

The Book of Clarence and the Paschal Mystery: A Psycho-Theological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a psycho-theological analysis of the film *The Book of Clarence* (2023) in dialogue with the Catholic understanding of the Paschal Mystery. Employing an observational film review method and thematic analysis derived from a focus group discussion of seven postgraduate students in psycho-spiritual therapy, who are also Catholic priests, the study examines how the film's fictional narrative symbolically engages themes of suffering, conversion, death, and resurrection. While *The Book of Clarence* utilizes satire, anachronism, and creative liberty, the analysis demonstrates that its narrative structure mirrors key dimensions of the Paschal pattern through the journey of a marginalized and morally flawed protagonist. Clarence's movement from skepticism and self-interest toward selflessness, faith, and moral transformation is interpreted not as a parallel or salvific event, but as an analogical participation in the Paschal rhythm made possible by Christ's grace. The paper further explores themes of faith and doubt, moral courage, divine mercy, racial representation, and the role of suffering in spiritual growth. From a Catholic psycho-theological perspective, the study affirms the uniqueness and unrepeatable salvific character of Christ's Paschal Mystery, while proposing that the film, when approached with theological discernment, may function as a contemporary cultural text that invites reflection on redemption, conversion, and hope.

Keywords: *The Book of Clarence*, Paschal Mystery, psycho-theology, conversion, redemption, Catholic theology

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Clarence (2023), written and directed by James Samuel, is a contemporary cinematic reimagining of biblical-era Jerusalem that employs satire, anachronism, and creative fiction to explore themes of faith, doubt, suffering, and transformation. Set against the backdrop of the early Jesus movement, the film narrates the journey of Clarence, a marginalized and morally conflicted man whose quest for meaning leads him into an unexpected encounter with suffering, conversion, and grace.

The film has generated significant discussion among Christian audiences due to its bold narrative liberties and its symbolic engagement with central elements of the Christian story, particularly the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. While the film does not purport to retell the Gospel narrative, its thematic structure invites theological reflection, especially when interpreted through the lens of the Paschal Mystery, which stands at the heart of Christian faith.

This study undertakes a psycho-theological analysis of *The Book of Clarence* in dialogue with the Catholic understanding of the Paschal Mystery. Rather than treating the film as a doctrinal source, the paper approaches it as a cultural text capable of stimulating reflection on conversion, suffering, mercy, and transformation. The analysis seeks to discern how Clarence's fictional journey may symbolically echo the Paschal pattern of dying to self and rising to new life while maintaining the Church's teaching on the uniqueness and unrepeatable salvific character of Christ's Paschal Mystery.

The Book of Clarence Film

The Book of Clarence introduces viewers to Clarence (LaKeith Stanfield), a struggling Hebrew man residing in Jerusalem in 33 AD (Wishard, 2024). Clarence, a neighborhood weed dealer, is a loser who loses a chariot borrowed from gangster Jedediah the Terrible and is robbed by street kids. He is portrayed as the twin brother of Thomas (also acted by LaKeith Stanfield), one of Jesus's twelve apostles, a fact that creates an immediate point of contrast and tension. Clarence neither believes in the messiah nor God but believes in life itself. Despite this, he believes he could be a better person. His crush, Varinia, keeps him at a distance, while his mother, Marianne Jean-Baptiste, loves him but has her own criticisms. Clarence believes he is capable of greatness and plans to get his life in order.

Clarence finds himself deeply in debt to a local loan shark, Jedediah the Terrible, who is also Varinia's brother. This sets in motion his desperate search for a way to alleviate his financial woes. With just 30 days to pay back his debt to Jedediah and the disappointment of his community, Clarence inhales deeply and hatches a plan to become the 13th apostle. He believes that being in Jesus's inner circle will give him money, immunity, and prestige. However, his lack of faith and his brother's dismissive attitude led to his rejection by the apostolic group.

Undeterred, Clarence devises a more audacious plan: to become a fake messiah himself. Espousing a philosophy of "knowledge over belief," Clarence begins to perform staged "miracles" with the help of his friend Elijah and the freed gladiator Barabbas, managing to garner a following and accumulate wealth. He made a visit to Jesus's mother, Mary, and father, Joseph, seeking to understand Jesus's "tricks" and to hear about the Immaculate Conception from the horse's mouth.

As ordered by Rome, there were searches for anyone who claimed to be a "messiah." Roman authorities eventually arrested Clarence for posing as the Messiah. The narrative takes a significant turn when Clarence, confronted by Pontius Pilate, confesses to being a fraud. Pilate, seemingly amused, challenges Clarence to prove his deception by walking across a pool of water. To his own astonishment, Clarence miraculously succeeds, an event that offered the opportunity to know God (not just believe) and led to his sentencing to crucifixion. Clarence is crucified alongside many others, among whom was a white beggar named Benjamin, who had earlier received the ability to multiply coins from Jesus and subsequently underwent a "makeover" to resemble Jesus Christ as He is traditionally and pictorially depicted. After his death on the cross, Clarence is resurrected by Jesus, who forgives his prior unbelief and acknowledges his selfless act of freeing the slaves.

The Book of Clarence delves into several significant themes, most notably the complex interplay between faith, belief, and knowledge (GUG Contributor, 2024). Clarence's initial staunch atheism and his reliance on empirical knowledge are constantly challenged by the pervasive faith of those around him. His eventual conversion, marked by his declaration that he doesn't just believe but knows God exists, represents a significant thematic arc. The film also offers a potent social commentary on race and oppression, depicting the Roman authorities as white figures who oppress the Black Judean population. This casting choice and the narrative depiction of Roman brutality draw parallels to contemporary issues of racial injustice and police violence. Furthermore, the movie explores themes of redemption, self-discovery, and Clarence's deep-seated desire to transcend his status as a "nobody." Clarence's journey is marked by a yearning for significance and ultimately leads him towards a form of spiritual and personal redemption. The film's tone is also noteworthy, as it skillfully blends satirical humor with moments of serious drama, creating a unique and often thought-provoking viewing experience.

This plot summary reveals a narrative that, while taking creative liberties, mirrors several key aspects of Jesus's life, culminating in a form of passion, death, and resurrection. The introduction of a white "Jesus" figure alongside the Black Jesus in the film also offers a commentary on the historical whitewashing of biblical figures in Western art and culture.

Theological Foundations of the Paschal Mystery

The Paschal Mystery stands at the heart of Christian faith and theology, encompassing the Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Glorification of Jesus Christ. Sacred Scripture consistently presents these events not as isolated historical moments but as a unified salvific act through which God accomplishes the redemption of humanity. Saint Paul articulates this foundational conviction succinctly: “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4).

The origins of the Paschal Mystery are deeply rooted in the Jewish Passover (*Pesach*), commemorating Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt (Exod 12:1–14). The blood of the sacrificed lamb, marking the homes of the Israelites, protected them from death and signified divine deliverance. Christian theology understands this event as a typological prefiguration of Christ, the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). As Saint Paul declares, “Christ, our Paschal lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7). Through this typology, the Exodus event becomes a prophetic anticipation of Christ’s redemptive death, which liberates humanity not from political bondage but from sin and death itself (Rom 6:6–9).

The Passion of Christ reveals the depth of divine love expressed through obedient suffering. The Gospels portray Jesus freely accepting his suffering in accordance with the Father’s will (Matt 26:39; Luke 22:42). His crucifixion is not merely a tragic execution but a sacrificial offering “for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28). On the cross, Jesus embodies the Suffering Servant foretold by the prophet Isaiah, “He was wounded for our transgressions... and by his bruises we are healed” (Isa 53:5). The words spoken from the cross, particularly “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34), reveal that Christ’s suffering is inseparable from mercy, reconciliation, and self-giving love.

The Death of Christ marks the apparent triumph of sin and death, yet Scripture presents it paradoxically as the moment of victory. The Gospel of John emphasizes that Jesus’ death is an act of sovereign self-gift: “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (John 10:18). Through his death, Christ enters fully into the human condition, even unto death, thereby transforming death from within. As the Letter to the Hebrews affirms, “By the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Heb 2:9). The tearing of the temple veil at the moment of Jesus’ death (Matt 27:51) symbolizes the removal of the barrier between God and humanity, granting direct access to divine life.

The Resurrection constitutes the definitive confirmation of Christ’s identity and mission. All four Gospels testify that the tomb was found empty and that the risen Christ appeared to his disciples (Matt 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–18). The Resurrection is not a mere resuscitation but the transformation of Christ’s humanity into glorified life. Saint Paul underscores its centrality: “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (1 Cor 15:14). Through the Resurrection, Christ conquers death, inaugurates the new creation (2 Cor 5:17), and becomes “the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor 15:20), guaranteeing the future resurrection of believers.

The Paschal Mystery reaches its completion in Christ’s Glorification, particularly expressed in the Ascension. The risen Christ is exalted at the right hand of the Father (Acts 1:9–11; Phil 2:9–11), where he continually intercedes for humanity (Rom 8:34). The Ascension does not signify Christ’s absence but his new mode of presence, empowering the Church through the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–4). In this way, the Paschal Mystery extends beyond historical events and becomes an ongoing reality in the life of the Church.

The Church formally articulates the centrality of the Paschal Mystery in her magisterial teaching. The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “The Paschal Mystery of Jesus, which comprises his Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Glorification, stands at the center of the Christian faith, because God’s saving plan was accomplished once for all by the redemptive death of his Son Jesus Christ” (CCCC, no. 112).

This teaching echoes the Second Vatican Council’s *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which affirms that Christ “achieved the work of redemption principally by the Paschal Mystery of his blessed Passion, Resurrection

from the dead, and glorious Ascension” (SC, no. 5). The Council further teaches that the Church lives from this mystery, which is made present sacramentally in the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist (SC, no. 10).

Patristic theology also provides foundational insight. Melito of Sardis, in his second-century homily *On the Pascha*, describes Christ as both the sacrificed lamb and the victorious Lord, emphasizing that the Paschal Mystery is at once historical and eternal, earthly and heavenly. This early witness underscores that the Church has always understood Christ’s Paschal act as the interpretive key to Scripture and salvation history.

Saint John Paul II further develops this teaching by emphasizing the existential and participatory dimension of the Paschal Mystery. In *Salvifici Doloris*, he explains that human suffering acquires meaning when united with Christ’s Passion, allowing believers to participate spiritually in the redemptive work of Christ. Thus, the Paschal Mystery is not only something Christ accomplished *for* humanity but also something into which humanity is invited to enter (cf. Rom 6:3–4).

Catholic theology emphasizes that the Paschal Mystery is made present sacramentally, especially in the Eucharist. Jesus’ command, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19), is understood not as a mere mental recollection but as a liturgical participation in his saving work. As taught by the Second Vatican Council, it is through the Paschal Mystery that Christ “accomplished the work of human redemption and the perfect glorification of God” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 5). Thus, the Paschal Mystery remains the source and summit of Christian life, shaping faith, worship, and moral transformation.

The Paschal Mystery, therefore, constitutes God’s definitive act of salvation, uniting Christ’s suffering, death, resurrection, and glorification into a single redemptive movement. Through this mystery, humanity is reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18–19), liberated from sin (Rom 6:6–7), and invited into new life in Christ (Rom 6:4). Any theological engagement with narratives of suffering, death, and transformation—such as those explored in *The Book of Clarence*—must therefore be measured against this unique, unrepeatable, and salvific mystery of Jesus Christ.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to provide a psycho-theological analysis of *The Book of Clarence* in order to illuminate its symbolic relationship to the Paschal Mystery. The study seeks to discern how the film engages themes of conversion, suffering, self-sacrifice, and resurrection, and how these themes resonate with Catholic theological anthropology and soteriology, without conflating fiction with doctrine.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, observational film-review method grounded in psycho-theological inquiry. Data were generated through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving seven postgraduate students of psycho-spiritual therapy at the Psycho-Spiritual Institute of Lux Terra Leadership Foundation, Nairobi Campus. All participants are Catholic priests from Nigeria, Rwanda, and Zambia, with formal training in theology and psycho-spiritual therapy.

Following a collective viewing of *The Book of Clarence*, participants engaged in a guided group discussion focused on theological, psychological, and pastoral interpretations of the film. The discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai. Thematic analysis was then conducted to identify recurring patterns related to faith, doubt, suffering, conversion, representation, and the Paschal Mystery.

Themes were found by repeatedly reading the transcript, marking important statements, and grouping similar ideas together. While the participants’ perspectives informed the analysis, interpretive synthesis and theological evaluation were undertaken by the author to ensure coherence, doctrinal clarity, and analytical integration. The findings are therefore presented not as a survey of opinions but as a psycho-theological interpretation shaped by communal reflection and theological discernment.

Thematic Psycho-Theological Analysis

The group reviewed the film, *The Book of Clarence*, and thematically grouped the reviews into two parts. The first part was to relate the movie to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The second part relates to other lessons from the movie.

Part A: Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus

The film *The Book of Clarence* presents a satirical yet thought-provoking re-imagining of biblical times, offering a fictional narrative that, by its very design, invites parallels and contrasts with the foundational story of Jesus Christ. While steeped in humor and a distinctly human perspective, Clarence's journey inadvertently mirrors key stages of the Christian narrative, albeit through a lens of skepticism, ambition, and eventual transformation. The following themes were derived:

1. Fictitious Story vs. Parallel Biblical Story

Clarence's tale is entirely fictional, set in Jerusalem in 33 AD. He is a street hustler, a skeptic, and a debtor, living in the shadow of Jesus of Nazareth's growing fame. His initial motivation to become "a new Messiah" is driven by a desire for wealth and status, to impress his desired girl, Varinia, his community, and to prove his twin brother Thomas, a disciple of Jesus, wrong. His journey is one of misunderstanding, misdirection, and ultimately, a profound encounter with suffering and a different kind of truth.

In parallel with the Biblical story, there is no mention of anyone named Clarence as Thomas's twin brother, even though the Bible identifies Thomas as a twin. More importantly, the Gospels present the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as historical events, central to Christian faith. Jesus' story is one of divine incarnation, selfless ministry, sacrificial love, and ultimate triumph over death, believed to be the fulfillment of ancient prophecies and the foundation of salvation. The parallels drawn with Clarence are often ironic or serve to highlight the stark differences in their motivations and ultimate impact.

Notwithstanding, there is a constant picture with a strong message to say that "Jesus is not as He is portrayed today", according to Speaker 1. Jesus could be 'black' and not 'white'. The picture of the 'white Jesus' in the *Book of Clarence* was a beggar transformed by Jesus's miracle.

2. The Life of Jesus: Immaculate Conception, His Person, and Miracles

Jesus is born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, conceived without sin, signifying his unique divine nature. He is presented as the Son of God, fully divine and fully human, embodying perfect love, truth, and righteousness. He is humble, compassionate, and unwavering in his mission. He performs genuine miracles (healing the sick, raising the dead, walking on water, feeding multitudes) as signs of God's kingdom and his divine authority, always for the glory of God and the good of others, never for personal gain.

Clarence is born to Amina, who is an ordinary human parent, with no extraordinary circumstances surrounding his birth. He is deeply flawed, driven by worldly desires. Clarence is initially portrayed as a cunning opportunist, seeking to exploit the spiritual fervor around him for personal benefit. He is self-centered, boastful, and often misguided, a stark contrast to Jesus's humility. Clarence attempts to *fake* miracles (e.g., pretending to heal a blind man and raise the dead) to gain followers and money. These are illusions, designed to deceive, and they ultimately lead to his downfall. The film uses these attempts to highlight the superficiality of seeking power without a genuine spiritual foundation. However, there was a real miracle of walking on water, a situation where true knowledge (not belief) became the foundation of his faith in God.

3. Betrayed with a Kiss

Betrayal emerges as a multifaceted theme through both Judas and Virginia. Jesus is betrayed by Judas Iscariot, one of his own disciples, with a kiss, a sign of intimacy twisted into an act of profound treachery, leading

directly to his arrest and Passion. Clarence also felt a "betrayal with a kiss" by his desired girl, Varina, although this was not really the case, as confessed by Varina when she visited Clarence in prison.

Judas' betrayal of Jesus is portrayed not merely as treachery but as a theological misjudgment; Judas perceives Jesus as weak and ineffective, aligning himself with power structures ("Judas is working for us"). His betrayal stems from disbelief in a suffering Messiah.

Similarly, Virginia is portrayed ambiguously as a betrayer of Clarence. Though circumstances suggest her complicity, she denies betrayal during her prison visit. This parallel invites reflection on the ambiguity of loyalty, the fragility of human relationships under pressure, and the ease with which misunderstanding replaces trust. The film thus reframes betrayal as rooted not only in malice but also in fear, confusion, and misinterpretation.

4. Passion and Death: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"

Jesus undergoes immense physical and emotional suffering (the Passion), culminating in his crucifixion. His death is a voluntary sacrifice for the sins of humanity. On the cross, he utters words of forgiveness, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), demonstrating boundless compassion even in agony.

Clarence is also subjected to a "passion" and crucifixion, mirroring the physical suffering of Jesus. He is mocked, beaten, and eventually nailed to a cross alongside other condemned individuals. This is the film's most direct visual parallel. However, Clarence's experience on the cross is less about divine sacrifice and more about a moment of profound personal reckoning. He also uttered words of forgiveness for his persecutors, "Lord, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." His suffering leads to a deep, transformative realization about the true nature of belief, love, and selflessness. His journey to the cross strips away his illusions, forcing him to confront his own motivations and the genuine suffering of others. He might find a different kind of peace or understanding in his final moments, a quiet acceptance that contrasts with his earlier defiance.

5. Resurrection

Jesus's resurrection is a literal, bodily rising from the dead on the third day, signifying his victory over sin and death and offering the promise of eternal life to believers. The 'empty tomb' is the physical proof, and his appearances to disciples confirm his living presence.

Clarence's transformation marks the theological heart of the film. Jesus' act of touching the tombstone, causing it to crack, symbolizes divine authority over death. When Jesus raises Clarence with the words, "Rise, Clarence, son of Amina," the scene unmistakably echoes biblical resurrection narratives. Jesus' declaration, acknowledging Clarence as "a man of no faith" who nevertheless acted selflessly by freeing slaves at personal risk, introduces a profound theological insight: moral courage can precede explicit belief.

Clarence's confession, "My Lord," signals his movement from skepticism to authentic faith. This conversion aligns with the Johannine proclamation spoken in the scene: "I am the resurrection and the life." The theme emphasizes that faith is often born through encounter, suffering, and grace rather than prior conviction.

After his crucifixion, Clarence's story continues through the impact he has on others. His suffering and the lessons learned (both by him and by those who witnessed his journey) lead to a transformation of his character and a deeper understanding of genuine faith and purpose. His "death" frees him from his former self-serving ambitions, allowing for a "new life" rooted in humility and authentic connection.

6. Restoration and the Disappearing Wounds

The vanishing of the crucifixion marks (holes in Jesus' hands) functions as a symbol of restoration rather than denial of suffering. Unlike the resurrected Christ, who retains his wounds in traditional theology, this visual

choice suggests healing, renewal, and completion of the mission. The sudden illumination above Clarence's head indicates the birth of a new idea or calling, though its content remains ambiguous. This ambiguity invites the viewer into reflection: resurrection is not merely about returning to life but about receiving a new purpose shaped by encounter with the risen Lord.

7. The Paschal Mystery Retold Through the Marginalized

Collectively, these themes reinterpret the Paschal Mystery: suffering, death, and resurrection, through the experience of a marginalized, morally flawed protagonist. Clarence's journey mirrors the Paschal movement: from doubt to death, from death to life, and from life to mission. The film thus presents salvation history not as distant sacred history but as an ongoing reality accessible to the socially invisible, the doubtful, and the broken.

Part B: Other Lessons

1. Faith, Doubt, and Spiritual Growth

The Biblical Thomas, a twin, was presented with his twin brother Clarence to bring about the dual personalities of Faith and Doubt. Thomas was the man of Faith while Clarence was a man of Doubt. However, Clarence was portrayed as a spiritual seeker. Speaker 2 interprets Clarence's journey as one of authentic spiritual pursuit. Though Clarence prized knowledge over belief, which he resisted, his actions reflect deep conviction, which subsists in his willingness to die for what he "knows." Faith begins in doubt, as Speaker 4 highlighted, that genuine faith often originates in doubt. This mirrors Thomas's doubt in scripture and underlines that unquestioning belief may lead to gullibility. Clarence told his brother Thomas, who was still stressing the importance of belief, that his experience of walking on the water was made possible by God. His experience was not based on believing, but rather on knowing. Several speakers noted that Clarence's journey paralleled Christ's in that suffering led to transformation, and that divine revelation came at his lowest point.

2. Divine Revelation and Instrumentality

It was noted that God's use of flawed vessels. Speakers 1 and 2 emphasize that Clarence, even while faking, became an instrument for divine revelation. This leads to a theological insight: God can use anyone, saint or sinner, for a divine purpose. Speaker 3 justifies this by pointing to the symbolic importance of recurring imagery like open skies and walking on water, interpreting them as signs of Clarence's inner goodness and divine encounter. Clarence's life revealed a movement to selflessness. Speaker 1 pointed to Clarence paying all he had to save the slaves, saying, 'I can die, but 20 more people will live.' By this act, "he went beyond changing to growing, yeah, from selfishness to selflessness." Speaker 2 connected this to Egunjobi's hierarchy of self, which posits the self in terms of selfishness, self-care, and selflessness. "Clarence's movement from selfishness to selflessness shows that the movement is not linear.

3. Identity, Representation, and Racial Commentary

A recurring theme is the rejection of white dominance, as depicted in the movie. The characters discuss how the movie portrays the Romans as oppressors and question why Jesus is often depicted as white. It can be said that the movie is about a rejection of white dominance. Speaker 3 focuses on how the film critiques colonial religious imagery. The visual contrast between black Jews and white Romans underscores racial power dynamics. The transformation of Clarence into a revered, whitewashed figure upon cleansing critiques internalized supremacy. The shift in public reverence after Benjamin (the Beggar)'s physical cleansing reflects enduring societal bias: purity and divinity are still unconsciously equated with whiteness, even in a black-centered narrative.

4. Humanity of the Messiah

The movie portrays the humanity of Jesus, showing his struggles and interactions with others. This theme is discussed in relation to Clarence's actions and the depiction of Jesus in the movie. Multiple speakers engage with Clarence's human vulnerability, particularly his romantic involvement. This leads to a broader discussion

on Jesus' humanity, often hidden or omitted in theological discourse. Speaker 1 reflects on the complex identity of Mary Magdalene and the often hypothetical claims that explore a possibly more human (and relational) Jesus.

5. Symbolism of Money and Influence

There was an exploration of the symbolic role of money and how it influences characters' actions and perceptions. Speakers 1 and 3 reflect on the symbolism of money in Clarence's journey. Money draws crowds, earns respect, and manipulates perception, highlighting the dangers of materialism in spiritual movements. Even Clarence's initial fake persona becomes entangled with economic gain, drawing a parallel with how modern religious figures can be judged by prosperity rather than authenticity.

6. Role of Women and Voice of the Marginalized

Speaker 5 draws attention to Clarence's girlfriend, Varinia, whose challenge spurs him to act. Her encouragement frames "growth" as a function of movement and change, faith enacted through deeds. The early disciples' doubts, including the disregarding of Mary Magdalene's testimony, parallel the marginalization of women's voices in both scripture and society.

7. Critical Media Literacy and the Power of Story

The Book of Clarence reflects how movies and media can influence and sometimes confuse people's understanding of faith and religious stories. Speaker 3 revises an earlier judgment, suggesting the movie isn't meant to dismantle faith but to spark deeper questions, especially about black spiritual agency and representation.

8. The Message Is Not for Everyone

It was reviewed that the movie, *The Book of Clarence*, came with a confusion, and it is not suitable for everyone. According to Speaker 1, "Behind it, there is an ideology or there is an agenda. That ideology is very dangerous." He continued to say, "You have to be critical to understand and to watch many times so you can understand the logic of the one who made this movie."

Speaker 5 also agreed that it is not for everyone because it is psychologically meant to confuse people of faith. He stated,

As I shared with my classmates, the purpose is psychology. Movies are not Scripture. We cannot believe them because they are a source of money. This has been happening for business purposes. It is to confuse believers. If you bring a movie that uses the stories of Jesus, but the stories are not from the Bible, it is to confuse people. At the end, did the blood come from Jesus? The Clarence movie ends as if Jesus didn't die or shed blood. It means that no black man can save or be saved? There is confusion.

Speaker 6 linked the Book of Clarence with a documentary film titled *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, which shows how passion narratives are constantly challenged by history, archaeology, and media. This raises an existential question: *What if Jesus' body wasn't resurrected?*

Speaker 5 warns that viewers without a grounding in faith might misread the film, potentially experiencing confusion or spiritual crisis. Thus, such media should be engaged with theological literacy.

DISCUSSION

From a Catholic theological perspective, *The Book of Clarence* may be viewed as a provocative cultural text that invites reflection on the Paschal Mystery, the Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Glorification of Jesus Christ, which stands at the very heart of Christian faith (Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCCC], 2005). While the film is fictional and employs satire, its narrative trajectory nonetheless evokes key

dimensions of Catholic soteriology, particularly the transformative power of suffering, conversion, and grace. When approached with theological discernment, the film can function as a *praeparatio evangelica*, stimulating reflection on the mystery of redemption while simultaneously requiring careful doctrinal boundaries.

Central to Catholic theology is the affirmation that the Paschal Mystery is unique, unrepeatable, and salvific only in Christ. The Church teaches that “God’s saving plan was accomplished once for all by the redemptive death of his Son Jesus Christ” (CCCC, 2005, no. 112). Consequently, Clarence’s passion and resurrection cannot be understood as redemptive in themselves nor as parallel in an ontological sense to Christ’s saving work. Rather, Clarence’s journey may be interpreted analogically, as a symbolic participation in the Paschal pattern of dying to sin and rising to new life, a movement made possible only through Christ’s grace.

The Catholic understanding of conversion (*conversio*) provides an important interpretive lens for Clarence’s transformation. Clarence begins as a man of skepticism, moral disorder, and self-interest, embodying what Catholic moral theology would identify as a life oriented toward the self rather than toward God or neighbor. His gradual movement toward selflessness, most clearly expressed in his decision to sacrifice his wealth and life to free enslaved persons, reflects the Church’s teaching that authentic conversion is manifested not merely in belief but in concrete acts of charity (*caritas*) (Wardwell, 2022). As such, Clarence’s journey illustrates that grace can be at work even before explicit faith, preparing the human heart for full conversion.

Faith itself is both a divine gift and a human response. Clarence’s insistence on “knowing” rather than “believing” initially places him at odds with traditional religious categories. Yet his eventual confession, “My Lord”, signals the moment when experiential encounter gives way to theological faith. This progression resonates with the Catholic understanding that faith often matures through encounter, suffering, and illumination rather than through abstract assent alone (The Paschal Mystery, 2010). Clarence’s experience thus echoes the Church’s recognition that doubt, when honestly engaged, can become a pathway to deeper faith rather than its negation.

The film’s depiction of Clarence’s crucifixion warrants particular theological caution and reflection. Christ’s Passion is not merely exemplary suffering but a sacrificial act that reconciles humanity with God (Sacrosanctum Concilium, no. 5). Clarence’s crucifixion, while visually evocative, lacks this salvific efficacy. Nevertheless, it may be interpreted as a representation of *participation* in Christ’s suffering. The Church teaches that believers are invited to unite their own sufferings with Christ’s for spiritual transformation (Wardwell, 2022). Clarence’s suffering becomes meaningful not because it redeems others, but because it disposes him to receive mercy and truth.

The resurrection scene further reinforces this distinction. Resurrection is not simply a return to life but a definitive victory over death accomplished by Christ alone. Clarence’s resurrection by Jesus within the narrative underscores, rather than undermines, Christ’s unique authority over life and death. Jesus’ explicit forgiveness of Clarence and acknowledgment of his selfless act affirm that salvation is ultimately rooted in divine mercy rather than human merit (CCCC, 2005). Clarence does not save himself; he is saved by Christ’s initiative.

The film’s emphasis on the marginalized is particularly resonant. The Church consistently teaches that Christ is uniquely present among the poor, the oppressed, and the socially excluded. By situating the Paschal pattern within the life of a socially insignificant figure, *The Book of Clarence* echoes the Gospel proclamation that salvation is offered first to those on the margins (Luke 4:18). This emphasis aligns with Catholic social teaching, which affirms the dignity of every human person and God’s preferential love for the poor.

The film’s racial and representational themes also invite theological reflection. Catholic theology affirms the historical particularity of the Incarnation: Jesus of Nazareth was a first-century Jewish man, not a culturally abstract figure. By challenging Eurocentric portrayals of Jesus, the film implicitly critiques distortions that have arisen through colonial and cultural dominance. Such critique is consonant with the Church’s call to inculturate the Gospel authentically while remaining faithful to historical and doctrinal truth (GUG Contributor, 2024).

Nevertheless, this review rightly notes that *The Book of Clarence* is not catechetically neutral. Its blending of satire, fiction, and sacred narrative risks confusion, particularly for viewers without solid theological formation. Popular media cannot substitute for Scripture or Tradition and must be engaged critically. As some reviewers observed, without proper interpretive guidance, the film's ambiguities could obscure essential doctrines, including the singular redemptive role of Christ's death and resurrection.

The Book of Clarence may be fruitfully engaged as a symbolic and cultural meditation on the Paschal Mystery, but never as a doctrinal re-presentation of it. The film affirms, albeit indirectly, that transformation, forgiveness, and new life flow solely from Christ. When approached with theological literacy, it can serve as a contemporary invitation to reflect on how the Paschal Mystery continues to unfold in the lives of imperfect, searching, and marginalized persons who encounter the mercy of God through Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine *The Book of Clarence* through a psycho-theological lens in order to illuminate its relationship to the Paschal Mystery. It serves as a challenging yet fruitful cultural invitation for theological reflection on the enduring relevance of the Paschal Mystery. Through an observational film review and thematic analysis grounded in group reflection, the study has demonstrated that while the film is fictional and employs satire, it nevertheless engages profoundly with themes that resonate with Catholic theology, including conversion, suffering, self-sacrifice, mercy, and resurrection. When approached with theological discernment, the film offers a symbolic narrative that echoes, without replacing, the salvific mystery of Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection.

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