

## Variations on Sacrificial Love: Three Films by Roberto Rossellini

“It was natural to look for the most accomplished form of the Christian ideal: I found it in St. Francis. However, I never meant to recreate the life of a saint. In *The Flowers of St. Francis*, I don’t deal with either his birth or his death, nor do I pretend to offer a complete revelation of the Franciscan message or of its spirit, or to tackle the extraordinarily awesome and complex personality of Francis. Instead, I have wanted to show the effects of it on his followers, among whom, however, I have given particular emphasis to Brother Ginepro and Brother Giovanni, who display in an almost paradoxical way the sense of simplicity, innocence and delight that emanates from Francis’s own spirit.” –“The Message of *The Flowers of St. Francis*” (1950), Roberto Rossellini

“Modern man feels a need to tell of things as they are, to take account of reality in an uncompromisingly concrete way, which goes with today’s interest in statistics and scientific results. Neorealism is also a response to the genuine need to see men for what they are, with humility and without recourse to fabricating the exceptional; it means an awareness that the exceptional is arrived at through the investigation of reality. Lastly, it’s an urge for self-clarification, an urge not to ignore reality whatever it may be. . . .

“*The Flowers* and *Europa ’51* are also autobiographical in that they express feelings I have observed in myself and in my fellow men. In each of us, there’s the jester side and its opposite; there is the tendency toward concreteness and the tendency toward fantasy. Today there is a tendency to suppress the second quite brutally. The world is more and more divided in two, between those who want to kill fantasy and those who want to save it, those who want to die and those who want to live. This is the problem I confront in *Europa ’51*. There is a danger of forgetting the second tendency, the tendency toward fantasy, and killing every feeling of humanity left in us, creating a robot man, who must think in only one way, the concrete way. In *Europa ’51* this inhuman threat is openly and violently denounced. I wanted to state my own opinion quite frankly, in my own interest and in my children’s. That was the aim of the latest film.

The ability to see both sides of man, to look at him charitably, seems to me to be a supremely Latin and Italian attitude. It results from a degree of civility which has been our custom from very ancient times—the habit of seeing every side on man. For me it is very important to have been born into such a civilization. I believe that what saved us from the disasters of the war, and other equally terrible scourges, was this view of life we have, which is unmistakably Catholic. Christianity does not pretend that everything is good and perfect; it recognizes sin and error, but it also admits the possibility of salvation. It is the other side who only allow man to be perfectly consistent and infallible. To me that is monstrous and nonsensical. The only possibility I see for getting nearer to the truth, is to try to understand sin and be tolerant of it.” --*A Discussion of Neorealism with Mario Verdone* (1952)

“By which I do not mean that it shouldn’t exist. Some people do it. To each his own. But as far as I’m concerned, in order to work I first need to gather an extraordinary amount of information, so as to know what I am going to be dealing with through and through, after which I allow myself total freedom of action. What one would call improvisation, and, in a sense, and its value is precisely in that it is a sketch. First of all because this allows one to move on, that is, to learn to become a man. And being a man is a very difficult job that must be learned ever day: and that’s why we all need the freedom in this world to do it well. If one gets bogged down in one’s own craft then one becomes a craftsman, not a man.” –Interview with Francesco Savio (1974)

### Exploratory Questions

- What is perfect happiness? What is perfect joy?
- How can you tell if you or someone else has it?
- Rossellini once said that *The Flowers of St. Francis* is a film about “innocence, innocence as combat.” What do you think he meant by this?
- What does it mean to love God and one’s neighbor?
- How should one respond in times of poverty and persecution? Is it possible to die the good death?

### ***Rome Open City* (1945) [100 min]**

The film began ostensibly as a documentary about the life of Don Pietro Pellegrini, a priest who was killed for supporting the resistance movement in WWII. It quickly expanded to an ensemble cast of intertwining stories about the heroism and struggle of the movement. Many see *Rome Open City* as the founding film of what came to be called Italian Neorealism, though that term is deeply contested. For some, neorealism should be a particular way of raising consciousness about the life of the lower classes and their suffering, for others it is a way of altering our consciousness through a method of filmmaking that defamiliarizes our normal expectations, and still for others it is a form of filmmaking that encourages freedom and spontaneity.



1. How does the opening film score set a tone for the establishing shot of Rome? How does the score continue to suggest the seriousness and danger of the unfolding events?
2. How do the film's mixture of traditional acting and some traditional cinematography blend (or jar) with the neorealist approach to amateur actors and cheaper filming and outdoor settings?
3. What do we learn about the conditions of occupied Rome after 1943?
4. What is childhood like in such surroundings?
5. How would you describe Pina the widow? How does she contrast with the cabaret singer Marina Mari?
6. What is the meaning of love and forgiveness in such surroundings? "Doesn't Christ see us? Doesn't he take pity on us?" they ask.
7. Does the film humorous at any point? Why?
8. Why is the scene surrounding Pina's death so quick?
9. What is the structural relationship; of the two parts of the film?
10. Are Manfredi and Francesco heroes? How would you characterize the philosophy of life that inspires them? What motivates Manfredi's sacrifice? Is it the same as Don Pietro's? Are they comparable?

11. Is Don Pietro correct to hold that anyone fighting for justice and peace “walks in the way of the Lord, whose ways are infinite”?
12. What is the meaning of his reaction to the death by torture of Manfredi? Why does he invoke the words of Christ: “It is finished”?
13. Is Don Pietro the priest a martyr? Is he a saint?
14. Why is it significant that the boys behold Don Pietro’s execution?

***The Flowers of Saint Francis* (1950) [75 min]**



1. What does the opening poem/hymn by Francis tell us about the film and its spirituality?
2. What does the episodic nature of the film reveal about the theme and focus of the subject? How does the neorealist approach shape these “little flowers”?
3. Does it matter that the monks are played by actual monks? How would you characterize their acting?
4. Why does Brother Juniper (Ginepro) play such an important role in the film? How important is Giovanni the Simpleton?
5. Why does Rossellini juxtapose Francis’ famous prayer with his preaching to the birds? What is the visual and aural impact of these scene?
6. How would you characterize the exchange between Sister Clare and the brothers?
7. How does Rossellini use various shots to explore the meaning of the leper? How does the cowbell add to the meaning of the scene?
8. What role does the episode with Brother Juniper and the tyrant Nicolaio serve in the film as a whole?
9. Does the absurdity of Nicolaio’s armor belong in the film? Why or why not?
10. Why does the film conclude with the brothers going into town and then spinning themselves to know which direction they are to preach?

***Europa '51* (1952) [113 min]**

1. How would you characterize the life of Irene at the opening of the film?
2. How does Michel's fall, then death change her perspective on the world?
3. What kind of character is Andrea the communist newspaper journalist? What are his strengths and limitations?
4. What would it mean "to change everything"?
5. How would you trace Irene's moral and spiritual growth in the following: the family with the sick child; the woman with six children; the factory job; the dying prostitute; the gang member who has murdered someone; the insane woman in the sanatorium?
6. Why does Irene ultimately reject Andrea's communist vision? How would you describe their conflicting visions of paradise?
7. Describe the visual shots in the factory. How does Rossellini use them to express Irene's near helplessness and bewilderment?
8. What role does the documentary at the movies play in the film?
9. Are the psychiatrists able to understand her? Does the priest?
10. How does her life parallel with that of St. Francis? How does it parallel with the ideas of Simone Weil?

Simone Weil and Rootedness

The French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil's last work, *The Need for Roots*, was written in 1943, the year of her death, and published posthumously in 1949, as well as being translated into English in 1952 with an introduction by T.S. Eliot. *The Need for Roots* offers a passionate call for helping the French return to a sense of true patriotism, tied not to the State, but to place and ideals. In the first part of the book, Weil explores briefly fourteen "needs of the soul" before focusing on her chief concern, the 15th and perhaps most comprehensive need--rootedness.

1. **Order**, by which Weil means a sense of epistemic coherence. The soul needs a sense that a balance of the forces of the universe exists, that they have a beauty to them, a rationality at some level.
2. **Liberty**, that is the ability to choose within a system of rules that we trust because they "emanate from a source of authority which is not looked upon as strange or hostile, but loved as something belonging to those placed under its direction." None are free unless they operate out of goodwill and obligation to others, she contends.
3. **Obedience** of a healthy sort is "necessary food for the soul," and the one who is forced to obey a tyrant must partake of the sickness of such a society.
4. **Responsibility** of a real sort, that is, of type that actually impacts the person and his or her fellows in a meaningful way.
5. **Equality** in degree of respect and with a degree of opportunity. There must also be a way for movement to take place up and down the ladder of social equilibrium.
6. **Hierarchism**, that is a proper veneration of one's superiors who are symbols of what we each desire.
7. **Honor** in being a part of a noble tradition with a proud past of examples of virtuous actions.
8. **Punishment** that restores the one who has moved outside the circle of obedience--fully for the one who is truly repentant, and partially for the one who refuses. "Punishment is a method for getting justice into the soul of the criminal by bodily suffering."
9. **Freedom of Opinion**, that is an unrestricted freedom to explore all opinions, though this pursuit is conducted by one who serves the truth.
10. **Security** from constant, debilitating fear or terror.
11. **Risk** that keeps one from boredom even while not descending into terror.
12. **Private Property** such as owning a piece of land and one's own tools, because these are the means of a necessary and bodily life.
13. **Collective Property**, a feeling of ownership in public monuments, parks, and ceremonies.
14. **Truth**: "The need for truth is more sacred than any other need," so we must do all we can to curtail lying in print or in public speech.
15. **Rootedness**. She defines rootedness in the following way:

A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations of the future. This participation is a natural one, in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession and social surroundings. Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw well-nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual, and spiritual life by the way of the environment of which he forms a natural part.

### Canticle of the Sun

Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord,  
 All praise is Yours, all glory, all honour and all blessings.  
 To you alone, Most High, do they belong, and no mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your Name.

Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,  
 especially Sir Brother Sun,  
 Who is the day through whom You give us light.  
 And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,  
 Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,  
In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,  
And fair and stormy, all weather's moods,  
by which You cherish all that You have made.

Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water,  
So useful, humble, precious and pure.

Praised be You my Lord through Brother Fire,  
through whom You light the night and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You my Lord through our Sister,  
Mother Earth who sustains and governs us,  
producing varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.  
Praise be You my Lord through those who grant pardon for love of You and bear sickness and trial.

Blessed are those who endure in peace,  
By You Most High, they will be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord through Sister Death,  
from whom no-one living can escape.  
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!  
Blessed are they She finds doing Your Will.

No second death can do them harm.  
Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks,  
And serve Him with great humility.

#### Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen