

Another Salt+Light gem

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My friends at Salt + Light Television are in the cable television business — or perhaps better to say, in the evangelization business, cable television department. The greatest profit I gain from their work though is not their TV programs but their special documentaries, available on DVD. I have about a half dozen myself, but there are more than 30 to date, ranging from devotional materials for Lent and profiles of religious communities to lives of the saints and current controversies.

On the last point, their documentary on the Venerable Pius XII and the Second World War is a signal service, dealing with the historical slander that the late Holy Father was indifferent to, or even complicit in, the Holocaust. Given that Pope Benedict XVI has entered the war over Pius XII's reputation in full battle armour — declaring last year that Pius likely did more than any other person to save Jews — the material assembled in the documentary, *A Hand of Peace*, is essential viewing.

Yet controversies are not the focus of the S+L documentary library. Rather they present Catholic life in all its fullness — taking you inside the convents of religious Sisters, on pilgrimage to the Holy Land or accompanying young people on missions to heal bodies and touch souls.

I attended this week the premiere in Toronto of the latest documentary, *This Side of Eden*, which will be shown on Palm Sunday, April 17, at 8:30 p.m. ET and 9:30 p.m. PT. Writer Matthew Harrison — proud product of the archdiocese of Kingston! — and his team spent Holy Week with the Benedictine monks of Westminster Abbey in Mission, B.C. The monks of Mission live a full Benedictine life of liturgy, prayer, silence, common life and work — on the land and in the classroom, running a farm, as well as a school and a seminary. We see the monks at recreation and at work — cleaning, making candles and teaching chemistry.

Most of all though we see what Benedictines do best — offering the common prayer of the Church, which finds its summit in the liturgies of Holy Week. I had the blessing as a seminarian of spending Christmas one year with the Benedictines of Solesmes, France, and still profit from that experience of praying with the Church's liturgical masters. *This Side of Eden* shares the experience of spending Holy Week with the monks.

The producers have captured more than just what the monks do, but something of who they are. The film is filled with contemplative images — flowers, landscapes, crucifixes, prayer books — frequently without commentary. The viewer almost wants the narrator to say more, explain more, comment more, but the film opts instead for periods of silence. The mission of the monk is in large part to stop talking and to listen, and thereby to teach a world full of words that first it must listen, because faith comes from hearing, as St. Paul wrote to the Romans.

The heart of the film, to my mind, is the account of Holy Saturday morning. Anyone familiar with sacristy work knows that Holy Saturday morning is very busy, getting everything in order of the “mother of all vigils” that evening. The monks do all of this in silence, and the film maintains a prolonged silence that is at first distracting, even disturbing, but if persevered in, becomes eloquent. It is an artistic achievement to film silence in a way that records something rather than nothing.

In the breviary for Holy Saturday is one of the most sublime readings in the whole of the Church's liturgy, entitled simply an “ancient homily on Holy Saturday.”

“Something strange is happening — there is a great silence on Earth today, a great silence and stillness,” says the anonymous preacher. “The whole Earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. The Earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and He has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. God had died in the flesh and hell trembles in fear.”

We keep silence not only to weep at the grave, but that we might hear hell tremble. There is no doubt that the devils tremble before the monks of Mission about their powerful work.

“He has gone to free from sorrow the captives Adam and Eve, He who is both God and son of Eve. ... He took him by the hand and raised him up, saying: ‘Awake O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.’”

Then we see the monks gather in the darkness to proclaim exactly that: Christ our Light!