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Australian First for Catholic Film Office priest



Father Richard Leonard SJ, the Director of the Australian Catholic Film Office, has become the first priest in Australia to earn a PhD in cinema studies, and one of only a handful of similarly qualified clergy in the world.

Dr Leonard said that people were regularly surprised that as a priest he was sent to study film.

“But it all depends on how seriously we take the role of the media in today’s society. In recent years Pope John Paul has repeatedly challenged the Church to take it very seriously, and to do all we can to influence it for good. Understanding it, and speaking its language, is a critical place to start in that process.”

Three-and-a half-years ago the Australian Jesuits commissioned Fr Leonard to undertake doctoral studies with Professor Barbara Creed at the University of Melbourne.

“Professor Creed is recognised throughout the world as Australia’s most distinguished film academic. I was very lucky she agreed to supervise my work,” Dr Leonard said.

Dr Leonard’s dissertation was entitled “The Cinematic Mystical Gaze: the Films of Peter Weir.” Weir’s films include “Picnic at Hanging Rock,” “Gallipoli,” “The Year of Living Dangerously,” “Witness,” “Dead Poets Society,” “Fearless,” “The Truman Show” and “Master and Commander.”

“When I started out I knew I wanted to write on Peter Weir, but as I read all the literature about him and his work, what struck me was how often critics and academics would speak about his films as ‘mystical’,” he said.

“So I set about exploring what that could mean for Weir, and whether it had something more significant to say about the way an increasingly secular audience view certain films. Some people report the impact a film has upon them by using language we once exclusively used in regards to religious experience.”

Dr Leonard’s Ph.D. dissertation was given the highest possible accolade by the overseas readers Melbourne University asked to examine the work.

“It took nearly five months to hear back from the readers, but their reports are humbling and very generous,” he said.

“They urge me to publish the thesis as soon as possible, and to help that process along, I’m already praying that Peter Weir wins the Oscar for "Master and Commander," Dr Leonard joked. “Actually I think God has much bigger issues to worry about!”

The Australian Catholic Film Office is an agency of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

Fr Richard Leonard is presently on assignment overseas but can be contacted at 100244.3614@compuserve.com.