


SPEAKING CANDIDLY

THE BELLS OF ST. MARY'S (RKO Radio)

 IN this sequel to the highly popular *Going My Way*, Producer-Director Leo McCarey presents Bing Crosby, as Father O'Malley, "up to his neck in nuns." That is not my phrase; it is taken from the film, and I quote it not merely because it does fairly accurately sum up the situation in which the hero-priest finds himself when he becomes pastor of a parochial school in New York, but also because it is somehow typical of the whole picture. Taken in its context, there is nothing actually offensive about that expression, any more than there is about the film itself, and yet I feel that both are in rather questionable taste.

To give a satisfactory reason for this feeling is not easy. Sectarianism simply does not enter into it, nor antipathy towards religious subjects as such (on the contrary, I am sympathetic); the individual players act with skill, good humour, and propriety; and there is nothing irreverent about McCarey's handling of separate incidents. But here you have Bing Crosby as a young priest, cast opposite Ingrid Bergman as a beautiful nun; and I think perhaps it is just that the very atmosphere of the cinema, or more properly of Hollywood, with all its customary associations of glamour and "romance," is the wrong sort of atmosphere for such a delicate subject and relationship as this, investing the film with undertones of meaning which, though faint, nevertheless give it a rather doubtful flavour. The fault may be in the eye of the beholder, but it is there all the same; and judging by the trailer I think perhaps the studio rather hoped it would be there.

SO much for what may be called the spiritual climate of *The Bells of St. Mary's*. One can be more specific about certain special aspects of the film. The sequence in which Sister Superior Benedict jettisons her belief in "turning the other cheek" and teaches one of her schoolboys to box (she is equally handy with a baseball-bat as with the gloves, and didn't, you understand, give up *nothing* when she became a nun) is a rather cheap and obvious appeal to the

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According to the tour organiser, Robert Jensen, the idea is to show that the Dominion can produce musicians of a calibre comparable with that of visitors from overseas. Each performer is 18 years of age. They were heard on Tuesday of this week from 4YA, and are in 3YA's programmes for this Friday (January 17, 8.28 p.m.). Three other NZBS stations will feature them—1YA (Friday, January 31), 2YH (Thursday, February 6), and 2YA (Friday, February 14). The times for the last three recitals will be given later, in the programme section. A different programme will be presented at each station.

audience's sympathy, though it does produce some brilliant acting by Miss Bergman: her expressions when she sees her protégé putting her boxing-lessons to advantage are a delight to watch. And one may similarly question the ethics as well as the probability of the device whereby Father O'Malley and the Sisters of St. Mary are shown as securing a new building to replace their old, overcrowded school. This amounts to nothing much less than religious blackmail of a certain Mr. Bogardus (Henry Travers). He is almost the sole representative of the secular arm in the picture, a testy old millionaire who wants to acquire St. Mary's and convert it into a parking-area for the fine office building which he is constructing next door, but who gives way, under extreme spiritual pressure, and instead presents his own building to the Church, to be used for the school. The nuns confine themselves to praying for this desirable outcome, but Father O'Malley doesn't scruple to get at the old boy through his doctor and frighten him into making a generous gesture for the sake of his immortal soul. Part of my objection to Hollywood's handling of this type of situation is that it is likely to give the wrong impression in the wrong quarters, and could present critics of the Church with ammunition which might be used unfairly.

On the other hand, nobody could possibly take exception to the charming sequence in which the infants of the kindergarten stage their version of a Nativity play. This sequence, I suggest, exemplifies the point I was making above: it is deliciously funny, but it has the unsullied innocence of childhood, whereas elsewhere in the story there is a carryover of sophistication from other performances and other pictures.

THESE are personal reactions. They are unlikely to be shared, at any rate in full, by the majority of those who, by crowding the theatre, are making *The Bells of St. Mary's* a terrific box-office success. Yet I think it will be fairly generally conceded that this is not as good a film as *Going My Way*. If at first you do succeed, try, try again, is Hollywood's favourite motto, but sequels rarely come up to their predecessors. *Going My Way* was sentimental in the extreme, as this new picture is: it had, however, a certain freshness of spirit and treatment which made it noteworthy but which is unfortunately lacking on this occasion. And though Ingrid Bergman is here now to supply the element of conflict—her ideas on education are not those of Father O'Malley—one misses sorely the presence of Barry Fitzgerald, the old priest of the first film. Miss Bergman, for all her charm and brilliance of technique, is not a sufficient substitute. Bing Crosby wears his straw-boater at as jaunty an angle as before, sings in Latin as well as in the vulgar tongue (Manhattan dialect), and is a sufficiently secular priest to entertain the irreligious without, however, unduly disturbing the faithful. It is an expert performance, aimed dead on the box-office, and it may be only perversity which leads me to remark that

this time Father O'Malley isn't going my way.

Yet what is chiefly wrong with *The Bells of St. Mary's* (leaving out my personal doubts on the score of good taste) is that McCarey seemed to feel himself obliged to exploit in it nearly every emotion known to Hollywood. With almost every situation, he is like a man with a sore place in his mouth; he has to keep tonguing it and chewing at it, he just cannot leave well alone. Thus, though there is artistry in the acting and in some passages of dialogue, most of the effects are achieved by purely theatrical artifice.

NATIONAL FILM UNIT

WEEKLY Review No. 281, released by the National Film Unit on January 17, contains the following items: "Bellona Arrives," showing H.M.N.Z.S. Bellona arriving at the Port of Auckland; "Toheroas," showing what good sport there is in digging and preparing this popular shell-fish; "Fire Brigades Demonstration" is an item from Reefton; "Amputees' Picnic" shows patients from Hutt Hospital, Wellington, being taken for a day out in the country; "Flying Eggs" illustrates how air transport is being used to relieve shortages from one island to another; and "Missing Airmen" is a verbal message from Group Capt. Burgess, whose mission is to trace missing airmen.

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