



## Movie review

# Gran Torino

Directed by Clint Eastwood; Starring: Clint Eastwood (Walt Kowalski), Bee Vang (Thau Lor), Ahney Her (Sue Lor), Chris Carley (Fr Jovanich), 130 mins, 2009.

BY DOUG HODGKINSON

Nobody does “pissed off” like Clint Eastwood! The movie opens at the funeral of Walt Kowalski’s wife and continues on at the reception. It is obvious that his emotional state and attitude is not just a response to grief. It is a lifestyle! He is alienated from his two sons, their wives and the grandchildren, as well as most friends. His neighbours, the Lors, are Hmong Vietnamese, allies of the US in Vietnam and now settled in his neighbourhood in Detroit. When he sits on his porch and watches Mrs. Lor he wonders, “Why did you even come here?” She watches him and wonders, “Can’t you see all the white people left? Why do you stay?”

Walt fought in Korea, earned a Silver Star for bravery, returned to the US to work in Detroit for Ford and raised two boys, who now sell Japanese cars. He’s retired but gains most of his identity from his capacity to fix things: appliances, roofs, cars, plumbing, eaves troughs...whatever. His pride and joy is a ‘72 Gran Torino, which he usually keeps under wraps in his garage.

Sue Lor, his next door neighbour is a pushy, wise cracking, cheerful, don’t-take-no-for-an-answer young woman who one day invites Walt (Wally) over for dinner with the extended family. Thau, her brother, is a brainy, shy and withdrawn young man who is getting slowly drawn into the clutches of a Hmong gang. His initiation test involves trying to steal Walt’s Gran Torino, which is thwarted when Walt grabs one of his many guns and drives off the intruder.

Initially hostile, the Lor family is drawn to Walt when on one occasion he rescues Thau from a potential beating by a Mexican gang and rescues Sue from a threatening situation with a black gang. In each situation Walt is ever ready to counter violence with his own overwhelming force. The grateful Lor family respond by designating Thau as someone to work for Walt. A curious mentoring relationship develops between the grumpy old man and the shy, incompetent boy. Worth the rental price is a scene in which Walt takes Thau to his barber, an Italian-American, to teach him how to talk as an American Male.

Fr. Jovanich, who is the parish priest in a congregation Walt never attends, tries to maintain a close connection after Mrs Kowalski’s funeral. His aim is to get Walt to confession. Walt considers him “an over educated, 26 year-old virgin who holds old ladies’ hands so that they will give money and who knows nothing about life and death.”

Though clergy are often played as hapless figures of ridicule in film, Fr. Jovanich proves surprisingly street smart when it comes to dealing with the gangs.

Things turn especially ugly when Sue is raped and beaten by her own “cousins” in the Hmong gang. Thau is ready to ride out with guns blazing but Walt is able to counsel caution in order to make the right preparations. For his part, Walt gets a new suit, goes to confession (given the impending violence his sins seem quite trivial!), changes his will, arranges care for his dog and locks Thau in his basement. In a surprising ending he confronts the gang unarmed and unsurprisingly is gunned down. Walt may have rejected his Roman Catholic upbringing but he knows his Substitutionary Theory of Atonement!

In his book “Things Hidden Since the Beginning of Time,” writer Rene Girard

describes a dirty little secret that all humankind knows. If we want to break a cycle of violence the offering of a Scapegoat is a very effective, but temporary measure. As we hear in the Easter Gospel, “It is expedient that one man die for the community.” One cop comments as Walt’s body is being hauled away, “Those guys are going away for a very long time.” All out gang warfare is avoided and Walt is a hero.

In the Easter Story the victimage mechanism of society is undermined and society’s secret is exposed. Jesus, the innocent victim does not stay sacrificed and a new basis for peace and justice is offered.

Neither Walt’s easy reliance on violence nor his self sacrifice, as an innocent victim, will prove anything more than a temporary pause in the violence inherent in the community. It may be that the naïve message of forgiveness by an “over educated 26 year old virgin” is a harder but more permanent solution. □



You wanted to know

## Why is Easter so important?

# More people seem to prefer Christmas.

BY PETER DAVISON

**Q:** Why is Easter so important? More people seem to prefer Christmas.

**A:** Well, if it hadn’t been for Easter, there would never

have been a Christmas celebration. The church instituted Christmas only after about three hundred years, and mainly to “Christianise” the pagan winter solstice festival of “Sol Invictus” (the unconquered sun). Easter celebrates Jesus’ triumph over death, which in turn delivers us from being governed by a fear of death and all the other “little deaths” which prevent us from being fully alive. If, on Good

Friday, Jesus essentially says, “Death, do your worst: you won’t prevent me from being true to who I am as God’s Son,” then Easter is the vindication of his trust in God, into whose hands, despite his agonised cry of God-forsakenness, he commends his spirit.

We also need to remember that Easter usually coincides with, or comes close to, the Jewish Passover, which this year comes on March 30, with Easter Sunday on April 4. Passover celebrates the deliverance of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage, and the hope of new life in the Promised Land. Its themes of freedom, wilderness and final homecoming are also interwoven with how Christians understand fear of death as

slavery and captivity, and resurrection as coming to God and to our true selves. Nor is this what some might call “mere theology,” with no practical consequences. Let’s spell this out a bit.

Even if we call ourselves “Easter people,” this doesn’t mean we never have fears. Most of us worry about what others think of us, or like to play it safe at all times. Our fears get in the way of healthy relationships and stunt our personalities, even if at times they provide a needed correction to recklessness. Old hurts lead us to take defensive-aggressive postures, so that we keep up old grudges, maintain ancient feuds, and refuse to risk forgiving others, even if we would like to, for fear that

our forgiveness will be rejected. In the same way we withhold apologies, lest we be seen as weak, or have our apologies rejected too. The result is that we spend too much of our lives in a wilderness of broken relationships, governed by fears and resentments which never allow us to feel good about ourselves or at home with one another. Across this nation there are communities (including churches!) imprisoned by ancient quarrels and unable to move forward into a healthy future — all because of wounded egos.

But for us as Christians, Good Friday spells out Jesus’ selfless sacrifice on the cross (which many have pointed out is “I crossed out”). On Easter Day he is raised and glorified

into a fullness of life beyond all ordinary imagining. But Jesus is no mere “Avatar” through whom we play out all these issues in mere fantasy. Jesus has made it possible for us to see our egos for what they are — false substitutes for the true selves God would have us become. If in baptism we have died with Christ, so also we shall rise with him — free to receive forgiveness, free to offer it to one another, free to be at home with one another, and ourselves free to be fully alive, to the glory of God. The “first day of the week” is also seen as “the eighth day” which ushers in a whole new creation. Is there anything more important than that? Happy Easter indeed! □