

# Faith and Life REFLECTIONS

## "Gran Torino: A faith and life perspective"

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Faith and Life Reflections are a regular resource for lay and rostered leaders on headlines, current books, movies, and social and ethical issues. Comments may be returned to the writer, or to the editor, Mark A. Staples, email [Mstaples@Ltsp.edu](mailto:Mstaples@Ltsp.edu).

This article is written by Mark Staples.

### Focus of our Reflection

This reflection takes a faith view of the epic film, *Gran Torino*, and its perspectives about modern life and death.

### Introductory thoughts

The best films hold a mirror before the eyes of the viewer, forcing the unwary moviegoer sooner or later to take a look inside.

Such a film is *Gran Torino*, a riveting portrayal of curmudgeonly Korean War veteran Walt Kowalski (Clint Eastwood) as he stubbornly lives out his waning years in his Highland Park, MI, neighborhood.

For those in the audience who are not people of faith, this film may not serve as a religious epic, but for the rest of us it plainly can be. It takes on several critical themes – family estrangement, a very real and evolving love between neighbors in unlikely circumstances, dealing with life, death and illness, even what happens when families clash over the idea of moving to a retirement community.

But the predominant theme is not a new one – the issue of racism in the setting of a changing community. Nothing subtle here. The next-door presence of Hmong neighbors evokes recollections in Walt of life (and death) in Korea, including the memories of killing a young Korean soldier there.



Theater-goers convulse with laughter as they hear Walt's inflammatory references to his "gook" neighbors at the outset. Especially memorable is a laugh-filled scene in the barber shop with Walt's long-time barber, Walt and neighbor, Thao (played by Bee Vang).

Thao, early in the movie, gets off to a bad start with Kowalski by trying to steal his mint-condition Ford Gran Torino. The reluctant Thao is led astray by his Hmong gang leader cousin in what was to serve as an initiation rite for the young teen to obtain a place of honor in the gang. Kowalski catches him in the act. But the shy Thao soon apologizes, and insistently carries out his family's tradition by doing chores for his neighbor to make up for the crime attempt. As he does so, Thao and his family in many movingly expressive ways become a redemptive influence on the crusty Kowalski. Kowalski's Hmong neighbors eventually become more of a family than his real, estranged one.

Enter the "mirror" moments. As moviegoers laugh at Kowalski's intense and insensitive language, they may sooner or later recall vividly their own encounters with racism and attendant attempts to squelch, rise above, confront or perhaps ignore the realities of their own harbored influences. These are demons that hit between one's eyes.

The feature film is fraught with religious imagery, subtle and not so subtle. Youthful Roman Catholic Priest Father Janovich (Christopher Carley) preaches

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a shallow eulogy for Walt's widow at the film's outset, drawing a bristling scour from Walt that becomes a familiar trademark of the movie throughout. Father Janovich is nothing if not persistent about fulfilling a promise he made to Walt's wife to get Kowalski to go to confession.

For his efforts Janovich is scurrilously and repeatedly rebuffed at first. But Janovich does not give up on his deathbed promise. (Does God ever give upon us?) A single tear shed by Walt in his darkened living room before yet another visit by the priest provides a soul-revealing moment, and Janovich eventually gets Walt to confession.

The film features several vigilante-style moments familiar to Eastwood fans. But Walt's contemplative response to the brutal rape of Thao's sister, Sue Vang Lor (Ahney Hor), by the aforementioned Hmong gang produces a climax not typical of many earlier Eastwood films. It won't be revealed here. Suffice it to say you can draw a compellingly religious connection to the ending.

**Gran Torino** (Clint Eastwood, director; Nick Schenk, screenplay; produced by Village Roadshow Pictures, Media Magik Entertainment, and Malpaso productions; distributed by Warner Brothers), is marked by intense language and violence, but moments of surpassingly poignant intensity that make for one of life's most memorable film encounters.

### Discussion questions

1. What have been your experiences with racism? What stories can you tell? Have you been changed by these experiences? Where do things stand for you today?
2. Are you part of a changing neighborhood or one that has changed?
3. Does your congregation's membership reflect the racial makeup of your community? Why or why not?

4. In what ways do you identify with a character like Walt Kowalski? Are you a war-time veteran? If so, how do those experiences influence you today?
5. If you are a pastoral leader, how do you feel about the relationship Father Janovich develops with Kowalski? How have you needed to be persistent in your ministry? What has that persistence cost you?
6. If you are a lay person, pastor or other kind of professional church leader, what have been the toughest times of your life? What role has your faith played in coming to terms with them?
7. What are the most memorable examples you can think of when it comes to loving (or being loved by) your neighbor? How well do you know your neighbors today? What might you do to establish better relationships with your neighbors and what are the societal tendencies today that tend to discourage or encourage more "neighborliness?"
8. Do you feel estranged from family members? If so, how did this happen? What might be done about it before it is too late? (As was the case for Walt Kowalski)

### Additional Resources

1. *The Internet Movie Database* page for **Gran Torino** has background information, the movie trailer and other video content, and more: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1205489>.
2. The movie's official Web site is at <http://www.thegrantorino.com>
3. A number of reviews and discussions of **Gran Torino** are on the Web. As an example, see the review by National Public Radio reviewer Mark Jenkins: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98088072>

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