Scenes from a Parish, a film by James Rutenbeck

Synopsis

In 2001, an irreverent, young, Harvard-educated Catholic priest arrived at Saint Patrick Parish in the hard-pressed former mill town of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Father Paul O'Brien soon discovered that trying to foster an inclusive community amidst the ethnic tensions of this working-class, multicultural parish would be no mean feat. Older parishioners like Edna McGregor were resentful of a new generation of immigrants--people like the tattooed Elvys Guzman, a former gang-banger from Santo Domingo--who was seen playing basketball with other Latino teenagers in the parish center. Meanwhile more idealistic parishioners like Peggy Oliveto were trying to reach out to those in need but faced cultural entanglements that grew more complicated with the passage of time. Filmed over four years, Scenes from a Parish explores the personal stories of a Catholic parish struggling to reconcile the ideals of faith with the cultural realities of a globalized United States.

The Vatican is trying to rouse Catholics' ire toward Ron Howard's upcoming "Angels and Demons" without giving the blockbuster drama exactly the publicity it craves. Here's an idea then: Steer the faithful, and everyone else, to "Scenes from a Parish," a surpassingly lucid little documentary playing at the Museum of Fine Arts over the next few weeks. It raises more questions about the church's place in a changing world--and touches more emotions doing so--than any big-budget studio folderol.

Ty Burr, Boston Globe

You don't need to be religious to be moved by the spirit of Father Paul O'Brien, head pastor, a Harvard graduate who finds his calling amid the unemployed, in the poorest city by far in Massachusetts. Yes, there are problems at Saint Patrick's: drugs, alcoholism, homelessness, and some resentment of the Hispanic newcomers from the aging Irish. But there's hope, too, and parishioners turn their lives around, because Father Paul is an exemplary priest, and a movie hero as well.

Gerald Peary, Boston Phoenix

In these hard economic times it is heartening to see a documentary work that makes you feel good about average people who give above average of themselves.

Robin Clifford, Reeling Reviews

...in its complete immersion into one community, it has something to say about people everywhere.

Laura Clifford, Reeling Reviews
Filmmaker James Rutenbeck's newest film, Scenes from a Parish, is a deeply felt homage to the nuances of small town life and the role faith plays when meeting the challenges that life presents. In the rhythms and rituals of a Catholic church in a small New England town, we see how people face change while trying to maintain tradition. Rutenbeck's immersion in the subject lends his film dignity and insight, allowing his viewers a fresh understanding of the complex interplay between faith and family.

Cara Mertes, Director, Sundance Documentary Film Program

If Flannery O'Connor had been alive, she would relish James Rutenbeck’s Scenes from a Parish. The documentary is both a subtly shocking peeling the lid off a hidden third world in an America that is only now allowing itself to wake up to how deep its depression runs, and a tribute to the wonderfully catholic collection of people, with their graces, foibles, hopes, prejudices, who make up as multi-faceted a parish as anyone could imagine, and who find themselves involved by their pastor, in some cases without really knowing why, in feeding the poor. Grace and inadequacy blend beautifully together in this tender and poignant portrait.

James Alison, Catholic Theologian, Priest and author
Few would contest the essential place of religion in American life. While we hold dear the principle of separation of church and state, it is impossible to understand life in this country without considering both. Religious ideals are bound up in the very fiber of the American identity.

Although parishioners at Saint Patrick’s Parish are together as one body of faith, they are often alienated from one another, driven apart by the pressures of ethnic tension, language barriers and generational change. Whether or not a common faith can overcome all these obstacles and generate a true feeling of community is a lingering question.

In approaching *Scenes from a Parish*, I wanted to explore the question of community through a cinematic exploration of character and place. The big issues of the film—identity, class and sexual orientation—appear in quiet encounters that grow out of the rhythms and texture of everyday life.

My intent is to instill these small moments with a resonance that reaches beyond the parish grounds, to reveal something about my country at this moment in time.

James Rutenbeck

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James Rutenbeck Biography

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Rutenbeck's body of work was featured at the 2003 Robert Flaherty International Film Seminar. His films have also been programmed at the Museum of Fine Arts and Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, MoMA, National Gallery, Double Take Documentary Film Festival, Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival, Lussas International Film Festival, Black Maria and others.

In January 2009 Rutenbeck was recipient of the Du Pont Columbia Journalism Award for his work as Producer and Director of *Not Just A Paycheck*, a half-hour episode of the PBS series Unnatural Causes, about health disparities in the United States. *Not Just A Paycheck* examines the health consequences of the loss of 3000 jobs in a rural Michigan county.

Editing credits include over fifty films for PBS, BBC, Channel Four (UK), Discovery Channel and Showtime. They include the 2008 ALMA award-winning *Roberto Clemente* for American Experience, Emmy award-winning *Siamese Twins* for NOVA and the groundbreaking *People of the Shining Path* for Britain's Channel Four. These films have also won Peabody, Du Pont-Columbia and other honors and awards. He was a consulting editor on the recent independent feature *American Wake*.

Mr. Rutenbeck was awarded a 2007 Sundance Institute Documentary Fund grant and is a three-time recipient of artist fellowships from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. He has received humanities grants from the Southern Humanities Media Fund and numerous state humanities councils. He received a Master of Science in Visual Arts from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1984, where he studied filmmaking with cinema-verité pioneer Richard Leacock.

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**Scenes from a Parish**, a film by James Rutenbeck  

### Credits

- **Produced & Directed by**: James Rutenbeck
- **Cinematography**: Stephen Mc Carthy
- **Editors**: Robert Todd
  - James Rutenbeck
- **Co-Producers**: Angelica Allende Brisk
  - Tina Nguyen
- **Original Music Composed & Arranged by**: Seamus Egan
- **Additional Cinematography**: Jeremy Leach
  - Andy Rice
  - Richard Chisolm
  - Thomas Danielczik
  - Austin de Besche
  - Douglas Gordon
  - Julie Mallozzi
  - Sandeep Ray
  - Xuan Vu
  - Kevin M. McCarthy
- **Additional Sound Recording**: George Shafnacker
- **On-line Editor & Colorist**: Michael H. Amundson
  - Jim Ferguson
- **Post Production Facility**: Outpost
- **Sound Design**: Geof Thurber
- **Re-recording Mixer**: Raul Rosa
  - Greg McCleary
  - Heartpunch Studio
Associate Editor
Kenneth Hebert

Field Producers
Patricia Alvarado Nunez
Franziska Blome
Moses Shumow

Archive Still Researcher
Cathleen O’Connell

Music Consultant
Rena Kosersky

Animation
Alisa Placas

Interns
Summers Henderson
Geoffrey Marschall

Humanities Consultants
Deborah Pacini Hernandez
Roberto Goizueta

Production Accounting
Brittany Gravely

Legal Counsel
Sandra Forman

Fiscal Agent
Documentary Educational Resources

Musicians

Fiddle
Win Horan

Harp
Catriona McKay

Guitar
Eamon McElholm

Violin
Luigi Mazzochi

Viola
Sarah Sutton

Cello
Elizabeth Thompson

Guitar, Keyboards, Tin Whistle
Seamus Egan
Recorded by John Anthony

Mixed by Pete Rydberg
Maja Audio Group
Philadelphia, Pa

Seimpre Es Pentecostes
Gesreo Azurmendi Gabarain
Courtesy of Oregon Catholic Press Music

Love Came Down at Christmas
Traditional Irish Melody
Words by C.G. Rosetti

Father, We Have Sinned
Music by Padre Paul McManus
Courtesy of Padre Paul McManus

Ubi Caritas
Music & Lyrics by Jacques Berthier
Courtesy of GIA Publications

Song of the Body of Christ
Text & Arrangement by David Haas
Courtesy of GIA Publications

Ave Maria
Music by Franz Schubert

Archival Stills
Library of Congress

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Stephen McCarthy
&
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Thanks

Coll Anderson
Louise Bourque
Maria Agui Carter
Cynthia Close
Priya Giri Desai
Barbara Dougan
Maureen Foley
John Gianvito
Paul Goldenberg
Brittany Gravely
Courtney Hayes
Diane Jarvis
Darin Kelly
Lyda Kuth
Tim Mangini
Frank Martin
Rosa Lopez
Joshua Miner
Jackie Mow
Hosffman Ospino
Melanie Perkins
Peter Rhodes
Miguel Rosario
Wendy Riseborough
Liza Rutenbeck
Llewellyn Smith
Joseph Tovares
Robert F. VerEecke, S.J.
Priscilla Waldron
Jeanette Woods
Ernie Zupancic

Victoria White Berger
David & Anne Bradley
Rachel Clark
Jeff Cronenberg
Mary Jane Doherty
Joan & Strad Engler
Patricia Garcia Rios
Cindy Goldenberg
Jonathon Goldenberg
Beverly Hart
Christine Herbes-Sommers
Jeanne Jordan
Ann Kim
Susan Levene
Madeline Marget
McCord Family
Padre Paul McManus
Robb Moss
Peggy Oliveto
Guadalupe Ospino
Alisa Placas
Pat Romeo
Julie Rosenberg
Liza Rutenbeck
Anthony Rutenbeck
Megan Rutenbeck
Marianne Tommasini
Vasquez Family
Joe Viel
Sister Jean Wilson
Sabrina Zanella-Foresi

&

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Peter Lyons
David M. Brooks
Ines Hofmann Kanna
Brian Tommasini

SCENES FROM A PARISH

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Long Synopsis

In 2001, Paul O'Brien, an irreverent, young, Harvard-educated Catholic priest arrived in Lawrence, Massachusetts to take over the reins of Saint Patrick Parish. A hundred years ago, Lawrence was a thriving mill town and Saint Patrick's was home to a large community of immigrant Irish mill workers. Today, the mills are closed, the Irish-American families are a dwindling minority and a new generation of immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Vietnam and Cambodia are looking to St. Patrick's as their spiritual home. Father Paul quickly discovered that trying to foster an inclusive community in this working-class, multicultural parish would be no mean feat.

Filmed over four years, Scenes from a Parish is a feature-length documentary film about a neighborhood church in a time of globalization and accelerated cultural change. We watch as Father O'Brien embarks on an ambitious plan to build a church-based meal center that will feed the hungry of Lawrence. He enlists high-profile allies for help while dealing with tensions from throughout the parish. The film delves into the personal stories of a rich collection of characters who come to the church seeking fellowship, but face obstacles that threaten to drive them apart: Long-time parishioner Frank Martin is distressed and along with other older parishioners questions Father Paul's hunger initiative. He's been helping the poor in his city for forty years. But now he finds the personal lives of those in need more and more perplexing, and his compassion is waning.

Edna McGregor is also suspicious. Father O'Brien, she thinks, is neglecting seniors as he invites teenagers from the neighborhood to play basketball in the parish center. She resents the Spanish and multicultural masses that have made the newcomers' lives here that much easier--but leave the veteran parishioners bewildered.

Elvys Guzman has arrived from the Dominican Republic, sporting tattoos, piercings and a menacing look. But in reality Elvys is a sensitive soul trapped in a gangster's body. Before he came to the church, he had had dark thoughts about ending his life. Rosaura Vasquez, also from the Dominican Republic, must overcome her fears to sing in the Anglo choir. Privately she wrestles with her own inner demons.

When Saint Patrick outreach volunteer Peggy Oliveto visits a group of homeless families, she befriends a single mother named Theresa Santell. Over the years, their unlikely friendship grows more complicated, as Theresa’s life circumstances and choices test the limits of Peggy's Christian love.
Scenes from a Parish attempts to define that elusive and fragile entity known as community. The film observes closely as the faithful who aspire to a communal "body of Christ" contend with forces that drive them apart. We see the ideals of Catholic theology pitted against pressures that put these ideals at risk.

The scenes from this parish, however small and intimate, resonate beyond the parish grounds as a statement about the United States at the start of the twenty-first century. Life at Saint Patrick's anticipates what lies ahead for all Americans: how we perceive each other, whether we choose to withdraw or engage, whether we can forge a community from disparate constituencies. All of these are matters of consequence that will shape the future of our country.
Scenes from a Parish, a film by James Rutenbeck

Filmmaker Biographies

Director James Rutenbeck's films have explored the lives of unemployed coal miners, small farmers and itinerant evangelists. *Raise the Dead* portrays the lives of holiness preachers practicing a grassroots tradition in the shadow of televangelism. In 2000, the hour-long documentary was the only U.S. film selected for competition at Cinema du Reel and was awarded "Best Independent Film" at the New England Film Festival. His 1989 film *Losing Ground*, also a Cinema du Reel selection, is a psychological portrait of an Iowa family facing the loss of a family farm. His first film *Company Town* (1984) is a meditation on the past and present in a former Appalachian coal town.

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Stephen McCarthy (Cinematographer) is a Boston-based Director of Photography with twenty-five years' experience in non-fiction filmmaking, from cinema verité to docudrama. His work has appeared in prime-time documentary series on PBS, Discovery, The BBC, Channel Four Television, HBO, History Channel and MTV.


Mr. McCarthy is currently working on *We Shall Remain*, a five-part series on Native American history, *The Death of Lincoln*, both for American Experience, and *Master Class* for HBO.

Angélica Allende Brisk (Co-Producer) has been an award winning independent producer and a freelance editor since 1991. Ms. Brisk's independent production credits include *Sex Without Love*, a poem by Sharon Olds, *Never Met Picasso*, *Next Stop Wonderland* and *16 Decisions*, an international festival favorite exploring a Bangladeshi woman's social charter. As a staff producer for *La Plaza* at WGBH in Boston, Ms. Brisk has written, produced and directed several half-hour documentaries for local and national broadcast.

Robert Todd (Editor) has been exhibiting paintings and films while teaching and editing in the Boston area since 1985. An eclectic filmmaker and sound artist interested in "the poetic use of non-fiction material," he continually produces short works that resist categorization. His work has screened internationally, and received various awards. He has produced more than 30 films in the past ten years and served in creative positions on 30 other projects including independent features and WGBH productions such as *NOVA* and the *Science Odyssey* series.

His work has won awards at the Media City Festival, Images Festival, Big Muddy Film Festival, Black Maria Film Festival, the New England Film Festival, the Rochester Film Festival and the Ann Arbor Film Festival - where his film won the coveted "Old Peculiar" award. Since 2000 he has been a full time assistant professor in the Media Arts Department at Emerson College in Boston.
Seamus Egan (Original Score) Born in Hatboro, Pennsylvania and raised for a time in Ireland, Seamus has released three acclaimed solo albums for Shanachie; 1985's Traditional Music of Ireland; 1990's A Week in January; and 1996's When Juniper Sleeps. He also performed on a soundtrack tied to the 1995 Oscar winning movie Dead Man Walking and more recently wrote a "crisply pulsative score," said Billboard Editor-in-Chief Timothy White, for the Irish stage show Dancing on Dangerous Ground.

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