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Spiritus

Matthew Spaul

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Thesis - Master of Fine Arts in Film & Animation
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ABSTRACT

On February 25th, 1999, The Roman Catholic Church excommunicated Father James Callan and the parishioners of Corpus Christi Church in Rochester, NY. Covered by Media nationwide, the excommunication was portrayed as the latest struggle of progressive Catholics against the more conservative Church authorities. Growing from 200 to more than 3,000 parishioners in less than a decade, Corpus Christi became home to an impressive range of social justice programs, including a health care center, a halfway house for former prisoners, a home for recovering addicts, a hospice, and a day-care center. What got Callan and the church into trouble were the practices that went far beyond the norm in Roman Catholicism; blessing homosexual unions, allowing non-catholics to receive communion during mass and allowing his pastoral associate, Mary Ramerman, to wear priest-like vestments and help officiate in the celebration of the Eucharist.

This paper discusses the making of the documentary, *Spiritus*, by Matthew Spaul to fulfill his thesis requirement in order to receive his MFA in film & animation from The Rochester Institute of Technology. This paper takes us from how he learned about this story to the making of the film 15 years later. Matthew navigates not only why he did this, how he did this, but also the challenges that he faced along the way. The paper concludes with the reactions and feedback during the various screenings this film was put through and the awards it has won up until this point.

I. The Origins of a film

When I was 13 years old, my mother took my family to Corpus Christi Church. It was different from the church in which I was confirmed, and a refreshing change. There was a gospel choir singing, a diverse congregation, and perhaps the most noticeable difference: a woman at the altar, preaching. At such a young age, I was not thinking about these contrasts; I just knew that this new church was more interesting and exciting than the more traditional Catholic church we attended in the earlier part of my youth. For the next two years, church didn't feel like a chore anymore. I started to actually listen to the messages being preached on the altar every weekend. Coming from an Italian family, identifying as Roman Catholic was as much an expectation as eating pasta at my grandmother's house; but it was only when we attended Mass at Corpus Christi that I learned to believe in and understand the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Corpus Christi became our religious home, and I never felt more in tune with Catholicism. When we showed up one weekend and camera crews, news reporters, and a growing number of people were lining up to sit in the pews, a sense of shock came over me. This marked the beginning of the drama that unfolded over the next two months, ultimately resulting in excommunication of the parish by the Vatican. We continued to celebrate Mass at Corpus Christi throughout those two months; however, one day after the senior priest had been removed, an above-the-fold headline emblazoned across the front of the *Democrat & Chronicle* read "Excommunicated." My mother informed our family that the church and its thousands of parishioners -- including us -- were no longer welcome by Roman Catholicism. We stopped going to Corpus Christi, but what was even more interesting was that we stopped going to church. As a 15-year-old, I understood enough to know that the church had broken some rules, but I didn't understand why those actions caused my family to be excommunicated by the Vatican. Why was I no longer permitted to believe in Jesus? I could not fully understand what had taken place. I ceased to believe in rituals; I stopped praying; and I stopped thinking about having a relationship with God.

Eventually we started going back to church, but this time it felt different. Father Jim Callan -- formerly the priest at Corpus Christi -- was still our priest. Mary -- the woman who had

preached from the altar at Corpus Christi -- still stood at this new altar. However, we were no longer at Corpus Christi, we were seated inside of a Presbyterian church. Our church was no longer called Corpus Christi, but instead "Spiritus Christi." I soon left for college, graduated a few years later, and moved to start my career in San Francisco; but every time I returned to my hometown for Christmas or other holidays, we went to Spiritus Christi to celebrate Mass. My interest in this new church began to grow, partially because I started to feel a connection with religion again and also because I never fully understood what had happened to disconnect our congregation from the Vatican years earlier. Over the subsequent 13 years of my life, I became interested in filmmaking and in 2012, I moved back to Rochester to pursue a Master's in Film & Animation from Rochester Institute of Technology.

II. Choosing a Thesis Film

For two years, I learned a tremendous amount about the filmmaking process and when I was approaching my third year, I finally had to make a decision about the thesis film I was going to make. I chose a narrative film about the death penalty and the collateral damage that the death penalty caused. I had always felt a sense of duty to tell stories that dealt with social justice and I wanted to use my last year of film school to make a thesis film that I would otherwise never make. Whether by chance or choice, I had become a documentary filmmaker and I wanted to challenge myself by making a narrative fiction film. My proposal was passed and I was on my way to making a film about the last 48 hours of a prisoner's life on death row. I wrote the script, applied for grants, and started taking every step I needed to take to make this film a reality. Over the next few months, some of those steps I had taken to make my thesis film were not turning into fruitful endeavors. I did not receive the grant I had applied for, some people I had hoped would work on my film and help make this film as good as I thought it deserved to be, no longer could help, and I was becoming burdened by trying to make money to not only pay for my life in Rochester, but my schooling as well. I was quickly realizing that I was not going to be able to make the film that I had set out to make.

During that same time, I went with my family to Spiritus Christi on Easter. I was having trouble with my thesis film and wasn't sure what I was going to do. I sat at Mass and quickly realized that this church was the film I should make. The gospel choir was singing, this new church was thriving, and some of those questions I had when I was fifteen had never been answered. I talked to my advisor, my family, and after a few weeks realized that the story of Spiritus Christi was the film I should make for my thesis. Of all the decisions in the filmmaking process a director needs to make, this was the most important one I made. I recognized that I would never truly be satisfied with the other film and to continue that process was an uphill climb that would never truly be achievable. I do not want to say that I gave up because that is not what I did. I pivoted in a direction and a film that was more appealing and doable at this time in my career. It is not to say that I will never make the film about death row, but the documentary about Spiritus Christi was the film I was meant to make right now. So, in the fall of my 3rd year, I went back in front of the thesis committee and gave them a new proposal. They approved my new film, a documentary about the Excommunication of Corpus Christi, and so there was only one thing left to do. Make the film.

III. Pre-Production

When I started making the change over to the Spiritus film, I realized that I could not make this with film without Fr. Callan, so the first step was to get him on board with allowing me access. I believed that with him alone my film could be made. However, now that I was actually making a film about the church and what they did, I realized I needed a few more people to agree to participate in the film. I also started extensive research about the issues that got Corpus Christi excommunicated. As I began to peel back the layers of what had happened, it became evident that there were three issues that were at the heart of this conflict. These Three canon laws that had been broken by Corpus Christi and inevitably the reason why Fr. Callan got fired, but not why the church got excommunicated. These three canon laws were as follows.

Canon Law 844

1. Catholic ministers administer the sacraments licitly to Catholic members of the Christian faith alone.

Canon Law 1024

1. A baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly.

Canon Law 1055

1. The matrimonial covenant by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between the baptized.

In other words, only Catholics can receive communion, only men can be priests, and only a man and woman can get married. I began trying to find out more about Canon Law. For many, Canon Laws are infallible doctrines of the Catholic Church that cannot be changed, altered or revised. These laws are viewed by most as handed down by God on how Catholics need to live their lives and how the catholic church needs to perform. What I realized is that while these are laws that the Catholic Church abides by and follows, these were laws of man, created by man, to help rule man. These did not feel like laws of infallibility, but laws that were made by men to exclude certain groups. These laws were no different from New York State laws which are revised and changed all of the time, and there is no reason why this can't be the case for these Canon laws.

In my opinion, the true mark of a good documentary film is to create change by bringing awareness to certain issues. I had created a new goal for this film. I wanted to create change by bringing these three laws to light and focus on telling a story to actually make these laws change. One thing that I knew I could not do was chastise or alienate the Catholic church. I could not attack Catholicism because that would only make Catholics tune out. I needed to approach this topic very carefully and with the right attitude. I needed to be open to listening to both sides of

the argument and approaching this subject from as neutral a position as I could take. All of this felt possible and doable, but there was always an underlying fear of being shut out from some of the important players in the film. There are three issues that everyone has a tough time talking about and religion is one of them. While off camera everyone had an opinion, I started to get the sense that there was trepidation from members of the Spiritus community and Roman Catholics to participate in the making of this film.

I didn't let this deter me and pressed on. In part my optimism was based on the progressive nature of the new Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis. John Paul II was the Pope when Corpus Christi was excommunicated, then came Pope Benedict XVI. Before he became Pope Benedict XVI, he was Cardinal Ratzinger, head of the Congregation of Doctrine & Faith, the modern day Inquisition in charge of keeping Catholics around the world in line and following the rules. Cardinal Ratzinger was much more conservative than Pope John Paul II and was actually the cause of the excommunication of Father Callan and Corpus Christi, but in an unprecedented move of the Vatican, he retired and a new Pope, Pope Francis became Pope in 2011. Pope Francis was a much more progressive Pope and had begun to make some changes in the church to rectify some of the exclusion and past issues that have plagued the church for many years. If there was ever a time that real change could be made, this seemed to be it. Pope Francis seems to be following the teachings of the New Testament and Jesus. Teachings that focus on inclusion, justice, and serving the poor. This is different from some other Pope's who tend to focus on the teachings of the Old Testament. The fire and brimstone that more conservative Catholics usually focused on. It became clear that there was an essential piece needed to allow me to focus on these issues. I needed to speak to the Catholic Church.

For the next five months, I began taking steps and going down as many different avenues as possible to get any official statement from the Catholic Church. I started with the person that I thought was potentially the easiest and the one I had the most connection to Bishop Matthew Clark. Bishop Clark had been the Bishop of the Diocese of Rochester and was the individual who had removed Fr. Callan in 1998. I also knew he was always viewed as a progressive Bishop who was forced to remove Callan rather than doing something he had wanted to do. He had also retired as bishop two years earlier and while I never thought he was going to speak to me

regarding the issues of Corpus Christi while still in his role with the church, he may be willing to speak about his beliefs, the challenges, and the other side of the argument. During the time of the drama, there was almost zero dialogue from the Catholic Church. This is an institution that is notoriously private and secretive about the back room decisions they make and this situation was no different. After all, the Catholic Church was very tight lipped about the events that took place and never had provided a more substantial argument than “the rules were broken and we acted accordingly.”

My uncle had a relationship with Bishop Clark as well and I was able to get an e-mail to him, followed by a phone conversation. During that phone conversation I was able to talk to Bishop Clark about a number of different aspects of what happened. I explained to him the neutral position I hoped to take and that I wanted to tell the story in the fairest, most accurate way. I did not want to have the opinion of only Fr. Callan and the Spiritus community, but also that of the Catholic Church. I felt it was important for the audience of my film to have a complete view and understanding of what happened. Bishop Clark was sympathetic to the story, felt like he was in a position to talk and agreed to meet me and talk with me on camera when I got back from a thanksgiving trip with my parents.

When I returned from the Thanksgiving trip, Bishop Clark had changed his mind. After having a week to think about meeting with me, Bishop Clark rethought his participation of the film and when I returned, he was no longer will to speak with me on camera. To be honest I was always a little shocked that he was going to speak with me, but I understood when he no longer felt comfortable. He explained that he still had many connections to the Diocese and to he did not want to risk those connections by speaking with me during a time that resulted in his successor becoming more conservative. In the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI, a very conservative Pope, was replaced with Pope Francis, the most progressive Pope we have had to date. Here in Rochester, NY, Bishop Clark, one of the most progressive Bishops in the country, had been replaced with one of the most conservative Bishops in the country, Bishop Matano.

IV. Bishop Matano & The New Guard

Bishop Matano came to the Diocese of Rochester from Rhode Island, and I suspect that the Vatican wanted to replace the progressive nature of Bishop Clark with a more conservative Bishop. This was not just something that was happening in Rochester, but a noticeable trend all over America. In San Francisco, the Archbishop has asked all priests, teachers at Jesuit schools and other tertiary parties involved in the Catholic Church to sign a morality clause, effectively condemning same sex marriage and women equality. This is in San Francisco, one of the most accepting and liberal cities in the world and this is happening. At the highest level, the Catholic Church looks like it is moving in positive directions towards equality and inclusion, but at the local level they are actually taking steps that are moving backwards. This did not bode well for me getting Bishop Matano or other members of the church on camera to talk about these issues as there is a history of the church not discussing many of the policies or practices of the church, but that could not stop me from trying.

Another interesting development from the time that Corpus Christi was excommunicated in 1998 and my production of Spiritus in 2015 was the communications director within the Diocese of Rochester. In the last 15 years, Doug Mandalero had gone from writing as the religion columnist for the Democrat & Chronicle, the local newspaper in Rochester, and the main follower from a journalistic standpoint of the events that took place in 1998 to now being the Communications director for the Diocese of Rochester. This created two problems. The first was that I had always had Doug Mandalero on my list of people to contact and talk to as an interview. I thought he could provide an unbiased and well-documented timeline and understanding of the events hopefully without siding with one party or the other. He was on the ground following the story for over 9 months writing almost weekly and many of the newspaper articles I had regarding the conflict in 1998 were written by Doug. Now not only did Bishop Matano have control over the Diocese talking to me, but my star witness as well. I reached out to Doug and asked him about speaking to me or asking him if he could speak on behalf of the Diocese. After three voicemails and a few e-mails to Doug, I finally received a response. He said that the Diocese, including him, would not be willing to participate in my documentary in any fashion. He went on to say that the events that took place “were very emotional for all involved and the Bishop believes that any involvement from members of the Diocese of

Rochester would bring up old emotions and there was no reason to revisit the past.” There was no further communication from anyone inside the Diocese of Rochester. This was a huge blow to the film. Not only had I lost the entire Diocese of Rochester and anyone associated with the Diocese, but Doug Mandalero was also no longer on the table as a possible interviewee. As if this weren’t enough, it seemed as though the Diocese shut me off from the rest of the possible assets I was hoping to have access to. There was a lot of visual symbolism that was important to my film and the most authentic and symbolic places in the community were now being closed off.

Thankfully, I understood that this was a possibility long before it actually became a reality. I realized that as soon as I made contact with the Diocese of Rochester and made them aware of the project I was working on, the directive for no one to provide me any help could be passed down from the Diocese. I wasn’t sure that it would, but I know that this could happen. After all, the new Bishop had already removed all women from being anywhere near the altar or preaching and after deciding not to have any involvement, it would not be surprising for them to forbid anyone else in the Diocese to have any involvement as well. You have to remember that while these issues are laws that were broken by the Spiritus Christi Community, the American culture shift on these issues in the last fifteen years was much different. Women’s rights, equality for all and gay marriage have had a paradigm shift in America. Once viewed as a far reaching liberal agenda, these issues had now become the accepted norm and the Diocese understood that if it said anything or even portrayed a sense of inequality, that may pose a problem for them. The Catholic Church has suffered a tremendous drop in numbers in the last 20 years and any more negative press would only cause further trouble for Catholics in America. In simpler terms, it seems as though they knew that what they did was wrong and by ignoring it, the diocese would not lend any credibility to this film. This had crossed my mind and so before I reached out to the Diocese, I talked to a local priest who had been supportive of the Corpus Christi movement even if in a silent way. Many of the priests who were now heads of most of the churches in Rochester had gone to seminary school with Father Callan and knew him well. They were even taught many of the same beliefs of questioning the authority and the current church practices in the seminary, so some were sympathetic to his cause. Originally, I met with

this priest for guidance, hoping to get him on camera at some point after I talked with him a few times. It became clear after that initial meeting that I would not get him to talk on camera and I would also not be able to use him in any capacity within the film, but that I might be able to use him in other ways. He gave me two resources that he thought would both be good interviews and people interested in being on camera. Furthermore, I requested that I be able to film inside one of the three churches he leads when it was empty to allow me to capture the symbolism I was hoping to obtain from churches in town. The priest allowed me to come in the church on a day when he wasn't there and I had two hours to get everything I wanted.

After that initial filming, I felt that now was the time to reach out to Bishop Matano and the Diocese. This way I had these assets of the church symbolism prior to getting shut out by the Diocese. I moved on towards bigger fish within the Catholic Church. Cardinal O'Malley of Boston was in the Pope's cabinet and considered part of the progressive movement of the church. The more local chapters had become more conservative as I mentioned above, but maybe I could not only bring it to the attention of the officials in higher positions of the church, but also potentially receive their comments on these issues. All communication was answered with silence. I was never able to get in contact with Cardinal O'Malley or anyone within the Boston Diocese or any other Diocese in America. It was becoming more evident that I would not be able to tell both sides of the story. Then one day I was searching on the internet for clips or statements people had made during that time and came across the final potential conservative point of view that may be willing to speak with me.

The website was called cleansingfire.org. Cleansing Fire was an organization of Rochester Catholics who used the internet as platform to call out violations of catholic teachings and to also voice their opinion on Bishop Clark, the new Pope, and the Catholic church. When I found this site, I initially thought it was absolute gold. This proved how conservative and really hateful some Catholics in Rochester were. Showing some posts on this website would give every understanding of the nasty nature and hurtful words Catholics were saying about people within their church. It also gave me an understanding of how much of a ground swell against Bishop Clark there was. The main contributors of the site talked a little bit about Corpus Christi, but most of the posts and hateful things being said were against Bishop Clark. I went to the

contact page on the website and only found five names. These five names were first names only and only linked to e-mails associated to the website. No contact information, just generic titles like site administrator or contributor. I chose three of the five names and wrote them e-mails. I am not sure what I would have done had any of these e-mails returned with a response, but while I was waiting, I generated a new thought about the cleansing fire website. This was a very hateful and mean spirited website, using nasty words all under the guise of God's will and I realized that while 90% of the people watching my film would understand and be disgusted by the hate these people write, there may be 10% of the population who actually agreed with them and may start following them or contributing to the website. I sat on this thought for about a week and went back and forth finally deciding to not include CleansingFire.org in my movie. As I mentioned above, this might have changed had one of them agreed to speak with me, but it also shows the ugliness of our society today. This ability we have to hide behind a machine without any accountability for what is being said and to say really hateful and mean things on a platform where these thoughts would otherwise not be voiced. I decided that I was not going to promote or even mention the fact that this type of website with these type of Catholics existed. This was not only because I did not want to give them any sort of added following, even if accidental, but I also was conscious that by even mentioning them, it may turn some Catholics off and I really wanted everyone to be open to receiving my film without giving any ammunition towards discrediting what was being said.

After this decision and the previous months that had transpired, I felt that I was in a good position to begin filming the documentary and I had a few interviews lined up, but there was another problem I began to see. If I was essentially telling a historical documentary about events that took place 15 years ago, I needed footage from that time documenting what was happening. I needed to show Father Callan and Mary in Corpus Christi or else this whole film would not work. When telling a documentary, often times the most important thing is who is willing to participate, but a very close second is the assets available to help tell the story in a visual way. I had discovered a new mission in order to make my film work: I needed to track down the assets. Fortunately this was such an event when it happened and attracted national as well as local media coverage, I knew that this footage existed, I just wasn't sure where it existed. I started very

simply and contacted the local news stations, seeing if they had any footage from that time that they would share. Both Channel 10 and Channel 13, locally in Rochester told me that they had six months of coverage and I would need to give them more specifics. I focused around 4 major events and the dates associated with them. The first was when those news cameras began to arrive, July 27th. The other three dates were when the major conflict began to become more realized, the day Father Jim was fired from the church, and finally the day the church became excommunicated. I received some good news stories, but they were already cut in two or three minute packages that would not provide me with enough footage to utilize it in other areas. Within those packages, there were some great sound bites from parishioners of Corpus Christi, but there was also an interview with a conservative catholic that provided the necessary sound bite that I thought I would never get. The bite basically stated “there are rules in any organization, Father Callan and Corpus Christi have broken those rules, and if they don’t like it maybe they should start their own organization.” While all of this was great, I needed more footage. I knew for my documentary to work, I would have to work at close to a 10:1 ratio, shooting to screen time. I continued my search and then out of nowhere I got lucky.

One day I was at Electronic Field Productions, a successful production company in town owned by Steve Delmonte renting a light for another shoot not associated with this film. During my conversation with Steve, Spiritus came up and knowing that Steve has been a news shooter in Rochester for the last 30 years, I asked if he had any footage in his archives. We did a quick search and a master tape showed up. It was a fifty minute documentary about the last mass at Corpus Christi. The best part about it was it was basically uncut. A single camera filming the mass, capturing Mary and Fr. Callan at the altar giving sermons, but even better discussing exactly this issues that got them in trouble. Steve agreed to digitize and license the footage to me for a flat fee. Funding this film myself, I did not have a large budget, but after seeing the footage it became clear, that I needed this footage and so I licensed the footage from Steve. Now I was on my way. I had some good archival footage from Steve and other news outlets as well as interviews lined up with Fr. Callan, Reverend Mary, a catholic history professor at Nazareth, Dr. Timothy Thibodeau, and a catholic studies priest and professor at University of Rochester, Fr.

Curt Cadorette. The two professors were my attempt to give an understanding about what transpired without having it be biased.

V. Production

I gathered a good crew of past and current RIT film people: Aaron Gordon, Matt Ansini, Benjamin Strack, Michael Harper, and Shawn Gray. With this crew, whether or not they could all make every shoot, we created a consistent and quality visual for each interview. I preferred for us to be in churches filming with a lot of depth and because of the connections Fr. Jim and Reverend Mary had, we were able to secure visually beautiful Presbyterian church locations. I wanted to get the first and most important interview out of the way as I thought it would give me a skeleton of how I would structure the film as well as hopefully be able to learn more and go into different detail with the other interviews.

When I sat down with Fr. Callan, we started at the beginning. Why Catholicism? Why become a priest? How did you come to Corpus Christi, and so on. We went from the early days of his childhood and some stories during his formative years all the way through the conflict, excommunication, and the church that came out of it all. I started with the basics because I needed that information, but also because I wanted him to relax and not just jump into the tough questions. I needed him to feel that I wasn't just after the conflict, but interested in the whole process.



1. A Still from *Spiritus*, Callan Interview.

We ended up spending almost two hours talking and by the time it was over, I not only thought that we had gotten exactly what we needed from him, but I also learned a lot about the process, the timeline of when things happened and the stance of Fr. Callan and the Corpus Christi Community. What was maybe the most unexpected and interesting thing that came from this interviews was my understanding of the actions that Fr. Callan took. When I first started this project, I thought that the Catholic church had fired him very quickly, but during his very candid interviews, I came to realize that there were things that he and the Corpus Christi Community did that further enhanced the divide and in some ways he almost forced their hand, to a degree wanting to become a martyr for these issues. I have often heard that making a documentary is a journey and as you peel back the layers, you start to uncover the real story the filmmaker wants to tell. This was never more true on any other film I have ever made than with *Spiritus*. Part of that is because I thought I already knew the story and so I went into this film with an arrogance of base knowledge that I thought was the basis for the film. After Fr. Callan's interview, I realized that prior to that I knew enough to be dangerous, but not to tell the proper story. This prepared me for the next interview, Reverend Mary Ramerman.

Maybe because I thought Fr. Jim's story was more compelling or I wasn't sure how much Mary really was involved and I knew I needed her for the film, but she was the most surprising interview for me. I had increased my knowledge from Father Jim's interview, but there was also a sincerity in Mary's interview that I felt was missing from Jim's interview. It wasn't that he wasn't sincere, but there was emotion in her answers that I did not expect. Mary really made me understand the struggles and challenges that she faced during this period.



2. Still from *Spiritus*, Ramerman Interview

With those two interviews done, I felt that I had the backbone of my film. Mix that with the archival footage I had gathered and I started to see the film as it would lay out. I even started pulling some of the sound bites from the interviews and started forming a really rough edit. During this time, I knew that the interviews were important and the archival footage was important, but I also believed that the present church could provide me with some nice coverage. I wasn't sure how I would use it, but I knew that I wanted to capture the Gospel Choir, the messages given during Sunday Mass, and also the consistent crowd of hundreds that attended each Mass verifying the strength of the Spiritus Christi Community. I had been doing fifteen



years of pre-production in terms of attending Mass and understanding what the program was like

and where different parts of the mass took place. I began by going by myself to a few masses and filming from the back. One day, I took my camera, with only an 85 mm lens and strived to challenge myself at shooting the whole thing on a long lens. This proved to be some of the best footage I got of the mass and was able to use fragmentation to really get into the scenes with a beautiful depth of field. I continued to go to mass alone and over time gathered shots I thought I was missing, pieces I thought were important, and by the time Christmas break came along, I had most of the church coverage I had aimed to get.

The only piece that I was missing was the gospel choir. I knew that midnight mass on Christmas Eve was the time when the most people showed up and when the gospel choir was at its best. Because of the importance I put on this single mass, I reached out to various members of my crew to see if anyone was available on December 24th at midnight to help shoot this mass. Needless to say, everyone was busy. I knew that my family went to this mass every year for Christmas and so I asked my father, Chair of the School of Film & Animation at RIT, if he would be willing to run B camera for the mass. Without hesitation, he agreed and now I felt that I could capture the gospel choir in one mass. Again, knowing a somewhat rough outline of the musical set the gospel choir sang, I knew the good stuff always happened at the end of mass. With my father on stage capturing not only the mass and gospel choir, but having a nice angle on the crowd, I began to get bolder as the mass went on. At one point after the “peace be with you,” I decided to go handheld and see how close I could get. This proved to be extremely important for two reasons. The first was that it gave me some angles that aren’t normally captured in a documentary. The second and more important is that it proved to be the audio I ended up using in the film for this section.

Every mass is recorded at Spiritus through a board in the back connected to a cd burner. I knew this from my previous filming at mass and had received those audio files from the engineer who operated the board. The problem that I had was during some of the previous recordings, I noticed that at 87 minutes, no matter where we were in the mass, the cd ran out and the recording stopped. Knowing that midnight mass on Christmas Eve had the tendency to go for almost one hour and 45 minutes, I was concerned that the best stuff which was at the end would not be captured. I pleaded with the audio engineer to allow me to connect a portable

recorder instead of the CD with no time limits. I think they had their system and were used to it and did not want to add another wrinkle to the situation, but for whatever reason the engineer refused to allow the portable recorder to record the mass. So, without fail at 87 minutes the CD turns off and communion had yet to be given. Because of my previous experience with my camera and mass, I put a shotgun mic on the end of my camera, really as sync, scratch audio, but put the pots as low as they would go because I knew the gospel choir is really loud and I wanted to be as close as I could while shooting in an opposite style from the previous masses. Prior to Christmas Eve Mass, I was standing far away and shooting on a long lens. This time, I wanted to get as close to them as I could and be on a really wide lens. I used a Cooke 12 mm, put the camera on my shoulder and headed toward stage.

I was in the right position at the right time capturing fairly clean audio of the gospel choir and this proved to be in my opinion some of the best footage I shot. Not because it is a fantastic shot, but because it is an angle that normally is not seen in a documentary and the foresight I had before I shot it. It was one of the first times in my film career that I knew exactly what I wanted to get and knew the tools and settings I needed for the job, resulting in the look and feel I wanted to portray.



4. Gospel Choir, *Spiritus Christi*, 12 mm

Maybe because it was because I am a rhythmic editor or I felt that I had more of an understanding of where this footage was going to go, but after the gospel choir footage was captured, I really began building the end of the film first. In fact, the end of the finished film was the first thing I cut. It isn't exactly what ended up in the film, but pretty close.

I completed the interview with Dr. Timothy Thibodeau, the professor of Catholic History at Nazareth and while it wasn't the best location and a little rushed, I was able to get some good information out of him. At this point, I believed that 80% of my principal photography had been shot and I was ready to edit. I didn't want to shoot all of my interviews or reenactment footage as I wasn't completely sure yet what I was missing and I wanted to leave an interview with the ability to act as a pick up without having to go back to someone or get the crew back to a certain location because we missed something the first time. After all, 90% of the crew was doing this pro bono and I did not want to waste their time or mine. If anything had been time sensitive, I would have shot it right away, but with almost five months until screening, I was way ahead of the game and in a good position, or so I thought.

VI. Post Production

In the previous three months prior to editing, I had learned so much about this story and felt that my ideas had continued to switch sides in terms of who was to blame, who was right, and other decisive questions. Yet, when I got to this point, I tried to forget that. I needed those ideas when I was interviewing the subjects, but now that I had their answers and what felt like a 360 degree view of this story, I separated it from my mind. I think this is important because during the pre-production and production phases of this film, I was constantly seeing how this film would turn out, where these pieces would fit and a word of advice that I received from a professor once was "when you sit in the editing room, you have to stop thinking about the film you wanted to make, and start thinking about the film you can make, with the footage you have." I tried to move away from the what if's of my film. What if Bishop Clark had talked to me? What if Doug Mandalero had talked to me? Should I have gone outside of Rochester? What if I made this more about the dying Catholic Church? When I started editing, the first thing I did was

sit down and watch everything that was shot. I pulled important bites from Mary, Jim, and Dr. Thibodeau's interviews. I separated important sermons and statements from Mary and Jim during the masses. I watched the archival footage again and again, pulling bites off of that and started organizing the footage. From that I started to create the structure of my film.



I had always struggled with how to keep the interest of the audience as I discussed these issues and was very conscious of the fact that it could become a lot of talking heads and not a lot of action. I drew from some of my favorite filmmakers Errol Morris, Werner Herzog, and a new documentary series that was approaching a murder from an interesting perspective. At the time *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* was premiering on HBO. What I noticed from all of these filmmakers was the way they revealed new information almost constantly. Whether it was revealing a new character or a new situation, these films were always keeping the audience interested because of how they told the story. In the hands of a different filmmakers maybe *Thin Blue Line* would have been done in a different way, but as I started creating the structure of the film, I realized that for me to be successful, I needed to reveal new information constantly. I figured the best way to do this was by not revealing the outcome too early in the film. I knew how this story ended and I knew where the bulk of my story was going to take place, but I was unsure as how to get to those points. As I mentioned in some of the first paragraphs, I wanted to create a film that was going to inspire change and have people think about the issues that eventually got Corpus Christi in trouble. However, I realized that these issues were gigantic and with a time limit of 40 minutes it would be difficult to talk about the macro of these issues while

focusing on the micro of Corpus Christi's situation and how they related to the bigger picture. I decided somewhere in the fifth day of editing, that I needed to lose the idea of tackling major macro issues and just to focus on the human interest side of the film. To focus solely on the Corpus Christi story and if the audience takes the bigger picture away from it then great, but my goal was to tell these two people's story: Father Jim and Reverend Mary. While thinking about that as well as the need to constantly reveal new information, I came up with sections for the documentary. Before we found out what happened, I would address each issue. This would achieve two things. The first being we get to hear from Father Jim and Mary regarding their beliefs around these issues and why they chose to do what they did without yet understanding the consequences of their actions. Before revealing the punishment for breaking the rules, I wanted to give the audience the understanding from my subject's perspective as to why they thought those rules were wrong. This helped to frame the issues when the punishment was revealed, but it also allowed the audience to become invested and interested in these two characters that way when the punishment was revealed, the audience automatically felt for the characters they had spent ten minutes meeting and hearing from.

After a brief teaser at the beginning and a small introduction of how Father Jim came to Corpus Christi, I launched into the canon laws. I led with the allowance of communion to protestants because it was the most innocuous of offenses that Fr. Callan had committed, but it was also some of the best footage I had of modern day Spiritus before we reveal what happens. I wanted to lead strong and create a way of going from Fr. Callan to introducing Mary which this section allowed me to do. At the end of this section, I was able to introduce Mary which then led perfectly into the issue of women's ordination and finally settle on the issue of gay marriage. When I got to the end of this section, I realized something was missing. I quickly realized that I had a film whose first 13 minutes was really only two voices. There was no point in Dr. Thibodeau talking about these sections, but it wasn't revealing as much as I had hoped and Mary and Jim were overpowering the film. If Jim was the subject of communion for everyone and Mary was the subject of women's ordination, then I needed a gay couple who had been married by Fr. Callan to be the subject of the third section. This way I would be revealing new voices as well as getting a different perspective, one that I otherwise didn't have, that of the parishioners



who attended Corpus Christi. I was able to find a wonderful couple in Todd & Dan Schirmer who were willing to talk to me about their marriage, but also the fact that they had found a place that didn't cause the tension or discord that the previously had felt between their sexuality and their spirituality.

With the first ten minutes of the film in a good position and the last five minutes of the film in a good position, the only part really left to tackle was the conflict section. I had the archival bites and news footage slated for this section and Jim, Mary and Dr. Thibodeau navigating the waters, but I was missing coverage and I needed more assets than what I had. I also realized Dr. Thibodeau gave me some great stuff, but he missed some important points that I needed an authority to say. I completed the last interview with Fr. Curt Cadorette who I had waited on interviewing in case I need specifics from him. I found those specifics and went to talk to him. With his interview complete, I still had more assets to find.





The first thing I did was reach out to Fr. Jim and Mary and see what assets they had. Unfortunately they did not have much, but they put me in touch with John DeMaria who they said was the unofficial archivist of the last fifteen years and collected pictures, newspaper articles. Maybe that was something he could help me with. They put me in touch with John, I went over to his house and he had an amazing collection of Corpus Christi, Spiritus Christi, Mary's Ordination, and various other newspaper articles and magazine scans. Jackpot! I talked with him for a while. He let me take everything to scan in and told Mary and Jim that he had given me assets.

Over the years, many people have interviewed Fr. Callan and Mary, some have attempted to do documentaries about them or the church and some filmmakers had promised them that they would do certain things only to never have anything come from it. When John told Mary he was giving me some assets, Mary's previous experience caused her to jump into action and all of a sudden I had an e-mail requesting a service agreement between me and the church to make sure that I do not own certain assets, to have to get certain approvals if it is to go out into the world, and to create separate agreements if something were to happen with the film in terms of distribution, etc. This took me by complete surprise and I became worried about my film having to be approved by the subject's that were in the film. Back to the what-ifs. What if she doesn't like how she looks? What if she doesn't like how I told the story? What if they don't agree with parts of the story? We finally came to an understanding and signed an agreement that for educational purposes i.e. my thesis and the film festivals or awards under the educational

umbrella, then no approval would need to be given. However, in the event that this film is sold outside of the educational umbrella there may need to be approval given and new agreements made. That was fine with me as I was confident in my skill as a filmmaker and the way in which I was telling this story. Through the development and journey of making this film I had discovered that my film was taking on many of the characteristics of my subjects. To be forgiving, loving, unwavering, and positive. I had already created my style of filmmaking that I call “solution-based filmmaking.” It is probably what drew me to this story in the first place. I want to find stories that not only pose a problem and some conflict, but also show how a group of individuals have found a solution to this problem. If Spiritus Christi hadn’t come out of this conflict, I am not sure it would have been as interesting a film to make, but because there is this extremely positive outcome, I knew the film could be powerful and was not worried that Mary or Jim would think it isn’t worthy of sharing. With these new assets, a signed agreement, and 3 months until screenings my film was almost complete. There were two sections of the film that I was still at a loss at how to cover. John gave me some great assets, but I really wanted to push the drama in two sections and I did not have the footage to cover it. This led me to use



reenactment for these sections, which I think took my film to that next level. It allowed me to really to tell these sections in a visual way and show the audience the option Fr. Jim was given at a critical point in the film. With my editing pretty much complete and music composition and coloring underway, the only thing left to do was receive some initial feedback from professors, peers, and filmmakers around Rochester.

VII. First Screenings

I first showed the film to my advisor, Frank Deese and my advisory committee. With some feedback, I was able to tighten the film and lose some sections that did not need to be explained. I then shared my film with the Rochester Documentary Filmmakers of Rochester. There were 20 - 30 people sitting in the audience approaching the film from a filmmaking standpoint while also sharing it for the first time with people that may not know the whole story. Their feedback turned out to be extremely helpful. Up until then, everyone who had seen the film had a lot of knowledge about the subject and it could be argued that they were too close to the subject matter. This can manifest problems by assuming that everyone knows details that are maybe not clear or feeling like it other things need to be further explained when they do not. At this point, I was confident in my film and while I needed to finish it and have it ready for final screenings at RIT, I had also gotten to the point where I was unsure of the changes I was making and felt as though I was splitting hairs. After the screening for the Rochester Documentary Filmmakers group, I was able to listen to their feedback, realize that many could follow what I was saying and received two small suggestions that ended up making a big difference in the final film. The first piece of feedback was that the opening shot which was an old archival shot and had some serious color issues and shake issues. While many people loved the cinematography, they thought that this first shot was the worst shot in the film and it was what led the entire film. I was able to find a shot of Corpus Christi exterior that I filmed and was able to replace this opening shot. The second was that at about 3 minutes in, the film starts to settle on Fr. Callan's backstory. For many, they felt that this was getting into a style that many other documentaries take and it is to start to follow a person. The original piece lasted only two minutes, but after the first minute it was almost like the audience feared that this was going to be a more traditional boring doc. I went home and massaged that section, so that it only lasted a minute. This made it so as the audience started to think "Oh no", we move onto the next section and we keep their interest.

After these small changes, I decided, with encouragement from my committee, to show the film to Fr. Jim and Mary. I had them over to my parents' house for a private screening and was on pins and needles while they viewed the 26 minutes I had created about their life. When it was done, they both had their eyes welling with tears and I knew I had done a good job. We then sat for an hour and discussed the film making sure that they were properly represented and that the story was accurate. This screening was not so that I could receive praise from them, but if I am telling the story of someone's life, I want to make sure that I am telling it accurately and fairly. If they had small issues, then I could deal with those, but if they had major story problems or the ways the film progressed, I would have to overhaul the film. They gave me their blessing moving forward with the film as I see fit and I suddenly had a huge weight off of my back.

VIII. RIT Screenings

The most important screening for this film is at RIT during final screenings. If I had not completed my film in time to submit for this screening, then I would not graduate and would have to wait another year to submit the film. I had almost a month between RIT Screenings and showing Fr. Jim & Mary, yet I still was working on the film up until the last possible minute before it needed to be submitted. Most of this was because the music composition took longer than expected, the coloring took longer than expected, and the sound mixing took longer than expected. While I had given myself plenty of time to do all of this, filmmaking is an art form that will constantly have the filmmaker tweaking up until the last possible second. It was not my intention to do this, but thankfully, I was so far ahead of schedule on other aspects that I had the time to really focus on these final pieces and make sure they were right instead of having to rush through things as was my normal *modus operandi*. The lights got dark in Carlson Hall and my film came on. For twenty six minutes, I listened to the crowd's reactions to the film and felt both relief and anxiety. On the positive side, the film played from start to end without any technical problems. However, now that the film was done, I had to go give my artist statement and receive feedback from the audience. As I finished my artist statement, hands began to go up. One by one, people gave me their feedback. The overwhelming majority of the feedback was positive and it turned out that some of the professors actually had shot some of the archival footage I had

gotten from Steve DelMonte. There was one section of the film that confused more than one person which caused me to relook at that section. When Mary is ordained, the question arose, “how was she ordained?” “I thought they were excommunicated.” “Did the catholic church ordain her after excommunicating them?” As I began to answer this question, I realized I did not completely know how this worked. I knew they had a bishop there and it was not Bishop Clark, but I thought how is her ordination valid? The bigger issue I had was if it was unclear to so many, how could I answer this question without going into a whole exposition and if I didn’t go into an exposition would it be ok if I didn’t answer this question. After some other feedback, the screening was over and I returned back to my seat. When I got home that night I wrote Mary an e-mail asking her about the ordination. When she got back to me I found out that it was done through the Old Catholic Church and while valid it was not recognized or sanctioned by the Vatican. I realized that statement was all that was needed to clear up that question and so after screenings, I added a lower 3rd text box with that very explanation.



There had only been one other thing that I felt was missing. This was not based on feedback, but my own personal finishing of the film. When the Corpus community is excommunicated, they start their own church and go on with business as usual. For some, it is easy to forget that the Roman Catholic Church excommunicated them because I intentionally made it seem like not much changed for them. As it currently stood, the film ends with a text box stating “Spiritus

Christi is the largest non-Roman Catholic - Identifying congregation in the country.” While that was great, I never fully felt that we finished the Vatican’s stance on everything. At the last minute before I sent it out to festivals or awards, I added “The Vatican’s excommunication of Father Callan and the Spiritus Christi Community remains unchanged.” I think the real reason I did this was because of my initial hope for this film. When we end with such a positive outcome, it is easy to forget about the actions that the Vatican took. When I first started this film I wanted to make a film that inspired hope or change and by adding this last text box, I was able to show that even though these issues are much less taboo in American culture, the Vatican’s stance on women’s rights and gay marriage have not changed.

VIII. POST MORTEM

They say timing is everything and I often asked myself why I was making a film about something that happened fifteen years ago. I think for me it was because these issues are still relevant and as we have seen our society becoming more understanding and accepting, I think many of the issues raised in this film continue to apply today. Two weeks ago, the Supreme Court of the United States of America ruled that same sex marriage is legal across the country. Shortly after that, Ireland, also ruled that same sex marriage is legal. Catholic Americans are known to be progressive, but Irish Catholics are some of the most conservative Catholics in the world and we may see the church having to really look at some of these issues while we have arguably the most progressive Pope in the history of Catholicism. This film has taught me a tremendous amount about the filmmaking process as well as the style and films I want to make. I am extremely grateful and humbled to have been honored as a part of the RIT Honors show, but as I write this post mortem my film also been accepted as a finalist in the 42nd Student Academy Awards. Out of 1,686 films submitted to competition, they have broken it down to just 33 films, 7 in the documentary category and I feel proud that my film has been recognized as one of those finalists. This is affirmation that all of the hard work, careful planning, and tireless effort to get this story right from everyone who worked on this film paid off and that filmmaking is an amazing art that is only limited by our own creativity.

A film
by
Matthew Spaul

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the MFA degree in the
School of Film and Animation,
Rochester Institute of Technology

APPENDIX

- i. Abstract
- ii. Example of personal release form I had each subject fill out.
- iii. Agreement between Filmmaker and Spiritus Christi Members.
- iv. Initial e-mail correspondence between filmmaker and Doug Mandalero, Diocese of Rochester Director of Communications.
- v. Final correspondence with Doug Mandalero.
- vi. Email correspondence between filmmaker and Bishop Matthew Clark, former Bishop of the Diocese of Rochester.
- vii. E-mail correspondence setting up screening with Rochester Documentary Filmmakers group.
- viii. Original Proposal delivered to the thesis committee which includes, schedule, rationale, form, budget, and interview questions.