



### *In Bruges In Bruges*

Rome is the foundation of the University of Notre Dame architecture and urban design curriculum, and properly so. Nevertheless, every year for the past ten years I have traveled from Notre Dame to meet a new class of graduate urban design students (themselves up from Rome on spring break) for a week in the small historic city of Bruges. Where is Bruges? It's in Belgium.

I present urban form to my students in the long and large western humanist tradition that sees cities as communal artifacts that human animals by our nature make in order to live well (with all the teleological and virtue ethics implications of that tradition's notion of *living well*). We go to Bruges primarily because it's an extraordinary example of "ordinary" medieval mercantile urbanism shaped, literally, by Catholic Christianity: a beautiful compact environment of exemplary streets, squares, and buildings, perhaps the most physically intact medieval city in northern Europe.

Bruges was a monastic city but not (before modern tourism) a pilgrimage city, politically significant for a time because of its wealth and artistic culture, but never an imperial

capital or a major ecclesiastical center. Bruges is rather the long-term durable product of a local culture of successful and pious merchants. For Notre Dame students, these historic facts—plus Bruges’ location on flat, nondescript lowlands in a northern European climate, and a compact size that enables it to be well explored in four-to-five days—make Bruges an excellent academic counterpoint and complement to the grandeur and intrigue of imperial and baroque Rome. Bruges is good medieval urbanism at the scale of what we would regard today as a good town. It once attracted trading partners from all over Europe, and over time acquired an aura of enchantment that today draws tourists from all over the world.

My second time in Bruges with students was in late February 2007, and upon our arrival we were surprised to discover the central market square still decked out for Christmas. We soon discovered that this was because of a movie being filmed in the city, completed and released a year later as *In Bruges*, directed by Martin McDonagh. [The trailer](#) was intriguing (though misleading), and *In Bruges* opened in the United States to good critical reviews in mid-February 2008. I waited to see it with my students in Bruges in early March; but alas, when we got there we discovered it had not yet opened in Belgium. Even more disconcertingly, I discovered upon my return home it was no longer playing in American theaters.

If you’ve seen *In Bruges*, it’s not hard to imagine why it didn’t last long in the theaters. A tight and original story, wickedly funny, with well-developed characters and superbly acted, *In Bruges* is also graphically violent, politically incorrect on steroids, and marked by pitch-perfect but over-the-top profanity that warrants for sensitive souls ‘trigger warnings’ both literal and metaphorical. In the circles I inhabit, it is generally more popular with men than women. A number of women of my acquaintance admire its depth but don’t think its profundity worth the price of its delivery; and among a certain group of male faculty colleagues who’ve seen the movie, the town of Bruges itself apparently forever after will be referred to as “F\*cking Bruges.”

The plot involves two gunmen, Ray (played by Colin Ferrell) and Ken (played by Brendon Gleeson), who have been ordered to Bruges by crime boss Harry Waters (played

by Ralph Fiennes) to await instructions in the aftermath of a hit in London that inadvertently resulted in the shooting death of a small boy. Details of that backstory emerge slowly during several days of sightseeing that include contemplation of Hieronymus Bosch's *Last Judgment* and Bruges' most important relic, a phial of the congealed blood of Christ brought back to Bruges from the Holy Land by a local 12<sup>th</sup> century crusader; as well as varieties of self-destructive behavior that betray in different ways Ray's internal anguish. The pace picks up when the order comes from Harry for Ken to kill Ray, as a matter of honor: "You can't kill a f\*cking kid and expect to get away with it."

Its hard center notwithstanding, I have subjected my students to *In Bruges* in Bruges every year since 2009 because it's great drama, and because Bruges itself is a character in the movie. We watch it at the end of our third day of walking around, by which time we have seen most of the places depicted in the movie, and are even able to recognize its two most prominent physical discontinuities. Most of my students find *In Bruges* funny; are properly moved—horrified is more apt—by the crime central to the movie's plot; and those who watch it to the end (I have had a couple of excellent students leave midway through) are pensive, and appropriately so. For in addition to its humor and artistic virtuosity, *In Bruges* is an impressive meditation upon the reality of sin and sin's wages, upon final judgment, and upon the possibility of redemption and redemption's price.

Not the least redeeming feature of *In Bruges* itself is that it rewards multiple viewings. A happy consequence of my annual visit is that I get to see *In Bruges* yet again, and I discover something substantive at almost every new viewing. And if my experience resembles a less-agonizing version of the experience of Bill Murray's Phil Connors character in *Groundhog Day*, that may be fitting inasmuch as the two movies invite comparison as different treatments of a common theme.

Like *Groundhog Day*, *In Bruges* is often described as a film about Purgatory; but unlike *Groundhog Day* is noteworthy for the apparent inconclusiveness of its ending. It's clear Last Judgment allusions notwithstanding, I have been uncertain of *In Bruges*' purgatorial

theme—in Catholic teaching Purgatory is, strictly speaking, the purification and perfection of souls *already* assured of their salvation; and salvation is immediately clear neither in the movie nor to many of its interpreters—but since I saw *In Bruges* (most recently) last March, I have come to think it is indeed a story about Purgatory, and its ending not so inconclusive as it first seems. In particular, I was struck for the first time by two familiar but understated scenes. The first involves Ray, previously suicidal, who tries to leave Bruges *but can't*; because apparently he's just not yet ready to leave. The second occurs at movie's end. Ray --having been aided by Ken, who in the course of the movie quite unexpectedly emerges first as a priest-figure and then (logically) as a Christ-figure-- has already exhibited evidence of his own moral and spiritual progress. But with his life apparently in the balance, and the with-child innkeeper Marie (whose lives just minutes earlier Ray had taken care to protect) hovering serenely above him, Ray thinks to himself words that echo Luke 15: 18-19:

If I survive all this, I'll go to that house [of the boy he has killed], apologize to the mother there, and accept whatever punishment she tells me. Prison. Death. Didn't matter.... And I really really hoped I wouldn't die. I really really hoped I wouldn't die.

Discussing not long thereafter the significance of these scenes with some longtime friends, a married couple, he forwarded me [this review](#) of not only the film but also the script; and she pointed out that *In Bruges* is a story not only of Ray's redemption but also Ken's: a hit-man in need of redemption becomes the *means* of redemption --i.e., Christ-- for another hit-man in need of redemption, and is thereby himself redeemed. However odd this sounds, that by movie's end it seems both plausible and fitting bespeaks the artistic triumph of *In Bruges*: its ability to convey the Christian sacramental sense of divine presence within the created order, and most especially in self-sacrificing acts of love by imperfect beings themselves being perfected by Christ.

If you haven't seen *In Bruges*, do. And if you have, you might want to see it again.

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