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Manna From Heaven

Leader's Guide

Discussion Guide and Bible Study

By Sister Rose Pacatte, FSP

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Leader's Guide developed by:

Reel Spirituality

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Special thanks to Five Sisters Productions and to Justin Bell, assistant director of Reel Spirituality, for helping make this study guide possible.

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Dear Friends of Reel Spirituality:

Film has become our culture's primary storytelling medium. Ask a group of people how many have seen *Schindler's List* or *Beauty and the Beast* and almost everyone will raise their hands. Such movies not only entertain, they educate, helping us see what we might otherwise miss. Of course, there are movies that are poorly done and others that survive on adrenalin alone. But many more help us explore life and its meaning through their honest portrayals and engaging narratives. Movies invite conversation and even communion. After watching a movie together with others, many find the film serving as one more "person" in the group, a guest who has sought truth and shared vulnerably. Having sought life at some more central region, movies encourage a similar searching, openness and vulnerability from their viewers.

To help you in this movie conversation, we at Fuller Seminary's Reel Spirituality Institute are publishing online study guides of selected, soon-to-be-released films. We trust you will find these guides helpful in your personal reflections, informal conversations, and ministry settings. Why not take a group of neighbors or friends to the cineplex and then discuss the film over coffee? You not only will get to know each other better, you might be surprised to find yourself in God's presence.

Happy viewing,

Rob Johnston and Barry Taylor
Codirectors, Reel Spirituality: An Institute for Moving Images



Introduction

What if a “gift from God” in the form of a financial windfall turns out to be just a loan and is due immediately?

Manna from Heaven is a light-hearted fable in the Americana tradition of Frank Capra. The roles were written for mature actors whom many viewers will recognize from classic television and films. One of the most intriguing aspects of this independent film is that it was produced by five sisters and written by their mother!

Five Sisters Productions is named for Maria, Charity, Gabrielle, Ursula, and Jennifer Burton—all students of filmmaking or drama. Since 1999, the Los Angeles-based production company has released three films: *Just Friends* (playing on AMC and WE), *Temps*, and *Manna from Heaven*. (www.fivesistersproductions.com)

God is a key character in *Manna from Heaven*. God’s presence in the story gently invites us to consider divine providence and our response in the events of our daily lives through reflection and conversation about the film.

This guide will consider the Christian vocation to marriage and ministry; growing old; prayer, discernment, God’s will, and providence; and how to attain life’s goals; faith, hope, love, and humor.

Before the film

If you are planning a group event around *Manna from Heaven*, obtain a viewing license from www.cvli.org (don’t worry, the process is quite simple). Choose a place to gather that is relaxing and quiet. Feel free to prepare some refreshments and create a flyer using this guide or information available on www.imdb.org. Read this study guide in its entirety before the screening.

After the film

Your role as the leader is to facilitate the conversation and show respect for each person’s interpretation of the film and response to the questions; you are not required to do all the talking. The first themes that this study guide considers are prayer, discernment, God’s will, and providence. The first question in this section is an exercise that will help you break open the film and get everyone talking. You also may want to focus on certain sections more than others depending upon the energy of the group. Feel free to design your own conclusion, whether that be with additional questions or prayer.



As the song goes,

“Once upon a time,
When the world was young...”

There was a family of sorts:
Some related by blood,
Some related by marriage,
Some related by neighbors,
And some by freeloading....

(From the opening sequence of *Manna from Heaven*)

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge so that you will be filled with all the fullness of God.

—Ephesians 3:14–19 NRSV

Manna from Heaven: The Story

Once upon a time, many years ago, a neighborhood in Buffalo, New York is mysteriously showered with twenty dollar bills. Theresa, a young girl who everyone thinks is a saint, doesn't have much trouble convincing her loose-knit "family" of relatives, friends, and two permanent house-guests that the money is a gift from heaven to split up. Years later, Theresa, who has become a nun, decides that it is time to pay the money back, so she calls the eccentric group back together to repay the "loan."



The problem is, nobody has the money, nobody wants to give back the money, they don't know to whom it belongs, and most of them can't stand each other. Theresa has some tall talking to do to get this querulous group on board, but always seeing the best in everyone, she eventually wins them over. Each one of them starts a fundraiser for selfish reasons (Bunny and Ed are con artists who think they'll take the money and run; Inez, a hard-nosed casino card dealer is going to have no part in it until she starts falling for a secret

service agent...). In the process, however, they get caught up in something larger than themselves.

What follows is a witty comedy about rediscovering hope at any age.

Through the ensemble comedy's fun twists and turns, the characters learn about family, romance, reconciliation and redemption by overcoming the personal obstacles that have been holding them back in life -- and the city's community also blossoms in the process. By working together they begin to realize their full potential. Each character, in a moment of selflessness, finds the dreams they thought only the money would buy them.

The star-studded cast includes...

Ursula Burton as Teresa
Shirley Jones as Bunny
Frank Gorshin as Ed
Wendie Malick as Inez
Jill Eikenberry as Dottie
Cloris Leachman as Helen
Faye Grant as Rita
Harry Groener as Tony
Seymour Cassel as Stanley
Shelley Duvall as Detective Dubrinski
Louise Fletcher as Mother Superior
Austin Pendleton as Two-Digit Doyle



Themes

Of the many themes in *Manna from Heaven*, this guide will consider:

- Christian vocation to marriage and ministry
- Growing old
- Prayer, discernment, God's will, and providence
- How to attain life's goals
- Faith, hope, love, and humor
- The vocation of the independent Christian filmmaker

THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION TO MARRIAGE AND MINISTRY

Family faces are like magic mirrors. Looking at people who belong to us, we see the past, present, and the future. We make discoveries about ourselves.

—Gail Lumet Buckley
The Hornes: An American Family

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

—Galatians 6:9–10 NRSV

1. Write the names of the main characters in the film on separate pieces of paper and give one to each participant before viewing the film. Ask them to step into the reality of that character and see the film through his/her eyes. To begin the conversation about the film, invite someone to speak about their character and go around the group so that each one has an opportunity to share some insight or observation. (You can also use the themes in the same way.)
2. A visual motif that runs throughout the film is mirrors or objects that act as mirrors. What function does the use of mirrors serve in *Manna from Heaven*? When one of the characters sees his or her reflection, what happens to them personally and to their relationships with the other characters?
3. What does the film say about the meaning of Christian marriage? Which of the marriages is the most solid? Why? On what foundation are the marriages in the film based? How are the marriages affected over the years by the money that the characters receive at the beginning of the film? What is the implicit or explicit influence of faith in the marriages?
4. Theresa does not get married but becomes a nun and takes vows that bind her to Christ more closely and to an exclusive service of the poor. Why is her ministry misunderstood by the very people who should best comprehend her motives and actions?
5. How does the film define family?



GROWING OLD

Life is short and we never have enough time for gladdening the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Oh, be swift to love! Make haste to be kind,

—Henri Frederic Amiel

So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come. Your power and your righteousness reach the heavens.

—Psalms 71:18 NRSV

1. *Manna from Heaven* begins when most of the characters are young adults or children but most of the action takes place when many of the characters have reached maturity and even old age. How do the characters handle what their lives have become? What do you think growing old meant to Two-Digit Doyle, Helen and Dottie and Stanley?
2. Another motif that the film uses is that of names. The word “name” is used almost 900 times in the Bible. Why are names important in the Scriptures and in life? Ed and Bunny are the oldest couple in the film. Ed has always called his wife by nicknames, and she dislikes it. Why? How did you feel when Ed finally calls Bunny by her real name? What did this signify for their relationship at this stage in their marriage?

3. Ramona and Patrick are the youngest members of this assorted group of family and friends. What do you think their impressions are of their elders? If you were Ramona or Patrick, how would you relate to older relatives and friends that are family?
4. If you were a spiritual director, how would you advise the various characters to grow spiritually at this time in their lives? What Scripture references would you use to guide them?

PRAYER, DISCERNMENT, GOD’S WILL, AND PROVIDENCE

Prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God’s gift of himself.

—Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.

—Matthew 21:22 NRSV

1. What are the characteristics of Sr. Theresa’s prayer? How does she pray? How does her prayer manifest itself in her ministry and relationships?
2. Theresa believes she is doing God’s will because her prayer and circumstances indicate this to her. Yet her superiors, whose role is also one of prayer and discernment, mediate God’s will for her and it’s different from Theresa’s. What do you think of the way she handles this spiritual and very real conflict?
3. At the beginning of the film, which is a fable (i.e. a fictional tale with a moral), everyone listens to Theresa because they think she is holy. Yet, who ought the family and friends to have followed—Rosalie, who wanted to give the money back, or Theresa, who thought the money was a gift from God for themselves and for others?
4. Discernment is a process of listening, reflecting, asking advice from others, deciding, and taking action. What are the ways the characters in the film actually discern God’s will? What do you think about reading tea leaves, which serves as a literary device in the film? Many people read tea leaves (consult mediums or fortune tellers) but how does faith, and the First Commandment, address our desire to want to know the future through superstitious means?
5. How are God’s enduring presence and providence expressed in the film? In the final scene, even though Inez doesn’t “get the theological distinctions” of giving back real money in place of the counterfeit money, what are the characters saying about their belief about God’s role in their lives when they “give” the money back?





HOW TO ATTAIN LIFE'S GOALS

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth...that love is the ultimate and highest goal to which we can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: the salvation of humanity is through love and in love.

—Viktor Frankel, *Man's Search for Meaning*

Then someone came to him and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.”

—Matthew 19:16–17 NRSV

1. In the opening scenes of the film, different characters talk about their lives (especially Tony, Rita, and Rosalie) and the future. When they get the money, all of a sudden they start talking about how the money will change their lives and what they will do with it. They think the money will free them from their circumstances to better their lives. Do their lives change? Why or why not?
2. Why do many of the characters believe they have failed in life? Why have they not achieved their goals? From Two-Digit Doyle to Tony and Rita? What characterizes Inez's and Dottie's approach to life?
3. Even though circumstances do not seem to be going her way, has Sr. Theresa failed? Why or why not?
4. As the quotes above indicate, motivation has everything to do with being happy in life. But are being happy and successful the same thing? Why or why not? Which of the characters in the film seem to know the difference?
5. Talk about what Jesus tells the rich young man and what Viktor Frankel tells us in the aftermath of the Jewish Holocaust of World War II about how to achieve life's goals and understand the meaning of life.

FAITH, HOPE, LOVE, AND HUMOR

Humor is the great thing, the saving thing. The minute it crops up, all our irritation and resentments slip away, and a sunny spirit takes their place.

—Mark Twain

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned as a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

—1 Corinthians 11:13

1. St. Augustine defines theology as faith seeking understanding. Define what faith, hope, and love mean to you. Is there a difference between human, spiritual, and theological ideas of faith, hope, and love? Should there be a difference or distinctions? Would you agree that the goal of the Christian life is to integrate these understandings in practice? Explain what your response.
2. How does a believer or a person who is searching for transcendent meaning make sense out of different understandings of faith, hope, and love? Which characters in the film seem to embody the virtues of faith? Hope? Love? Or all three? Which characters seem to have forgotten the meaning of faith, hope, and love?
3. In coming together as a community, the city rebuilds itself and its sense of hope. Talk about how each of the characters does one selfless act (e.g. Helen, having bought hundreds of raffle tickets for herself, buys one for her daughter Rita, etc.). Through their selflessness, talk about how the characters are able to get the small dreams that they thought the money would buy them.
4. Do you agree with what the American author Mark Twain says about humor? Why? Do you find that a sense of humor frees you to live faith, hope, and love in real ways in your daily life?
5. What make *Manna from Heaven* a humorous film? What sort of meaning does the comedy create?





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