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Speaking Candidly, by G.M.

HOLLYWOOD PRODUCERS NOW TURN TO GOD



THE SONG OF
BERNADETTE
(20th Century-Fox)
GOING MY WAY
(Paramount)

HAVING adopted almost every expedient in their desire to attract money to the box office, Hollywood producers are now falling back, as many people in worthier circumstances have done before them, on religion as a means to salvation. Two notable results of this conversion are currently lining up crowds outside New Zealand theatres—20th Century-Fox's *Song of Bernadette*, and Paramount's *Going My Way*, both of them trailing clouds of glory in the form of multiple Academy Awards. They are, however, only the spearheads of Hollywood's new advance into the religious field.

Granted that the motive behind these two productions was not so much concern for the customers' souls as for their cash, both of them do nevertheless represent a major achievement. For one thing, Fox and Paramount were here boldly entering the most controversial arena in human history; the more so as, although its application is intended to be wide, the religion dealt with in both films is of one particular brand. Indeed, many people, moved by sectarian prejudice rather than by logic, will argue that the cinema should steer clear of this sort of subject-matter altogether; and *Bernadette* acknowledges some such difficulty when its foreword asserts that "for those who believe in God no explanation is necessary: for those who do not believe, no explanation is possible." My own view, however, is that the film producer is as fully entitled to use religious material as the author or the painter. In fact, if the cinema is to establish its claim to be an adult form of artistic expression, there is no corner of the human mind and heart into which the movie camera must not be prepared to pry. And while at other times an objective approach may be most desirable, I would think that if a film is going to enter the field of religious faith it will generally have a better chance of success if it shares and supports that faith. This may provoke sectarian feeling and so cause censorship headaches, but generally speaking a film producer, like any other genuine artist, can only turn out his finest work when he believes urgently in what he is doing.

WHEN *Bernadette* and *Going My Way* are examined and compared in this light, I think we can see one important reason why the latter emerges as the better picture. *Bernadette* is certainly not the miracle which the theatre people would have us believe it is when they introduce it with that vulgarly ostentatious foreword setting out all the Academy Awards heaped upon the production (almost as if they were afraid to let the show stand on its own merits and were saying, "You've jolly well got to admire this picture you're going to see: look at all the testimonials it has received"). But it is a sincere version

of Franz Werfel's novel about the miracles at Lourdes, acted with commendable discretion and conviction by Jennifer Jones, who moves through the story with serene spiritual exaltation as the simple peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous, who was so certain that she did see a "beautiful Lady" in a rubbish dump in 1858; by Charles Bickford as the Dean of Lourdes, who was at first not so certain; and by a picked handful of other actors and actresses.

There are certainly a few gaucheries, even a few crudities—for example, the practice of referring to Bernadette's complaint as "azma," the rather peculiar Hollywood-French spoken by some of the characters, and the too-frequent use of Hollywood's Heavenly Choir—but on the whole *The Song of Bernadette* is a very honest, reverent, and impressive piece of film-acting.

If it is a less moving and less human film than *Going My Way*, that is partly, I think, because it is so deliberately objective in its approach to the subject-matter. There is an earnest attempt to maintain a dispassionate balance between the various schools of thought which the affair at Lourdes brought into conflict: the sceptics are given almost as good a chance to state their case as the believers.

This is admirable in one way, and yet in another way I believe that the film's air of detachment, its dramatic gentility, is mostly responsible for its failure to be epoch-marking drama. Because the director has tried to be neutral as between the two sides in the controversy, his main allegiance, intentionally or not, has been to the box office. For instance, I think that the Imperial Prosecutor, who is the leading sceptic in the story, should have been allowed to maintain his upright attitude of honest doubt to the end, instead of being brought to his knees at the grotto of Lourdes in the closing scenes. This may have been what actually did happen. I don't know. All I do know is that in the film it looks like pandering to popular sentiment.

But the most spectacular example of this tendency, and the picture's gravest fault, is that all of us in the audience are shown, not once but several times, the vision which appeared to Saint Bernadette alone. It would have been far more convincing if we had been left to imagine for ourselves what the vision was like from the expression on Bernadette's face and from her subsequent description of the experience. But no, there is "the beautiful Lady" in person, a blonde in shimmering white robes with a blue girdle—like something off a chocolate box. If I seem irreverent in saying this, I am no more so than the producers in showing it. Such literalism may be commercially good, but it is artistically puerile, and not very religiously helpful either.

WHEN we come to *Going My Way* we are on a different plane altogether. There are trivialities and

(continued on next page)