy. And ultimately only the connection with ordinary, everyday life—Maradona's scoring a goal or the wisdom of a person with disabilities—makes the faith alive."

The Orphan

The great success of the series is the portrayal of the main character by Jude Law. The director believes that this will be a seminal role for Law, and that acting in the series has changed the actor. The story of Lenny Belardo, the American Catholic cleric who becomes the youngest Pope in history, is above all the fate of a complex and wounded person to whom a large number of people can relate. The Pope is an orphan, though it is unclear whether his parents died or simply abandoned him. The conflict between fathers and children in the series is obtrusively straightforward: The parents are committed hippies, but Lenny grows up in a church environment. He is a Vatican cleric, a representative of the same establishment that the hippies, in theory, should hate. And in Lenny's memories, his parents again and again run away from him. The Pope is an orphan, carrying the burning desire of love through his whole life. This unrest is the fulcrum, and at the same time the lever by which the young rigorist in the tiara seeks to turn the world around. "I have no father, and therefore I have found the Father" is a psychological construct which claims to explain his faith. The

Pope Pius XIII (Jude Law). Photo: Gianni Fiorito/HBO.



underlying question of love for God, love for people, and the transformation of these two loves into one is central to the arc of Law's character.

It is not for nothing that in one of the episodes the Pope's private letters become a universal sensation. They are unsent, chaste letters to a girl he had met only once in his youth and whose name he did not know, letters about a man's love for a woman, ascending to a single Source of Love. Other characters are also "sick with love" in the higher sense: Sister Mary, who became the "Ma" of Lenny and the other children of her orphanage; Cardinal Voiello, who is in love with Sister Mary; the young wife of a Swiss guardsman who is finally able to give birth to a child by the Pope's prayer. We watch the furious orphan grow up. By the fifth episode, the rigorist Pope is changing, trying to resolve the questions he cannot avoid: How can compromise with a sin be distinguished from charity to a sinner? How can one understand freedom when one is not free from childhood fears and illusions? How can we see

the trees for the forest—that is, living people for the church as an institution? How can one accept the world in all its complexity and yet not lose a living and ardent faith? Sorrentino himself says, "The Pope fights with himself, with his own phantoms. He is trying to free himself from his tragic childhood, although he is very connected to it. His ambitions are born not so much from vanity, as from the desire to stop being a son and become a father for hundreds of millions of the faithful. Obviously this is not an easy path, and on this path one cannot help making mistakes, because he has to change at the speed of light." It is these errors and these changes that reveal the Pope to be a living person.

The City On a Hill

The story of an orphan acting out his sufferings and complexes is not new. However, here the orphan is placed in a very specific environment, the highest echelon of ecclesiastical authority, in which the human element manifests itself with the greatest clarity.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8). All people—even atheists and opponents of the Church, the critical and the indifferent alike—are drawn to the Church to ask the most acute, burning questions. Everyone feels that it is in the Church that the search for meaning can somehow be resolved, for the Church is about God, about the truth, about the meaning of my life that I myself cannot understand. The Church cannot hide from these inquiries: it is the city on a hill, visible from afar to all, friends and enemies, believers and haters.

This is why so many viewers were attracted to this series: it is about the Church, and therefore about us, about the most important thing in us.

The Fifth Episode

I almost wish that the fifth episode had ended the series. It is the apotheosis of Pius XIII, who reminded everyone that his predecessor in the "Pius" line was a conservative and a supporter of Mussolini. He puts the Curia in its place, exposes the scheming of the insidious Secretary of State, reveals to the world his own moral purity and even holiness, taunts the pulp-greedy secular public, punishes a homosexual and pardons an alcoholic, sets the Vatican on a new course, one of conservatism and a "revival of the foundations." All are trembling, overwhelmed by the irresistible force of his words and deeds. "What have we forgotten? We have forgotten about God!" Having gathered the cardinals, the Pope tells them *ex cathedra*, "They are knocking from the outside, the world is knocking, but from now on we are not at home."

This message is understandable. In the world there is a longing for sacred mystery, for holiness that is not diminished by earthly life and will not dissolve in vanity, which is especially noticeable against the background of secularization of the Church's institutions and practices. Too often under what appears to be Christian pretexts, be it social service, peacekeeping missions, or ecumenical dialogue, the Church bureaucracy tries to insert itself into the affairs of this world, to occupy a cozy place at the throne of Caesar for the sake of honor, power, and prosperity. It is also worrying when churches feel more like ritual service shops, or when fashionable ideology begins to prevail over the Gospel, or when missionary zeal is obscured by a desire to lure as many sheep as possible into the fold so they can be "sheared." Regarding the last, Sorrentino says in an interview, "I learned that the main fear in the Vatican and the main concern of its inhabitants all the way to the very top is the number of believers. The number is very important. How many believers do we have? How many did we lose? How many can we bring back?"

The primary concern of Secretary of State Voiello, whose politics the Pope blames for the dwindling number of Vatican tourists, is very similar to the concerns of a typical Orthodox priest, the rector of a village church, fretting from dawn to dusk to find money to repair the roof, to renovate the iconostasis, to pay the endlessly growing diocesan assessment, and so on and so forth. A groan goes up throughout the world: "Who is my God? The Trinity or Mammon?" Thankfully, the director of the series has not created Cardinal Voiello as a black-and-white caricature. In one scene, we see him

in prayer, kneeling in front of a wall in his house hung with ancient crucifixes, and groaning about the same: "What am I doing, Lord, and how long will I live like this?"

Cardinal Voiello

Cardinal Voiello, portrayed by Silvio Orlando, is perhaps the best character of the series. A hardened schemer and manager, he says at one point when invited to confess: "All my sins are connected with politics and finances. You will not understand anything about them." Yet he is capable of love and compassion. He sees the action of the Holy Spirit in the election of the Pope, and in the Pope himself, whose conversation with a woman he wanted to use as compromising evidence. We see this, according to the director, "as always between the lines." And in all cases charming. Hopefully

this wonderful character will not be spoiled in the follow-up series.

On Holiness

The vertiginous turns of the plot, unpredictable and sometimes completely ridiculous on the surface, are in fact quite true to life, which itself is long, fascinating, and unpredictable. And in it there is a place for the miraculous.

In the course of the series it turns out, for example, that the new Pope, this hooligan smoking in the halls of the Vatican, who humbles and tames the older cardinals, and sneaks out at night with a friend to toss around Rome, is a saint. He has a personal relationship with God, whom he addresses in prayer passionately, straightforwardly, demandingly, honestly, with deep faith.

Cardinal Angelo Voiello (Silvio Orlando).
Photo: Gianni Fiorito/
HBO.





In his adolescence, the dying mother of his friend was returned to life by his prayer. By his prayer a barren woman conceives, a wicked abbess is struck by heavenly punishment. Like Saint Francis, he talks to animals. He is discerning and sees right through the intrigues of his opponents, sees the secrets in the hearts of those around him. At the same time he remains human, complex, passionate, mistaken, sometimes rigid and unfair, sometimes absurd, sometimes weak

and confused, always changing—in a word, alive.

Pope Pius XIII (Jude Law). Photo: Gianni Fiorito/HBO.

There is no contradiction here, because in every mortal both the heavenly and the perishable are intertwined. But the basis of the personality of Lenny Belardo is this holiness, this living faith and connection with God. It is the basis that defines him, and the rest is capable of change. Repentance in Greek is *metanoia*—"a change of mind." ❀



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