

# Hercules



[Fr. John A. Perricone](#)

**Modernity has succeeded in jailing God.**

**Then it made many of His priests a class of pygmies. Pity. For God's priests are anointed to be a class of Titans.**

**A perfect metaphor for the classical priest is Hercules. Sadly, the Modern priest happily sees himself as Shirley Temple, steering not the mighty Barque of Peter but the Good Ship Lollipop.**

**Orthodox. Faithful. Free.**

First, a bit of pertinent background. Virgil's Fourth Eclogue was always believed to be a proto evangelion by the Church Fathers. It would not be rash to say that an equivalent similitude can be applied to Hercules, a kind of proto presbyteros: an ancient allusion of the Catholic priest.

As Hercules, the priest is given strength from Heaven beyond ordinary human capacities.

**Hercules willingly embraced his twelve labors, bravely overcoming their wickedness. Similarly, the priest encounters the gates of Hell. Clothed in Christ's sacerdotal armature, the priest—as alter Christus—vanquishes Hell's terrors with the invincible power of the sacraments.** Hercules is always depicted by rippling mounds of muscle. The priest enjoys a more formidable notice, his heroic virtue, which amazes the world more than Hercules' imposing physical frame.

This dogmatic picture of the priest has been obscured by the Great Crisis of the past six decades— in fact, a tragic attenuation of the priest’s towering vocation. After the Second Vatican Council, many thought the priest’s sacred character ill fitted to modernity’s Brave New World. **The theological class bullied bishops into accepting a new paradigm of the priest as political actor, social activist, and (throughout the South American Church) guerrilla Marxist.**

**Every token that bespoke the priest’s unique status was thought embarrassing, and a rush ensued to erase any semblance of his supernatural vocation.** At that very Council itself, not a few periti were seen shorn of clerical dress, donning the business suit of the bourgeoisie. Even for those who persisted in identifiable clerical dress, the traditional Roman cassock was looked upon as a shameful repudiation of Man Come of Age.

This collapse was strengthened by the Nouvelle Théologie, an experiment of the early twentieth century which broke ground for a new way of looking at God, resulting in **a downsizing of God. At the heart of its mission was to level the Thomistic foundations of theology and philosophy which had protected the Church so effectively.** Aquinas was the thick wall that repelled all manner of the Church’s enemies. With that gone, chaos would ensue. And it did. Interestingly, one of its principal avatars, Hans Urs von Balthasar, entitled his 1952 work Razing the Bastions. A daring and provocative title, to be sure. But one quite fitting for the sea change it envisioned for the Church.

Moreover, **the Nouvelle Théologie successfully miniaturized the dramatic contours of the priesthood. It debuted a model of the priest that was effete, saccharine, and profoundly secular.** This was just showcased this past week when a Paulist priest offered a “gay pride” Mass in Greenwich Village outside the Stonewall Inn, ground zero of LGBTQ+ aggression.

Official outrage? None.

**The Herculean priest struggles to make men saints, summoning them to spiritual warfare. He identifies false ideas and firmly condemns them.** He is manfully confrontational when necessary, seeing himself as the protector of God's flock—or, in the words of St. Gregory the Great, “worrying over the incursion of barbarians and fearing the wolves who menace the flock entrusted to my care.”

This priest after the heart of Christ is unafraid of the heat of battle because, through grace, his manhood remains intact; it is not shredded by the jagged teeth of the Modernist Leviathan. Chesterton expresses this with his signature panache:

**You cannot love a thing without wanting to fight for it. You cannot fight without something to fight for. To love a thing without wishing to fight for it is not love at all; it is lust.** It may be an airy, philosophical, and disinterested lust; it may be, so to speak, a virgin lust; but it is lust, because it is wholly self-indulgent and invites no attack.”

Chesterton crowns this ode to love and battle:

**The full value of this life can only be got by fighting, because if we have accepted everything, we have missed something—war. This life of ours is a very enjoyable fight, but a very miserable truce.**

Not so **the New Post-Conciliar Priest. He preaches self-affirmation, not battle against vice. Dialogue, not refutation. Ambiguity, not truth. He massages feelings, rather than bringing men to the Cross.** In the recent words of one major American prelate, “Accusations of heresy are simply an inability to deal with ambiguity.” This kind of neutered priest was on display in a remark by one recently. He was bemoaning the use of the cassock. He giddily pontificated that he presents himself in lay dress because his role is to bring love. And you thought this kind of drivel disappeared with flower children and Woodstock.

Let's see. Cassocked priests for over a millennium did not? Hercules, meet Timothy Leary.

But this New Priest was foreign even to Hollywood. Old Hollywood, that is. The classic movie *On the Waterfront* proves the point. This Marlon Brando classic is not a movie; it is a sermon. It plumbs the depths of the human heart with Shakespearian flair. It doesn't censure the full range of human experience as does contemporary Hollywood.

Hollywood 2024 is a Puritan Hollywood. A reverse Puritanism: morality banned, religion proscribed, and God taboo, its air as claustrophobic as the kind Hester Prynne breathed in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. It wears the high-buttoned collar of Woke ideology so tightly that its restricted air supply of reality makes it impossible to see life as it is. Today's Hollywood might as well be Amish Town West. It fears reality as much as those dear Pennsylvanians fear modernity. T.S. Eliot's verses had to be directed against the likes of the 2024 Hollywood elites when he wrote in the *Four Quartets*, "humankind cannot bear/very much reality."

All the gifts of Hollywood's spectacular talent are frozen in a spiritual cake of ice. These formidable artists are immobilized by a terror of the real; the search for God and a thirst for virtue. Art thrives upon revealing to us the beauty of reality—every part of it.

When artists flinch from this vocation, their "art" curdles into crudity. Titillation replaces intuition, while debauched man crowds out man ennobled. Hollywood should be our 16th-century Florence—unveiling man in all his splendor and tragedy. Rather, it has become our Babylon—and Babel. It fails us by showing man only as a beast. Hollywood today is Dante's *Inferno*—without the *Purgatorio* or *Paradiso*.

But the Hollywood of *On the Waterfront* was a Hollywood of the whole Dante because it was a Hollywood of **the whole man. Proof of this lies in portraying wrenching moral struggle, principally in the person of The Priest.** Karl

Malden exhibits the Catholic priest as Hercules. His goodness and honesty are drawn in epic lines. The priest is hero in the tradition of Odysseus and El Cid. Men seek him for both light and strength and he supplies both in abundance.

**Here is a Hollywood unafraid of the reality of God, holy religion, and fallen man. Against that backdrop we see man for who he is: wretched and pure, flawed and struggling, conflicted and sure, craving God and yet wallowing in sin. Here is the priest calling men to sacrifice after the sacrifice of Christ. Here not only does goodness triumph over evil, it is more attractive than evil. Here the priest calls real men in their real conditions to make real leaps of grace.**

This is life as a Caravaggio canvas, not a Popeye cartoon.

Who better serves man?

No one was more Hercules than the Cure of Ars, St. John Vianney. This 19th-century saint never left his parish of Ars, France. All he did was offer Mass, hear Confessions, and teach the Catechism. Of course, that's like saying all that MacArthur and Patton did was defeat the Axis powers. St. John Vianney engaged men at the only place that matters: the battlefield of their souls. He helped them conquer their sins—and so helped them be men again. No joy compares to that joy.

In another time, that was the only kind of priest the world knew. So much so that 1954 Hollywood produced *On the Waterfront*.

The world was richer when such priests strode the earth.

How much poorer it is without them. How much more dangerous.

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