

Jesus is 'the ultimate superhero on the ultimate mission'

Fictional superheroes, like Superman and Spider-Man, have lots in common.

They wear unique outfits. They have superhuman powers, but engage with all of us. They stand for the universal virtues of truth, justice, and mercy. And they have the same mission: to save the world from evil.

So, by those criteria, Jesus is the ultimate superhero on the ultimate mission.

"We've already got a saviour. Making those links is no bad thing," says Father Richard Leonard, a Jesuit priest and internationally recognized author and film and culture critic. "What I do is, not say that Jesus is replaced by Spider-Man, but that Spider-Man has got an awful lot of interesting parallels."

"And Spider-Man is inadequate and Jesus is the real deal."

Father Leonard was the guest speaker at variety of events in Edmonton, including Faith Development Day for educators in the Edmonton Catholic School District. On Feb. 7, he spoke at Providence Renewal Centre about how the Church can reach out to a young generation.

As a cultural critic, Leonard said his advice to Catholics and the Church is to speak the cultural language of young people, by becoming more critical consumers of information, culture, and media, and to engage online, on social media, film and TV.

"The Jesuit philosophy, from St. Ignatius Loyola, is to find God in all things," Leonard said.

"You've got to know the culture first. You've got to understand some of the masses that are really important to us and finally what our response is to it out of our Catholic tradition."

Leonard said that means getting off the sidelines, engaging, and praising what's good – even online – when it reflects the Church's values.

"The Church is increasingly sitting in the royal box, just throwing scorn on modern society and secular values," he said.

"Well, actually we'd better get in there and be a player in it and promote what we can, reward what's good, and then we're in a better position to be taken seriously about the judgments we want to make."

Leonard noted that \$1.23 billion US was spent last year on movie tickets, but he's concerned that of the top 10 films in Canada last year by popularity, most of them focus on fantastical and otherworldly themes, including *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, *Wonder Woman*, *Spider-Man*, *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Justice League*.

For Leonard, a reviewer and commentator who has a PhD in film studies, telling the Good News – “the biggest metaphysical story in town” – requires the Church to engage in popular culture.



Amy Schwartz

Amy Schwartz, a Grade 3 teacher at St. Elizabeth School in Edmonton, agrees.

“I think you can absolutely make that parallel as a teacher. All these kids love Spider-Man and Batman and come to school with their T-shirts and their backpacks and they look up to these superheroes because that’s what they talk about when they come to school.”

Schwartz said: “It’s really important to be able to, in a sense, connect the two; that Christ is kind of like our superhero. He’s always there for us, and always will be.”

However, Leonard said the Church has alienated young people – who flock to and seek comfort in fantasy movies – in language and attitude.

“What comes with a lot of our story is often to dismiss people who have any different story or dissent from the story, or say ‘Your life is (not) valuable because you’re not with us,’ ” Leonard said.

“We’ve now got a post-Christian, deeply, profoundly secular culture of young people who are quite cynical. Some are quite angry – maybe for good reason –

who we want to talk to about the Good News. We'd better find a way into that culture, and we'd better start by talking their language."

That not only applies to movies specifically, but the experiences of young people.



Erica Schwabe

"We're dealing with all these issues, the transgender issues ... We've got kids in Grade 6 who are asking questions, who are on the edge of trying to go with what they feel is who they are," said Erica Schwabe, a Grade 5 teacher at St. Elizabeth School.

"When you accept people for who they are, they'll come to those conclusions on their own. The Church welcomes them and it's really just about Jesus' Word."

Speaking the cultural language of young people requires the same missionary zeal of the past, Leonard said, and for the Church that will take time.

"It's about pre-evangelization. I think it's about saying to people 'You go in their door and come out the Lord's.' What the Church often wants, particularly with young people and evangelization, is everyone already talking the talk and walking the walk," he said.

"But that's not what the best missionaries of the Church ever did. The French missionaries to Canada did not come here and immediately expect everyone to know about Christianity. They spent years and years and years understanding, enculturating, adapting, trying to explain in a way the local people understood, and (they) sometimes gave their life for it."