

Vatican II Goes to Hollywood: Cinema, Conscience, and Ecumenism in the 1960s

Paul G. Monson

In 1967, Fred Zinnemann's *A Man for All Seasons* swept the Academy Awards and received the first joint film award between the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures (NCOMP, formerly the Legion of Decency) and the National Council of Churches. One year later, Michael Anderson's *The Shoes of the Fisherman* incorporated actual footage of Vatican II's closing ceremony while pursuing the storyline of a progressive pope with remarkable ecumenical and interreligious acumen. Euphoric Catholic bishops quickly met the ire of secular and Protestant critics. The Academy Awards rejected the film, and joint awards between Catholics and Protestants later ceased altogether. What caused this shift in American ecumenical collaboration? This article analyzes the cultural reception of Vatican II through the lens of Hollywood and its explicit agenda to seize the "ecumenical outlook" of the council for stories on the screen. Expanding the scholarship of Anthony Burke Smith and Colleen McDannell, it charts the untold story of Hollywood's interest in the council. This story recovers memos, scripts, and letters from the Academy's archives in Beverly Hills and the NCOMP's archives in Washington, DC. Overall, it demonstrates the intersection of ecumenism and secularism in postconciliar American culture.

In December of 1966, the film *A Man for All Seasons* premiered in American theatres. Directed by Fred Zinnemann, the film enjoyed widespread acclaim and swept the Oscars the following spring. This film also received the first "ecumenical" film award, conferred jointly by the nation's Protestants and Catholics. This watershed moment in American ecumenism followed on the heels of Vatican II's conclusion in 1965. No dearth of literature exists on the council and its reception, yet scholars continue to overlook the secular dimensions of this reception, including that of Hollywood in the 1960s. James Skinner, Frank Walsh, and Gregory Black ignore the direct impact of Vatican II on the relationship between Catholics and America's film industry. Anthony Smith's laudable work culminates with the 1950s, and the council receives minimal attention in Colleen McDannell's *Catholics in the*

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Movies.¹ The cultural reception and even exploitation of Catholicism in Hollywood is nothing new, yet Vatican II's direct impact on the industry's artistic imagination remains in the shadows. There one discovers the convergence of ecumenical enthusiasm and secular values in American film.

This article recovers a small but significant example of this convergence by comparing the critical and ecumenical reception of Zinnemann's *A Man for All Seasons* with that of another Oscar-nominated film, Michael Anderson's *The Shoes of the Fisherman* (1968), a film initially offered to Zinnemann. American Catholics touted both as "ecumenical" yet encountered radically different receptions among critics in the span of only two years. This comparison demonstrates how Hollywood facilitated Catholic-Protestant collaboration while simultaneously nuancing the council's language of "ecumenism" for a secular American audience, reframing interpersonal dialogue through the human conscience. To support this claim, the following analysis charts the evolution of Catholic interaction with Hollywood in the 1960s, the influence of the council on the industry's imagination, and the cinematic philosophy and reception of both films. The article further

1. James Skinner's pioneering work on Catholics and Hollywood fails to mention Vatican II at all, especially with respect to the Legion of Decency's name change in 1965. See *The Cross and the Cinema: The Legion of Decency and the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, 1933–1970* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), 159. Frank Walsh's insightful study at least gives a nod to the cultural impact of Vatican II on Catholicism, but only cursorily. See *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 309. Gregory D. Black also does not discuss the council's relation to the Legion's name change to NCOMP. See *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies, 1940–1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 221, 229. On the contrary, Legion of Decency memos and correspondence make it abundantly clear that the council's document *Inter Mirifica* (1963) was responsible for the reorganization and rebranding of Catholic agencies responsible for social communications (see below). Additionally, Anthony Burke Smith provides one of the best accounts of how collaboration between the Legion and Hollywood impacted American Catholicism. However, Smith's excellent work focuses only on the 1930s to the 1950s. See *The Look of Catholics: Portrayals in Popular Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 8–15. One of the best collected discussions of American culture's portrayal of Catholicism in film is Colleen McDannell, ed., *Catholics in the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). This work briefly discusses *The Shoes of the Fisherman* (22–23), but not at all *A Man for All Seasons*. For more on Catholics and Hollywood, see also Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Association* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Alexander McGregor, *The Catholic Church and Hollywood: Censorship and Morality in 1930s Cinema* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013); and Una M. Cadegan, "Guardians of Democracy or Cultural Storm Troopers? American Catholics and the Control of Popular Media, 1934–1966," *Catholic Historical Review* 87 (April 2001): 252–282.

employs original archival work from collections in Beverly Hills and Washington, DC.

From Legion to NCOMP

The unprecedented reception of an ecumenical film award stemmed in part from both pre- and post-conciliar shifts in how Catholics engaged Hollywood. On December 8, 1965, the very day Vatican II concluded, the National Legion of Decency, the official Catholic voice in Hollywood since 1934, was renamed the National Catholic Office of Motion Pictures (NCOMP). In a Legion memo, its seasoned leader, Monsignor Thomas F. Little (1912–1986), endorsed the name change to remedy a “pre-Johannine anachronism,” a legalistic name out of touch with the more charitable tones of Pius XII’s *Miranda Prorsus* (1957) and the Council’s *Inter Mirifica* (1963).² Vatican II had mandated something new.

In truth, the decision had been a decade in the making. International film producers, many of them Catholic, had tired of the prudishness of their American coreligionists.³ This pressure, coupled with the theological insights of Avery Dulles and John Ford, had created a culture demanding reform.⁴ In response, the Legion revised its pledge, recited annually in most American Catholic parishes. The new pledge, completed by 1963, substituted earlier language of condemnation with promises to promote good films.⁵ This meagre gesture only highlighted the need for more earnest steps. Many bishops were apathetic about any pledge at all, and it practically disappeared from parishes by 1968.⁶ These shifts prompted the bishops to rebrand the Legion, fearing it might become completely obsolete.

For its part, the industry scoffed at the name change. Intriguingly, Hollywood employed the language of the council against perceived American Catholic lethargy. *Variety*, a leading Hollywood daily,

2. See Thomas F. Little to Paul Tanner, May 17, 1965, Series 1.1, box 31, file 2, General Administration, Records of the Office of the General Secretary (hereafter GA/OGS Records), The Special Collections, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC (hereafter ACUA).

3. Black, *Crusade*, 176–180.

4. See Avery Dulles, “The Legion of Decency,” *America*, June 2, 1956; and Gerald Kelly and John Ford, “The Legion of Decency,” *Theological Studies* 18 (September 1957), copies of both in box 177, file 4, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Communications Department/Office of Film and Broadcasting Records (hereafter USCCBCM/OFB), ACUA.

5. Skinner, *The Cross and the Cinema*, 37, 155.

6. “Many Catholic Churches Here Omit Legion of Decency Pledge,” *Daily Variety*, December 11, 1967; Skinner, *The Cross and the Cinema*, 175–176.

dismissed the Legion's renaming "aggiornamento" as a façade for further censorship.⁷ Such skepticism was common in 1965, a year in which the Legion had condemned *Kiss Me Stupid* and *The Pawnbroker*, the first C-ratings of large-scale productions since 1953.⁸ Much ridicule of the Legion centered on *The Pawnbroker*, a film about a Jewish Holocaust survivor haunted by the memory of his wife's brutal rape and murder. A crucial flashback scene called for partial nudity, to which the Legion protested.⁹ Alongside the mockery of film critics, the Episcopal Bishop of California even publicly chastised the Legion, leaving little hope for ecumenical rapprochement over films.¹⁰ Nevertheless, a new potential was noted. *Motion Picture Daily* carried the headline "Catholics Bid Faiths' Aid on Films: Among Reason for Change of Decency Legion's Name." Curiously, the NCOMP underlined its copy of this story, suggesting both surprise and intrigue at the idea of interfaith collaboration.¹¹

Catholic Ecumenism & an Interfaith Industry

In many ways, Hollywood provided a ripe setting for such a partnership. As Kevin Schultz has shown, the totalitarian regimes of interwar Europe sparked a sense of unity among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews before and during World War II. An arc stretching from the Presbyterian activist Everett Clinchy to the Catholic radio celebrity Fulton Sheen forged a "tri-faith America" celebrating interfaith harmony toward a just, moral, and God-fearing nation.¹² The silver screen became a creative crucible. Offset a Jewish author and a Jewish producer partnered with a Catholic director to realize the wartime hit, *The Song of Bernadette* (1943), a story of the Lourdes miracle still lauded as an artistic masterpiece.¹³ Catholicism continued to gain credibility (and utility) in a Protestant land via the charisma of Bing

7. Clipping, *Variety*, December 8, 1966, box 177, file 6, USCCBCM/OFB, ACUA.

8. William D. Romanowski, *Reforming Hollywood: How American Protestants Fought for Freedom at the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 164. Romanowski is one of the few scholars to acknowledge the role of Vatican II behind the Legion's name change. See 168.

9. Walsh, *Sin and Censorship*, 317–318.

10. Romanowski, *Reforming Hollywood*, 164.

11. "Catholics Bid Other Faiths' Aid on Films: Among Reasons for Change of Decency Legion," *Motion Picture Daily*, December 8, 1965, clipping in box 177, file 6, USCCBCM/OFB, ACUA.

12. Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14–42, 81.

13. Paula M. Kane, "Jews and Catholics Converge," in *Catholics in the Movies*, 83–105.

Crosby in *Going My Way* (1944) and *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945). The postwar years continued this trend. The 1948 film *Big City* featured the heartfelt (if improbable) story of a Catholic cop, a Protestant minister, and a Jewish vocalist adopting an abandoned orphan and raising her together.¹⁴ By 1960, enough Protestants had quelled anti-papal fears for the nation to elect its first Catholic president.

These political alliances took a theological turn in the 1960s, with Vatican II as a catalyst. Although Catholics had dabbled in the century's Protestant ecumenical movement, this participation was primarily limited to northern Europe with select American Catholic voices like John Courtney Murray and Gustave Weigel (both Jesuits).¹⁵ The election of Pope John XXIII in 1958 and the announcement of a new ecumenical council the following year suddenly piqued broader interest among Americans. The new pope introduced the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and invited Orthodox and Protestant observers to attend the council. Initial skepticism in the United States gave way to optimism, yielding regional and local efforts to effect *metanoia* (a conversion of heart) and *koinonia* (communal unity) through intentional dialogue, the movement's "hallmark."¹⁶

By 1963, this ecumenical climate found its way to Hollywood screens in two Oscar-nominated films, albeit manifesting vastly different approaches. In the immediate wake of King's March on Washington and a month before the trauma of Kennedy's assassination, *Lilies of the Field* (1963) appeared in American theaters. It surprised everyone. On a shoestring budget, director Ralph Nelson (a non-Catholic) embraced the 1962 novel of William E. Barrett (a Catholic) to tell the bizarre story of an impoverished and exiled group of German nuns in the Arizona desert cajoling a stranded Black Baptist traveler into erecting a chapel for them. The film starred Sidney Poitier (a self-identified "Anglo-Catholic") as the confused vagabond "Homer" and Lilia Skala (a Christian Scientist) as the stubborn mother superior, "Maria." Together Poitier and Skala made the film a feelgood success, punctuated with the earworm gospel tune "Amen" and a hilarious duel between Homer and Maria over biblical passages. The press immediately recognized the film

14. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 81–82.

15. Patrick Carey, *Catholics in America: A History*, updated ed. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 2004), 99, 242–243; Paul M. Minus, Jr., *The Catholic Rediscovery of Protestantism: A History of Roman Catholic Ecumenical Pioneering* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 174–183; Frederick M. Bliss, *Catholic and Ecumenical: History and Hope* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 1999), 32–44.

16. Arleon L. Kelly, "Local Roman Catholic and Protestant Ecumenism," in *A Tapestry of Justice, Service, and Unity: Local Ecumenism in the United States, 1950–2000*, ed. Arleon L. Kelly (Tacoma, WA: National Association of Ecumenical and Interreligious Staff Press), 103–119; Bliss, *Catholic and Ecumenical*, 55, 58–59.

as salve for racial tensions, and Jews, Protestants, and Catholics praised the film's message of interfaith cooperation.¹⁷

The timing of the second film was also impeccable. At the very moment that the council's second session closed in December 1963, Otto Preminger's *The Cardinal* (1963) was released in U.S. theaters. Based on the 1950 novel by Henry Morton Robinson, the film chronicled the rising career of a Boston priest to the rank of cardinal through a series of surreal subplots dealing with interfaith marriage, civil rights in the American South, and Nazi persecution. Preminger, a Jewish filmmaker who had publicly defied the Legion over a film in 1953, explicitly employed Vatican II to promote *The Cardinal*. Advertisements announced screenings for council participants at the Vatican and showcased Preminger's private audience with Pope Paul VI (John XXIII's successor after his death that June). Amid the drama of Kennedy's death, his hometown bishop, Boston's Cardinal Richard Cushing, gave the film a ringing endorsement. The Legion's objections to the film's obsequious pageantry and theological absurdity were effectively silenced. At the same time, both *Variety* and *Motion Picture Daily* noted how the film magnificently complemented the "Ecumenical Council" in Rome. The attention is telling. While *Lilies of the Field* was far more "ecumenical" in its plot and a superior film (earning Poitier an Oscar), Hollywood's press made no connection between its Catholicism and the international council in Rome. *The Cardinal*, on the contrary, put the council on the map for Hollywood, sparking a sudden recognition of the event in its dailies. Here both Preminger's publicity and his timing helped. Between initial screenings in October and the film's release in December, council participants had publicly debated the role of ecumenism in its drafted document on the nature of the church (*De Ecclesia*) with Protestants observing and even offering advice behind the scenes.¹⁸ The designation of Vatican II as an "ecumenical council" began to pique Hollywood's interest, not in its ecclesiastical definition (as an international gathering with dogmatic

17. Jeffrey Marlett, "Life on the Frontier," in *Catholics in the Movies*, 149–173. On Poitier and Skala's religious identity and mention of various awards, see Hedda Hopper interviews in files 79.f-2640, 89.f-2965, and 76.f-2495, Hedda Hopper Papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California (hereafter SCMHL, AMPAS).

18. On Preminger's publicity and the archival sources, see my article, "From *The Cardinal* to *The Shoes of the Fisherman*: Hollywood's Curious Dialogue with Vatican II," in *Catholicism Opening to the World and Other Confessions*, ed. Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion, and Jason Welle (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 185–201. On the second session of Vatican II, see Jared Wicks, *Investigating Vatican II: Its Theologians, Ecumenical Turn, and Biblical Commitment* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 179–182.

authority) but rather as a Catholic event reflecting a new interfaith milieu.

As the Legion licked its wounds, the industry's intrigue over the council increased. While producing his \$21 million biblical epic, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), George Stevens meticulously collected newspaper clippings and annotated magazine articles on the progress of council's debate on Jewish-Christian relations between 1963 and 1965. In the development of *The Singing Nun* (1966), correspondence between the producer and director discussed the need for the film's script to maintain the "whole ecumenical thought which is inherent in the story" alongside the joyous interfaith spirit of *Lilies of the Field* (even approaching Barrett for help with the script).¹⁹ This attention followed Pope Paul VI's historic pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1964 where he met with the Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople, precipitating a formal rescinding of East-West excommunication the day before Vatican II concluded in December 1965. The months beforehand witnessed the promulgation of the council's declaration on Jewish-Christian relations (*Nostra Aetate*) and its decree on ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), the latter extolling "dialogue" that "gains a truer knowledge and more just appreciation" of other Christian traditions and remains "prepared for cooperation between them in the duties for the common good of humanity which are demanded by every Christian conscience."²⁰ The intersection of dialogue, appreciation, the common good, and the conscience informed the NCOMP's experiment of an ecumenical film award two years later.

A New Ecumenical Award

In the immediate ecumenical fervor following Vatican II, the NCOMP discovered an unexpected ally in the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC). The NCC had introduced film awards in 1965 to counter the Legion's influence, and at first this rising Protestant voice in Hollywood was more foe than friend. The next year, for its 1966 awards, the NCC's Broadcast and Film Commission bestowed honor on *The Pawnbroker*, the very film the Legion had condemned (with ensuing ridicule). Meanwhile Catholics had taken

19. See various clippings in files 73.f-860, 114.f-1310, 177.f-1891, and 177.f-1892, George Stevens Papers; John Beck to Henry King, March 29, 1965, file 3.f-38, Henry King Papers; Jack Vizzard to William E. Barrett, March 12, 1964, file: "The Singing Nun [John Beck, 1964]," Motion Picture Association of America: Production Code Administration Records, SCMHL, AMPAS.

20. Wicks, *Investigating Vatican II*, 206–207, 210–213, 226–227; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4.

note of the NCC awards and began their own in 1966, selecting *Darling* over *The Pawnbroker* (with considerable irony, given the extramarital escapades of *Darling*).²¹ However, the NCOMP and NCC quickly learned they had something in common. *Variety* immediately reported that both Protestants and Catholics had “snubbed” Stevens’s *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. The fact that both sets of clergymen had recognized the dismal quality of this overtly religious film impressed Hollywood. *Variety* touted the headline “Let Catholics, Protestants Unite, Ecumenical-Style” and reproduced lines from Malcolm Boyd’s observations in *The Christian Century*. Boyd confessed that this “mutual accord” was not orchestrated and ebulliently recommended that the NCOMP and the NCC “get better acquainted” so as to foster more “dialogue” between the industry and Christians.²²

Boyd’s call seems to have taken hold. Patrick Sullivan, Monsignor Little’s successor at the NCOMP, quickly befriended NCC leadership, and by early 1967 *Variety* noted that a joint award was in the works.²³ A month later the *New York Times* announced that *A Man for All Seasons* was the only film on which both faiths could agree.²⁴ Reporting on the February 28 awards ceremony, *Variety* quoted James Wall, a NCC member of the awards panel, who credited Pope John XXIII and the Vatican Council for this breakthrough. He further announced that an initial NCOMP-NCC “ecumenical courtship” had now become an “ecumenical marriage.”²⁵ Both the Catholic and secular press hailed the award as a major ecumenical milestone.

At this point it is worth pausing to consider the surprising nature of this first NCOMP-NCC joint award. A drama on a Catholic martyr, executed by an Anglican king over a marriage to his mistress, seems unlikely material for ecumenical collaboration, yet *only* this film received a joint award. Over fifty years later, approaching a film on Thomas More as “ecumenical” would be unlikely. Biographers have since criticized More’s pursuit of Protestant heretics, and some critics consider *A Man for All Seasons* misleading and even “politically

21. Romanowski, *Reforming Hollywood*, 161–171.

22. “Rev. Boyd: Let Catholics, Protestants Unite (Ecumenical-Style) on Awards,” *Variety*, April 6, 1966.

23. Romanowski, *Reforming Hollywood*, 168; “Catholics and Protestants Ask Jews Join Them for National Film Awards,” *Variety*, January 11, 1967. Romanowski is the only scholar to note the first ecumenical award for *A Man for All Seasons* the following year, but only in passing (see 171). By contrast, Skinner’s otherwise thorough study of the Legion and NCOMP (*The Cross and the Cinema*) does not mention film awards at all.

24. A.H. Weiler, “2 Church Groups Cite 1966 Movies,” *New York Times*, February 3, 1967.

25. “Re Catholic-Protestant Award,” *Variety*, March 8, 1967.

incorrect.”²⁶ The More of Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*, a BBC hit, could not be more different. More was controversial then, and even more controversial now. One even finds hints of hesitation in the confidential handwritten reviews of NCOMP film consultants. One consultant, Emilie Griffin, worried that the film cast Anglicans in an unflattering role, fearing that Catholic endorsement of the film would “appear to be slapping our separated brethren right in the eye.”²⁷

Griffin was surprisingly alone in her logical demur. The other three NCOMP reviewers extolled the film as an ecumenical opportunity. One argued that “Christ-centered human values are seen possible in a secular context,” making More’s sainthood less the object of stained glass and more the subject of real-world discussion. Another hailed the film as “ambivalently ecumenical . . . preaching some ‘liberty of conscience’ doctrine, and that works two ways.” Finally, the most insightful review came from a Benedictine nun. Sister Bede Sullivan informed NCOMP officials that the film had already sparked “inter-faith dialogue, especially between Anglicans and Roman Catholics” in New York. The reason, she posited, was that the film “focuses attention on the specific conflict, the oath of supremacy in the sixteenth century.”²⁸

These internal reviews yield several observations. As Sullivan notes, the film was already making “ecumenical” headway without official church endorsement. It had naturally arrested the attention of contemporary audiences with a refreshing take on the English Reformation. Rather than reduce the Catholic-Anglican divide to Henry VIII’s libido, the film focuses on a specific historical conflict between More’s conscience and the Crown’s Oath of Supremacy. A prime example of this conflict in the film is Margaret’s news to her father of the oath. More immediately asks her to repeat the precise wording of the oath, and despite her protest that “we know what it will mean,” More insists that he needs to know it in the hope that he can take it without violating his conscience, since humanity’s “natural business lies in escaping.”²⁹ Here the audience encounters the conscience of a conflicted statesman rather than a sanctimonious theologian. The focus

26. Richard Marius, *Thomas More: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Mark Royden Winchell, *God, Man, and Hollywood: Politically Incorrect Cinema from The Birth of a Nation to The Passion of the Christ* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008), 337–339.

27. Emilie Griffin review, n.d., Series 1, box 81, file 34, USCCBCM/OFB, ACUA.

28. See (1) Pat Coll to Patrick Sullivan, December 3, 1966, (2) review of Brother Cosman Vreeland, n.d., and (3) review of Sr. Bede Sullivan, OSB, n.d., in series 1, box 81, file 34, USCCBCM/OFB, ACUA.

29. Robert Bolt, *A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS: Final Screenplay* (Hollywood, CA: Script City, 1966).

on a historical case of conscience rather than theological infighting thus made the film “ambivalently ecumenical” in contemporary eyes. Although the Hollywood genius behind the screen would never have couched the film as “ecumenical,” its case of conscience served the foundation of his vision.



Thomas More and King Henry VIII in *A Man for All Seasons*
(Columbia Pictures, 1966): 1 file, no. 70095293

Photo from the Core collection Production files and Poster collection of the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Zinnemann & Hollywood Ecumenism

It is doubtful that the Hollywood legend behind *A Man for All Seasons* ever contemplated the word “ecumenical.” Born to Austrian Jews (both of whom perished in the Shoah), Fred Zinnemann brought a European finesse to Hollywood glitz. Trained in the silent film industries of interwar Vienna, Paris, and Berlin, he took particular inspiration from Carl Theodor Dreyer’s focus on human facial emotions in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). He moved to Hollywood in 1929, later to be joined by other German intelligentsia escaping Weimar despair and Nazi fascism. He gradually rose the ranks of the industry until he made his mark with *The Search* (1948), *High Noon* (1952), and

the Academy Award sensation, *From Here to Eternity* (1953).³⁰ His last film of the 1950s, *The Nun's Story* (1959) was in many ways the thematic precursor to *A Man for All Seasons*. As with *More*, the protagonist of the film (played by Audrey Hepburn) struggles to navigate an institution she both adores and fears. In Zinnemann's words, a "question of conscience," a story of the "individual against machinery," animates both films.³¹ Kathryn Hulme, the author of the book behind *The Nun's Story* and a convert to Catholicism, had further defended the wrestling conscience of a nun who leaves the convent as an "ecumenical" book in its honesty.³² Although Zinnemann's extensive collaboration with Hulme and other Catholics on this project is beyond the purview of this article, two comparisons with *A Man for All Seasons* illumine Hollywood's peculiar sense of "ecumenism."

By Zinnemann's own admission, Robert Bolt's original play on *More*, the basis of the film, lacked all that movie audiences had come to expect: dramatic fights, titillating romance, or famous stars.³³ In fact, Zinnemann's adaptation of Bolt's play contradicted his earlier cinematic philosophy. In a 1959 interview for *The Nun's Story*, Zinnemann vowed "never" to adapt stage plays for movies, since theatre is all "talk" and "films are visual."³⁴ By 1965 Zinnemann had clearly changed his mind, working closely with Bolt on a screenplay adaptation. Zinnemann's rationale for this shift was the realization that film could build "off the dialogue" of theatre and communicate emotional depth and feelings "between the lines."³⁵ Zinnemann accomplished this cinematic advantage through close-ups of the characters, capturing facial expressions and moods.

Zinnemann's effectiveness in this vein found confirmation in *America* magazine's Moira Walsh, one of the most respected Catholic film critics of the 1960s. She concluded that the film's success lay in how the "main cinematic tool . . . is the camera, artfully capturing the faces

30. Neil Sinyard, *Fred Zinnemann: Films of Character and Conscience* (London: McFarland, 2003), 9–38, 61–89.

31. Fred Zinnemann, interviews with Paul R. Michaud (1972) and Gordon Gow (1976) in Gabriel Miller, ed., *Fred Zinnemann: Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 35, 59.

32. Kathryn Hulme to Harold C. Gardiner, June 2, 1959, file 52.f-708, Fred Zinnemann Papers, SCMHL, AMPAS. This letter was published with Hulme's permission in "'The Nun's Story' – A Symposium," *America*, June 27, 1959.

33. Fred Zinnemann, *A Life in the Movies: An Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 199.

34. Clipping of "Zinnemann Sees No Art in Taking Film From Play," *Dallas Times Herald*, June 25, 1959, in file 51.f-699, Fred Zinnemann Papers, SCMHL, AMPAS. On his decision to take up Bolt's play, see also Zinnemann, *A Life in the Movies*, 198.

35. Zinnemann, interview with *Action* (1967), in *Fred Zinnemann: Interviews*, 29. Emphasis original.

of superb actors speaking superb dialogue—dialogue that is the outward manifestation of electrifying confrontations and inner conflicts.”³⁶ Four decades later, Kevin Smith, the director of *Dogma* (1999), echoed this description of *A Man for All Seasons* as “porn for somebody who loves language.”³⁷ In other words, the film’s ability to capture authenticity in dialogue comes to life in Zinnemann’s masterpiece in a way that gripped the director and continues to grip the audience.

In a similar manner, another insight emerges from the same 1959 interview about *The Nun’s Story*. Zinnemann further confessed his adamant intention to keep Catholic actors out of Catholic-themed films so as to avoid “bias.”³⁸ Later in life he reiterated this strategy in another interview, admitting that he always worried about producing “an ‘in’ film—a film that would be very meaningful to Catholics but . . . nobody else.”³⁹ This approach surfaces in *A Man for All Seasons* with Zinnemann’s selection of Bolt, a committed Anglican, and Paul Scofield, who played More yet grew up religiously confused in a mixed Anglican-Catholic household.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Zinnemann prided himself as a true “Hollywood director” in that his films were designed to “entertain a mass audience” rather than “express [his] personality or ideas.” Nevertheless, Zinnemann understood this appeal to a “mass audience” not in terms of profit or vapid pleasure. Rather, he sought to probe, in his words, a common “human spirit.”⁴¹

Such probing is precisely what *A Man for All Seasons* accomplishes. In the words of one scholar, Zinnemann is able to “treat a saint in a secular way” by wrestling with “the political questions of the age.”⁴² The film’s genius lies in its ability to transcend the Catholic orbit and to speak to a variety of audiences in a secular, pluralist culture. One could say that the film is “ecumenical” not only in plumbing the depths of

36. Moira Walsh review in *America*, clipping in file 44.f-662, Fred Zinnemann Papers, SCMHL, AMPAS. The original is in *America*, December 12–24, 1966.

37. Kevin Smith, interview in Robert K. Elder, *The Best Film You’ve Never Seen: 35 Directors Champion the Forgotten or Critically Savaged Movies They Love* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 145.

38. Clipping of “Zinnemann Sees No Art in Taking Film From Play,” *Dallas Times Herald*, SCMHL, AMPAS.

39. Fred Zinnemann, interview with American Film Institute (1986), in *Fred Zinnemann: Interviews*, 99.

40. Garry O’Connor, *Paul Scofield: An Actor for All Seasons* (New York: Applause, 2002), 19–21.

41. Fred Zinnemann, interviews with Gene Phillips (1973) and Arthur Nolletti, Jr., (1993), in *Fred Zinnemann: Interviews*, 46, 112.

42. Joel N. Super, “Fred Zinnemann, *A Man for All Seasons* (1966), and Documentary Fiction,” in *The Films of Fred Zinnemann: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Arthur Nolletti, Jr. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 160.

dialogue; it is also “ecumenical” in the most literal sense of the term, encompassing the entire “polis” of humanity, the true *oikoumenē*. What for the theologian might be an intra-Christian affair is for Zinnemann’s Hollywood a blending of ecumenical and interreligious meaning for a secular context. Consequently, Hollywood found *A Man for All Seasons* to be “ecumenical” not so much in its Christian import but in its treatment of basic human questions.

If one takes these two strands together – a dialogical conscience venturing beyond ecclesial loyalties – one finds them at play in a pivotal scene on conscience in the film. More is suddenly summoned from sleep in his jail cell to defend his refusal to sign the oath. Interrogating him (with the noise of a raucous royal party behind a closed door) is Thomas Cromwell (Leo McKern), the Duke of Norfolk (Nigel Davenport), and Archbishop Cranmer (Cyril Luckham):

DUKE OF NORFOLK: “Oh, confound all this! I’m not a scholar. I don’t know if the marriage was lawful or not . . . but damn it, Thomas, look at these names. Why can’t you do as I did, and come with us, for fellowship?”

THOMAS MORE: “And when we die, and you are sent to heaven for doing your conscience and I am sent to hell for not doing mine, will you come with me . . . for fellowship?”

ARCHBISHOP CRANMER: “So, those of us whose names are there, are damned, Sir Thomas?”

THOMAS MORE: “I have no window to look into another man’s conscience. I condemn no one.”

ARCHBISHOP CRANMER: “Then the matter is capable of question?”

THOMAS MORE: “Certainly.”⁴³

Further worth noting is that none of the “superb actors speaking superb dialogue” in this particular scene are Roman Catholics. McKern described himself as an Anglican-turned-agnostic, while Davenport and Luckham claimed no religious affiliation in their lives.⁴⁴ At the same time, contemporary interest in such a scene finds confirmation in Peter Cajka’s recent work on American Catholic appeals to conscience in the twentieth century. *A Man for All Seasons* followed a Catholic tradition

43. Robert Bolt, *A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS: Final Screenplay* (Hollywood, CA: Script City, 1966).

44. George Whaley, *Leo ‘Rumpole’ McKern: The Accidental Actor* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008), 127.

upholding More as a martyr of conscience that stemmed from his canonization in 1935 and Pope Pius XI heralding More as a heroic model amid Europe's rise of totalitarian regimes. The film echoed scores of midcentury Catholic publications on More.⁴⁵ However, there is no evidence that this tradition directly influenced Zinnemann, at least not in the Academy's archives (and the Zinnemann collection is one of its most extensive). The NCOMP-NCC alliance may have seen itself baptizing secular art with its award, yet, as the English Catholic historian Eamon Duffy reminds us, the Thomas More of *A Man for All Seasons* reflects more an "icon for twentieth-century liberals, defending the rights of the individual against a coercive society" and less the complex historical figure and saint.⁴⁶

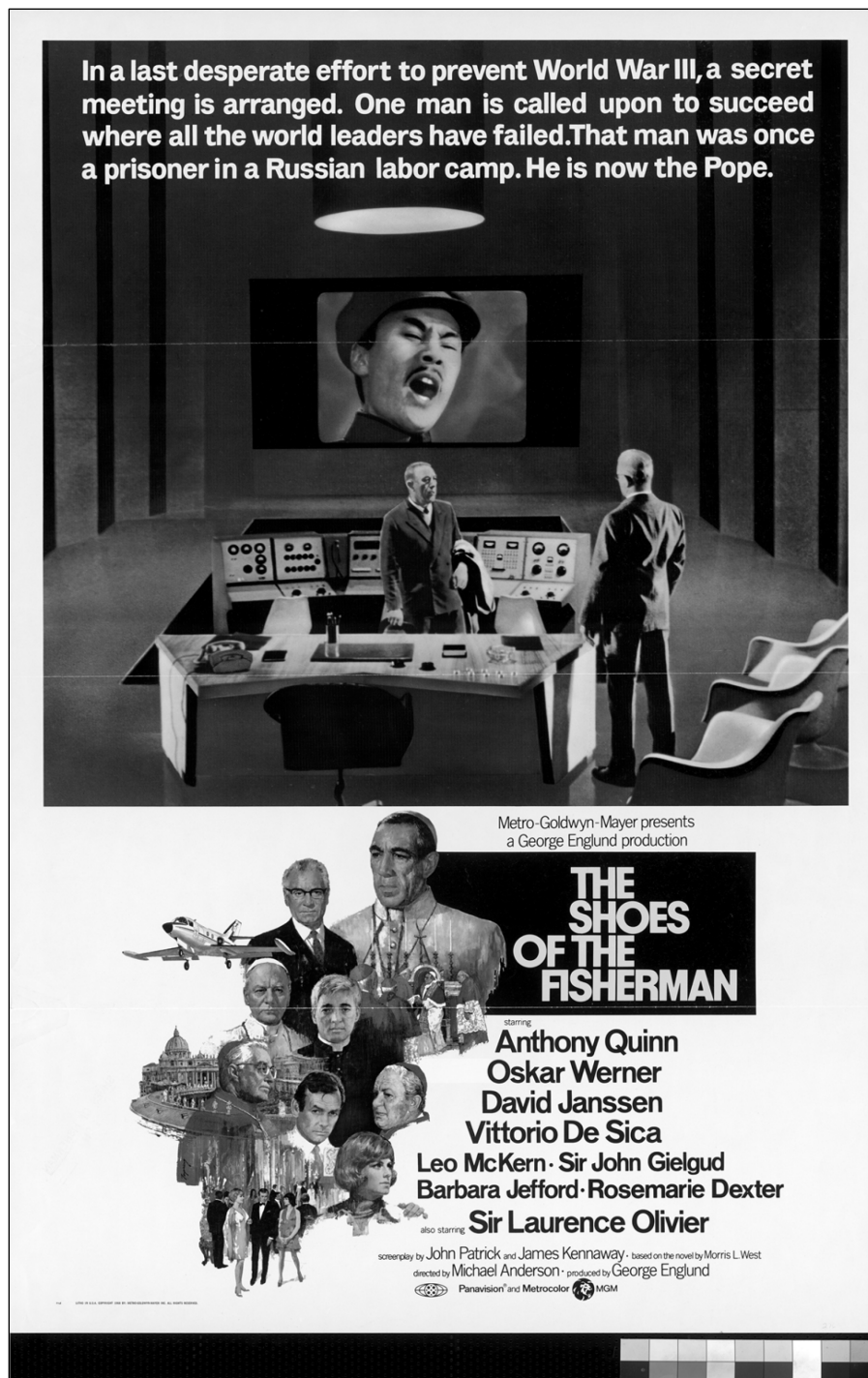
Whatever its historicity, the film generated a box-office success to great critical acclaim, taking home no fewer than six Oscars. The film even garnered the attention of Pope Paul VI, who asked Columbia Pictures to arrange a confidential viewing of the film, which he "thoroughly enjoyed."⁴⁷ An endorsement from Paul VI was no small accolade in 1967, a year his papacy enjoyed great popularity among Americans after his 1965 apostolic visit to the United States and historic address to the United Nations. Both Hollywood and the NCOMP took note. In 1967, the year of the first ecumenical award, the NCOMP introduced a new visual format for its annual film catalogue, with advertisements for noteworthy films. Its most prominent advertisement appeared on the back cover, touting a forthcoming papal drama, *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, as "an unforgettable tapestry of intrigue and faith that reaches from the Kremlin to the Vatican."⁴⁸ Catholics saw great cinematic and ecumenical opportunity in this 1968 drama. They were to be greatly disappointed.

45. Peter Cajka, *Follow Your Conscience: The Catholic Church and the Spirit of the Sixties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 50–51.

46. Eamon Duffy, "More or Less," *The Tablet*, January 29, 2015.

47. Jack Valenti (MPAA President) to Raymond Bell, February 6, 1967, file 45.f-584, Fred Zinnemann Papers, SCMHL, AMPAS. On the pope's reaction, see Paul C. Marcinkus to Emilio Panchadell (Columbia Pictures), August 2, 1967, file 45.f-584, Fred Zinnemann Papers, SCMHL, AMPAS.

48. *NCOMP Film Catalogue*, copy in file 40.f-393, Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers Records, SCMHL, AMPAS.



The Shoes of the Fisherman movie poster (MGM, 1968): 1 file, no. 70000515
 Photo from the Core collection Production files and Poster collection of the
 Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Papal Shoes and Trampled Ecumenism

If for no other reason, *A Man for All Seasons* warrants a comparison with *The Shoes of the Fisherman* by virtue of a letter buried in Hollywood's archives. A few days after the opening of the council in 1962, novelist Morris West (1916–1999) wrote Fred Zinnemann that his soon-to-be-published book, *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, provided ready material for a box-office hit. The book tells the tale of a Ukrainian bishop named Kiril Lakota who, upon his release from a Soviet Siberian prison and swift election to the papacy, becomes the sole man who can bridge the East-West divide and avert an impending World War III. In his letter, West introduces this storyline as “the pontificate of the *next* Pope,”⁴⁹ detailing a colorful plot layered with inescapable allusions to Pope John XXIII. Pope Kiril, West writes, “understands the secret landscape of the human heart” in his quest to “break through the historic bureaucracy of Rome to meet the hearts of his people.” Subplots complement the story, including the censorship of a Jesuit scientist, a fragile relationship with the Soviet Premier, a friendship with a woman on the brink of divorce, an appreciation for Judaism forged in prison, and world travels for peace, all presenting Kiril as a “an apostolic missionary and not a Prince.” Overall, West pitches the book's ecumenical outlook as its greatest cinematic opportunity: “I don't have to point out to you the current relevance of all this to the council which is now being held in Rome, and to the world wide interest in the question of reunion for the Christian Churches.” West assures Zinnemann that he alone can adapt the story for the screen.⁵⁰

Zinnemann kept this letter but instead pursued *A Man for All Seasons*. Six years passed before West's novel made its way to Hollywood, and then only under the direction of Michael J. Anderson, Sr., known best for *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956).⁵¹ West himself wrote the screenplay, which he considered “tighter” and better than the

49. Morris L. West to Fred Zinneman, October 15, 1962, in file 110f.-1719, Fred Zinnemann Papers, SCMHL, AMPAS. Emphasis original. Morris notes in his letter that the typescript will be ready by November and promises Zinnemann “one of the first copies.” The book finally appeared in June 1963, just at the time of Pope John XXIII's death. See John L. Brown's review in the *New York Times*, June 16, 1963.

50. Morris L. West to Fred Zinneman, October 15, 1962, Fred Zinnemann Papers, SCMHL, AMPAS.

51. Anthony Asquith was originally slated to be the director. He directed the film before his sudden illness and death in 1968. See Tom Ryall, *Anthony Asquith* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005), 21. Coincidentally, McKern also appeared in the film. See Whaley, *Leo 'Rumpole' McKern*, 144.

novel, adding a new ending.⁵² For the film's conclusion, Pope Kiril (Anthony Quinn) addresses a crowded St. Peter's Square from its iconic loggia, removes his papal tiara as a gesture of humility, and announces the emptying of Vatican coffers to alleviate the famine of communist China. For this scene, MGM shot footage of the actual closing ceremonies of Vatican II in the square.⁵³ In the final cut, this remarkable footage blends scenes of the real, historic event with the film's fictitious climax.

Unlike the pageantry of *The Cardinal*, the timing of West's papal pomp became a liability. This cinematic adaptation of the book did not appear in theatres until November 1968, several months after *Humanae Vitae* (July 25, 1968) and its papal prohibition of artificial birth control. The previous months had revealed splenetic Catholic divisions over the encyclical alongside a liberal Catholic sense of betrayal. As social unrest consumed cities and college campuses, the press also took note of Catholic dissent and rebellion.⁵⁴ The same month as the film's release, Catholic priests in the nation's capital gathered at the Mayflower Hotel to organize resistance against their archbishop, Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle, adamant in his support of the encyclical and willing to discipline any priest who did not.⁵⁵ West's "next" pope, Paul VI, suddenly became an object of widespread scorn and distrust, and controversy over papal authority engulfed American Catholicism as the *The Shoes of the Fisherman* graced main street marquees.⁵⁶

Although national critics explicitly noted the film's "ecumenical outlook," they were merciless in their assessment.⁵⁷ One *Newsweek* review described the film as a "basically silly script [that] suffers occasionally severe spasms of intelligence." *Time* added insult to injury, ridiculing the film as a "saccharine Pope opera" that "would be hard to imagine a . . . sixth-grader taking seriously." The same critic offered a scathing observation: "At a time when Roman Catholicism is rent by internal rebellion and dissent, the church could use some aid. *The Shoes of the Fisherman* makes a pompous offering and in the act of

52. Don La Badie, "Pilgrimage to the Set of 'Shoes of a Fisherman,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1968, Q1.

53. See James Wall's review in *The Christian Century*, clipping in file "The Shoes of the Fisherman (MGM 1962)," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records (hereafter MPAA/PCA), SCMHL, AMPAS.

54. In addition to the front page, *The New York Times* devoted an entire page to the controversy and medical doubts about the rhythm method (see July 31, 1968, page 16).

55. Cajka, *Follow Your Conscience*, 87–119.

56. Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 264–277.

57. Untitled review by John Mahoney, clipping in file "The Shoes of the Fisherman (MGM 1962)," MPAA/PCA, SCMHL, AMPAS.

genuflecting, falls on its face.”⁵⁸ Regular readers of *Time* would have found this assessment compelling. That autumn the same magazine had covered Cardinal O’Boyle’s removal of Father T. Joseph O’Donoghue from his parish in Washington, DC, only to be met with parishioner outrage and O’Donoghue’s public defiance. Before a crowd of disillusioned Catholics, the priest had appealed to the “competence of your conscience and mine.”⁵⁹ The secular press thus found the film’s depiction of a strong, triumphant papacy to reflect a naïve past rather than the mature present.

However, the most biting criticism came from Protestants, quickly dispelling West’s hopes for Christian reunion. *The Christian Century*, the same publication that had celebrated the first steps of NCOMP-NCC collaboration only three years earlier, considered the plot a farce. An author jeered, “There are more than few moments when the shoes appear to pinch the papal bunions.”⁶⁰ In particular, the Protestant critic claimed that the film was littered with contrived “*dei ex machinae*” in its attempt to speak to contemporary ecumenism. Dismissing the film as an “ecclesiolatrous mime” of Catholic pageantry, the reviewer ridiculed West’s screenplay and Anderson’s eye: “If it is indeed a cinematographic paradigm of the ecclesiastical shape of things to come, God help us every one!” Even Catholic critics like Walsh dismissed Kiril’s plausibility in the real world, and the film suffered at the box office with minimal success.⁶¹

The critical reception of *The Shoes of the Fisherman* mirrored something of Hollywood’s approach to the NCOMP-NCC joint awards going into the 1970s. The 1968 joint awards went to *The Battle of Algiers* and *In the Heat of the Night*, the latter also the recipient of several Oscars. The ceremony received a full-page spread in *Variety*, including a speech by a Jesuit flattering Hollywood directors and producers as new “theologians.”⁶² That was four months before *Humanae Vitae*, and it would be the last time that any Hollywood daily reported on the joint awards. There is no evidence of any joint award in

58. See clippings of Joseph Morgenstern, “The Shoes of the Fisherman,” *Newsweek*, November 25, 1968, and untitled review from *Time*, November 29, 1968, both in file “The Shoes of the Fisherman (MGM 1962),” MPAA/ PCA Records, SCMHL, AMPAS.

59. Cajka, *Follow Your Conscience*, 87–88.

60. Trevor Wyatt Moore, “Habemus Papam ex M-G-M,” *The Christian Century*, clipping in file “The Shoes of the Fisherman (MGM 1962),” MPAA/ PCA, SCMHL, AMPAS.

61. Moira Walsh, “The Shoes of the Fisherman,” *America*, November 30, 1968.

62. See page 21 of *Variety*, March 13, 1968, including the articles “Catholics & Protestant Prizes,” “Clergy in Romance with Pix,” and “A Jesuit Valentine to Films.” See also “Protestant-Catholic Awards to Seven Current Films,” *Boxoffice*, March 18, 1968.

1969 and 1970 (either in the press or the archives). In 1971 *Variety* did note a new interfaith form of collaboration via an “interreligious” committee (now including Jewish voices), but this development was in the context of the NCOMP-NCC protest of Jack Valenti’s new MPAA rating system (a replacement of the old Hayes Code). Instead of joint awards, Catholics and Protestants gave their joint condemnation of Valenti’s project by 1972.⁶³ Collaboration had shifted from film content to political strategy. The NCOMP-NCC “marriage” struggled until 1973 when the NCC abandoned its awards program, leaving the NCOMP a widow until its reorganization in 1980.⁶⁴

Whence Hollywood Ecumenism?

Over fifty years later, official Catholic-Protestant collaboration in films continues in Europe but not the United States. Since the 1970s the Prix du Jury Ecuménique (the “Prize of the Ecumenical Jury”) has marked a joint venture between SIGNIS (Catholic) and INTERFILM (Protestant) at major international film festivals (especially Cannes). Prominent Christian critics judge the year’s films according to criteria that bridge Christian concerns with the challenges of society. Even today, *A Man for All Seasons* meets each one.⁶⁵

Why did such an award not continue in America? Obviously there are many interrelated reasons, and *The Shoes of the Fisherman* did not loosen ecumenical ties anymore than any number of events in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Both NCOMP and NCC floundered as organizations and the national debate on abortion fractured the “tri-faith” alliances of generations past.⁶⁶ As Cajka likewise points out, American Catholic efforts toward conscientious objection during the Vietnam War quickly dovetailed with calls for moral autonomy after

63. The industry did take notice of a new “Interreligious Film Award Committee” in 1971 between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. See “Jews Join Catholics, Protestants; Form New Film Award Committee,” *Variety*, December 15, 1971. NBC also aired a segment on the joint awards in the same year, but only in the context of the MPAA ratings controversy. See Romanowski, *Reforming Hollywood*, 196 and Byron Stone, “Modern Protestant Approaches to Film (1960 to the Present),” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (New York: Routledge, 2009), 72–75.

64. On the ratings controversy and the NCC/BFC decision, see Romanowski, *Reforming Hollywood*, 172–183, 196. On the last years of the NCOMP, see Skinner, *The Cross and the Cinema*, 171–176.

65. “Ecumenical Jury,” dossier for Cannes Film Festival, 2012, http://cannes.juryoecumenique.org/IMG/pdf/2012/dossier_jury_oecumenique2012_web_en.pdf; 2021 “Criteria for Ecumenical Juries,” 2021, <http://cannes.juryoecumenique.org/IMG/pdf/2021/JO%20criteres.pdf>.

66. Schultz, *Tri-Faith*, 198–209; John T. McGreevey, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 259–264.

Humanae Vitae. By 1970, the “two fronts” of the “battlefield and the bedroom” consumed U.S. Catholic attention with respect to questions of conscience.⁶⁷

But the brief emergence of the NCOMP-NCC award, straddling the films of Zinnemann and Anderson, further reveals a philosophical divergence over the meaning of “ecumenical.” West’s drama, intentionally capitalizing on an “ecumenical” opportunity, flopped both on the screen and in the churches. By contrast, *A Man for All Seasons*, riddled with the Reformation, experienced cinematic and ecumenical success. However, neither film actually manifests full theological ecumenism, at least according to the vision of Vatican II. *The Shoes of the Fisherman* deals with East-West relations in terms of the Soviet state and Vatican culture (not Orthodoxy and Catholicism). *A Man for All Seasons* centers on a political quandary and avoids ecclesiological questions. Both films minimize interaction between conscience and creed; both reduce dialogue to individual voices, rather than between communities and traditions. In some ways Zinnemann’s success was a matter of an optimistic milieu and Anderson’s failure a casualty of shifting sands. Nevertheless, together these films demonstrate how Hollywood’s industry absorbed the hype surrounding the council and redefined the term “ecumenical” in the process. “Ecumenism” became synonymous with humanism, shirking any clear distinction between inter-Christian dialogue and interreligious dialogue. The result was a cultural conflation that midcentury American Catholics may have blessed with accolades but was “ambivalently ecumenical” at best. The award’s season was also its limitation. But seasons change, and Vatican II encourages authentic ecumenism to endure them all.

67. Cajka, *Follow Your Conscience*, 85.