

IRELAND BEACON (June 1, 2001)

Chocolat: A gentle endorsement of change

It is easy to view Lasse Hallstrom's movie *Chocolat* as a light and tasty treat. It is a fanciful story about a 1959 traditional French village transformed by the opening of "Chocolaterie Maya."

Well, it is simple — like a fairy tale. Taken for what it is, a morality tale with social types standing in for contemporary cultural issues, it is a charming fable with an easy-to-taste moral about the forces of modernization and the liberalization of tradition as the best response.

The town had been dutiful in its Catholicism, but the tradition had become rigid. Along comes chocolate entrepreneur Vianne: She is stylish in bright-red heels and colorful wraps; she is unashamed about stoking natural pleasures; and she uses artful marketing to draw in customers — all easy-to-notice examples of modernizing forces.

What's more, she doesn't go to church, but she is good and kind (transparently secular humanist, and maybe even spiritually radical with her mysterious and seductive Mayan delicacies).

The mayor of the town, a descendant of generations of nobility, is a landlord to many and the moral custodian of all. He even edits the young priest's sermons to make sure they instill respect for moral duty and propriety. He baldly represents traditional authority.

And of course, the mayor regards Vianne with her shop (opening its doors and letting out

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moral outrage against the town's tranquility.

As the newcomer and the mayor face off for the soul of the town, the other characters swirl around them with familiar issues that show the two forces in the balance.

Some elements of the plot lean toward liberalism and the need for more tolerance: Wandering river people are the town's despised "outsiders" that the good citizens treat with rank prejudice; and a married couple in town has a physically abusive marriage that drives the wife partially crazy, until she finds a haven with Vianne's comforting trust and cups of chocolate.

But others lean toward tradition and the tug of community: Vianne's daughter hates that her mother has always insisted that the little family move frequently and has dealt with this by retreating to play with an imaginary wallaby; and the river people's captain, played by Johnny Depp, is a traveling man with difficulty committing in relationships.

In the main story line, the town is transformed, but not by a wholesale trading in of the

shop kindles a host of simple pleasures, even the mayor and the priest come to endorse the need to find the loving and creative spirit embedded in their honored rituals.

But in addition, the newcomers also change: Vianne discovers community as she decides to give up wandering for the chance to set roots in her new town.

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message about the way to cope with many of the forces of our world. The movie's setting in an ardently Catholic town, just a few years before Vatican II, suggests an endorsement of that renewal of Catholicism.

As a fairy tale, however, it can be read as a gentle endorsement of change in general: Maybe those novel ideas are not so bizarre and scary as they appear at first glance. On this level, the viewer can look beyond this particular French town and its traditions, and muse about substituting any number of traditions challenged by new ways.

While the movie looks like it will be anti-clerical, as is so much of contemporary culture, it is actually a strong endorsement of traditional religion as long as it is willing to adapt.

So keepers of the faith can go to the movie expecting just a tasty dessert, but they will actually find they are swallowing a brief for liberalizing tradition.

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