



Certy Images

20 Christmas Movies

The following movies have been evaluated by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops according to artistic merit and moral suitability. The reviews include the *USCCB rating*, the *Motion Picture Association of America rating*, and a brief synopsis of the movie.

Browse your TV listings, video store shelves, or your movie service website to find one of these classic gems and recent favorites to share with your family.

THE BELLS OF ST. MARY'S (1945)

Director Leo McCarey's sequel to "Going My Way" (1944) pulls out all the emotional stops in a sugary confection that takes happy-go-lucky Father O'Malley (Bing Crosby) to a poor parish with a crumbling school run by overworked Sister Benedict (Ingrid Bergman). Though their conflicting views on education have less to do with the plot than the chasm between their personal relations, Bergman's shining performance as the idealistic nun is still worth watching. Sentimental yet warm picture of Catholic life in an age of innocence. (A-I) (NR)

THE BISHOP'S WIFE (1947)

A debonair, smartly tailored angel (Cary Grant) uses his heavenly powers to help the neglected wife (Loretta Young) of a busy Episcopalian bishop (David Niven) renew her husband's ministry to those in need rather than in raising the money for a new cathedral. Director Henry Koster's sentimental Christmas fable has the virtue of a good script, sincere performances and some amusing moments with Grant's angelic powers and Monty Wooley as a softhearted old cynic. Most of the family will find it charming entertainment. (A-II) (NR)

A CHRISTMAS CAROL (1951)

This British version of the Dickens' classic has worn well over the years principally because of Alistair Sim's zestful performance as Scrooge, the old humbug whose transformation into a loving human being is a pleasure to behold. Director Brian Desmond Hurst's period piece does well with its 19th-century London setting and the ghostly visitations are done simply but with considerable flair. The result is dandy family viewing. (A-I) (NR)

A CHRISTMAS CAROL (2009)

Lavish, well-crafted but frequently eerie 3-D animated adaptation of Charles Dickens' classic 1843 novella in which miserly misanthrope Ebenezer Scrooge (voice of Jim Carrey) is urged to change his ways by the tortured specter of his late business partner (voice of Gary Oldman) and by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Yet to Come (all voiced by Carrey). Though free of objectionable content, and unabashed about the Christian context of its conversion story, writer-director Robert Zemeckis' largely faithful retelling features images and special effects likely to disturb the most sensitive youngsters. (A-I) (PG)

A CHRISTMAS STORY (1983)

Adapted from Jean Shepherd's nostalgic piece of whimsy, "In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash," the movie re-creates what it was like to be a boy (Peter Billingsley) yearning for a genuine Red Ryder air rifle for Christmas in the Midwest of the 1940s. Director Bob Clark gets some good performances from Darren McGavin and Melinda Dillon as the understanding parents and the period atmosphere is nicely conveyed with what is essentially a warm celebration of a more innocent, less sophisticated America. A few vulgar syllables. (A-II) (PG)

CHRISTMAS WITH THE KRANKS (2004)

Delightful yuletide comedy about a Chicago couple (Tim Allen and Jamie Lee Curtis) who boycott Christmas after their daughter leaves home to join the Peace Corps, sparking unforeseen reactions from their militantly merry neighbors (led by Dan Aykroyd). The film is based on the novella "Skipping Christmas" by John Grisham. Director Joe Roth delivers a dose of holly-jolly fun that is, by turns, extremely funny and poignantly tender, and its warmhearted message of selflessness, family and coming together as a community clearly embodies the truest spirit of the season. Some suggestive humor, comic violence and mildly crude language. (A-II) (PG)

COME TO THE STABLE (1949)

Sentimental but amusing picture from Clare Booth Luce's story of two French nuns (Loretta Young and Celeste Holm) trying to establish a hospital in New England with some help from an eccentric artist (Elsa Lanchester) and a cynical songwriter (Hugh Marlowe). Director Henry Koster gets some smiles from the nuns' adapting to American ways and the bemused reactions of the locals to the newcomers' otherworldly simplicity, with mostly heartwarming results. Unpretentious, generally high-minded fun. (A-I) (NR)

THE FOURTH WISE MAN (1985)

Adaptation of Henry Van Dyke's vintage short story "The Other Wise Man," tells of a fourth Magi (Martin Sheen) who is delayed in following the star to Bethlehem, then finally catches up with it in Jerusalem some 33 years later in an encounter which fulfills his life's search for truth. Produced by Paulist Father Ellwood Keiser and directed by Michael Rhodes, the 72-minute dramatization effectively amplifies the religious dimension of the original while adding some light humor from Alan Arkin as the Magi's servant. Family entertainment with the universal theme of bettering oneself by helping others. (A-I) (NR)

FRED CLAUS (2007)

Generally funny yet bittersweet tale of a sad-sack Chicago repo man (Vince Vaughn) who travels to the North Pole to help his younger, more popular brother, St. Nicholas (Paul Giamatti), at Christmas, while a devious efficiency expert (Kevin Spacey) threatens to shut down the elves' toy factory. Underneath the laughs, Dan Fogelman's script is a surprisingly resonant take on sibling rivalry, with lots of heart-tugging sentiment, and solid messages about family, self-esteem, forgiveness and ultimately redemption. Under David Dobkin's deft direction, there's sharp work by the leads and the classy supporting cast (Miranda Richardson, Rachel Weisz, Kathy Bates and John Michael Higgins). Mild innuendo, an implied premarital living arrangement, a suggestive costume, and some crass humor and expressions. (A-II) (PG)

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE (1946)

Seasonal favorite about the joys and trials of a good man (James Stewart) who, facing financial ruin on the eve of Christmas, contemplates suicide until his guardian angel (Henry Travers) shows him how meaningful his life has been to those around him. Director Frank Capra's unabashedly sentimental picture of mainstream American life is bolstered by a superb cast (including Lionel Barrymore as a conniving banker) and a wealth of good feelings about such commonplace virtues as hard work and helping one's neighbor. Young children may find the story's dark moments unsettling. (A-II) (NR)

JOYEUX NOEL (2006)

Intensely moving World War I tale of soldiers—Scottish, French and German—who spontaneously agree to a cease-fire on the Western front on Christmas Eve as they hear carols wafting from the enemy's trenches, intermingle and bond on a humanistic level, to the eventual disdain of their superiors. Writer-director Christian Carion's film, inspired by true events, is sensitively acted (by an international cast including Guillaume Canet, Daniel Bruhl and Benno

Furmann) and conveys a powerful message about the senselessness of war, while there is an admirable religious underpinning in the character of a dedicated Anglican priest (Gary Lewis) who brings everyone together for a liturgy on that special night. Partially in English, partially subtitled. Battlefield violence with death, some profanity and crude language, discreet husband-wife bedroom scene. (A-II) (PG-13)

MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET (1947)

Familiar seasonal favorite follows a department store Santa (Edmund Gwenn) as he strives to convince a lonely little girl (Natalie Wood) that he's the genuine article, despite the objections of her rigidly pragmatic mother (Maureen O'Hara) and a court trial that hinges on the U.S. Post Office. Director George Seaton's amusing romantic fantasy has its sentimental moments while spreading a reasonable amount of holiday cheer, largely due to Gwenn's charming performance as Kris Kringle. Problems of single parenthood. (A-II) (NR)

THE MUPPET CHRISTMAS CAROL (1992)

In this sprightly version of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," Muppets Kermit, Miss Piggy, the Great Gonzo, Rizzo the Rat and Fozzie Bear have incidental roles as Michael Caine portrays skinflint Ebenezer Scrooge, who is visited by the spirits of Christmas Past, Present and Future so he can learn the true spirit of Christmas. Director Brian Henson retells the holiday classic with delightful musical numbers, though with less frenzied fun than the usual Muppet outings. (A-I) (G)

THE NATIVITY STORY (2006)

Dramatization of the New Testament birth narratives from the Annunciation to the birth of Jesus, focusing on the relationship between Mary (Keisha Castle-Hughes) and Joseph (Oscar Isaac) and their arduous trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem, with subplots tracking the journey of the three Magi and the efforts of King Herod (Ciaran Hinds) to prevent the prophecy of a messiah from coming to pass. A composite of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, embroidered with apocryphal traditions and the imagination of the filmmaker, the Bible story gets the prestige treatment in director Catherine Hardwicke's artful, reverent and affecting retelling, with soulful performances from an excellent international cast -- including Shohreh Aghdashloo as Elizabeth -- and impressive production design. Mike Rich's screenplay manages to flesh out Mary and Joseph while remaining faithful to Scripture, poignantly suggesting the humanity beneath the halos. Some violent images. A-I (PG)

THE POLAR EXPRESS (2004)

Visually captivating animated fantasy—in which Tom Hanks plays five separate roles—about a doubting young boy who is whisked away on Christmas Eve aboard a magic train bound for

Santa's village in the North Pole. Based on the children's novel by Chris Van Allsburg, director Rob Zemeckis' hauntingly beautiful fairy tale celebrates childlike wonder and—though secular in tone—imparts a profoundly faith-friendly message about the importance of believing in things that can't be seen. (A-I) (G)

PRANCER (1989)

Sweet-natured Christmas story about a spirited 8-year-old farm girl (Rebecca Harrell) who cares for an injured reindeer believing it is one of Santa's team. While this "E.T." clone may have its fill of cranky adults and earnest moments, John Hancock's direction has a feel for rural community life that will please older viewers while younger ones will love the reindeer and the praise lavished on the spunky heroine for revitalizing the town's Christmas spirit. (A-I) (G)

THE SHOP AROUND THE CORNER (1940)

Delightful romantic comedy set in a Budapest department store where two clerks (James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan) nurture a mutual dislike of the other while each exchanges love letters with a lonelyheart's penpal until ultimately discovering they have been corresponding with each other. Director Ernst Lubitsch treats the workaday friction between the clerks with some wry humor while building sympathy for both, then brings them together in an emotionally satisfying conclusion that has charmed viewers ever since. Romantic complications. (A-II) (NR)

THREE GODFATHERS (1948)

After robbing a bank, an outlaw trio (John Wayne, Pedro Armendariz and Harry Carey Jr.) pause to help a dying woman (Mildred Natwick) deliver her infant son on Christmas Eve, then take the babe with them as they are pursued across a desert wasteland. Dedicated by director John Ford to Western actor Harry Carey, Sr., the story may be unabashedly sentimental and the action romanticized, but its lyrical images and religious resonances celebrate the myth of the Old West and its rugged heroes with good hearts. Off-screen suicide of one of the principals. (A-II) (NR)

WHITE CHRISTMAS (1954)

Cheerful but synthetic musical comedy about two World War II veterans (Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye) who use their popularity as entertainers to make a success out of the winter resort opened by their wartime commander (Dean Jagger). Directed by Michael Curtiz, the post-war feel-good plot is less memorable than Kaye's clowning and Crosby's crooning of the title song among other Irving Berlin numbers originally written for the earlier, better "Holiday Inn" (1942) pairing Crosby with Fred Astaire. While not a classic, it offers some good family entertainment. (A-I) (NR)