

*It's just an ordinary day in New York City, Nina says to the blind man on a busy Manhattan street corner, "people rushing back and forth and everybody's got somewhere to go, somewhere to be."*

The same could be said of San Antonio or any other city in this or any other nation. We live busy lives. We spend our days rushing from one thing to another, with little time to spare, as we juggle the many things we are responsible for in our personal and professional lives. And, yes, in the chaos of our busy lives it might just be better to "stay out of this" — of other people's lives and problems — as Manny suggests to José in the recently released movie "Bella." After all, isn't it better to just mind your own business and let other people live their own lives as best they know? I mean, it's safer not to risk getting off track yourself just because someone else has, isn't it? Maybe. But maybe not... as we see in the unfolding of a beautiful story of disinterested love and genuine friendship between José and Nina in the movie "Bella."

Nina is not the only one who benefits in this friendship: José does too. This is the story of a man whose life was dramatically changed a few years earlier when a tragedy knocked on his door, who now reaches out to help his co-worker Nina when

## Friendship evangelization: being Good News

her life is at a crossroads, and confusion and uncertainty knock at her door. José's simple, caring demeanor and his non-judgmental words and actions allow him to reach out and touch Nina the day she needed it the most. And in the process he himself discovers that not all was lost for him when he lost so much just a few years back. He experiences anew the power that love has to change people's lives. He shows us how by being a true friend we can make a huge difference in another's life — and see our own lives blessed in unexpected ways.

Friendship evangelization. José displays it rather well, this silent yet powerful witness with which most evangelization begins. It's bringing Good News by *being* Good News. It's about loving another as Christ loves us: with great care and compassion, with little judgment or reproach, with patience and great skill. Yes, skill. Knowing what to say and what not to say; when to say what needs to be heard and when simply to show with your actions what needs to be witnessed with eyes, heart and soul. It's about putting yourself as much as possible in another's shoes, feeling as best you can their pain



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and anguish, their inner turmoil and struggle. It's about seeing things as they see them in order to know how best to lead them to a place they have never seen before and consider options they have not yet considered fully.

Pope Paul VI in "Evangelization in the Modern World" wrote: "Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness. Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people ... Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Other questions will arise, deeper and more demanding ones, questions evoked by this witness."

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Director of the Office for Evangelization

José does this for Nina at a very crucial moment in her life, saying more with his actions than he does with his words. Not because words aren't necessary — they are indeed! — but because this Catholic knew from personal experience that sometimes love in action is the best medicine for an anguished and confused soul, and that at times like these actions speak louder than words. When he did speak, he knew how to say the right thing and ask the right questions: "What are you doing for the rest of the day? Do you want to go to the beach with me?" which in his case meant

home: a place where the love of a closely-knit family could heal almost any hurt; a place where Nina could see for herself that she had options available to her that she should seriously consider; a place where José could share that he knew from experience that a lost life is not something you can easily live with.

Then his initial act of evangelization becomes heroic virtue when he engages in a much deeper and more demanding type of evangelization, showing that "there is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13)

What José does for Nina — as well as for Manny, for himself and for Bella — in this Catholic-produced film, you and I must consider doing for whomever God puts in our path on any *ordinary day in South Texas*.

It will require, however, a true desire to be and bring Good News to others without counting the cost.

Consider making time this week to see the movie "Bella" — you will find in it a fine example of the art of friendship evangelization and of what it means to love your neighbor as yourself.

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## Go and see 'Bella'

The other day I went to see the movie "Bella" and was impressed by it. It is a touching, tender film. Here is a low-budget production, shot in 24 days in New York City, that captured the "People's Choice Award" at the Toronto Film Festival in 2006. (Among previous winners of that award have been "Chariots of Fire" and "Life is Beautiful.") In addition, the film won the Grand Prize for Best Dramatic Feature at the Heartland Film Festival this past year and was selected as entry for at least six other film festivals (four of them Latino). Edward James Olmos selected "Bella" to open the Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival. At the beginning of the event, Olmos said: "Bella is one of the most impressive landmark films to open our festival in 10 years. It is a film people have to see; it captures the heart."

The film is now being shown around the country. Hollywood has largely ignored it but favorable reviews and word-of-mouth recommendations are bringing people in. Larry Ratliffe of the *San Antonio Express-News* gave it three "jalapenos" (out of four possible); Roger Ebert gave it "thumbs up."



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The first weekend it was shown nationwide (Oct. 26-28), it ranked 17th in box office receipts — not bad for a film that was released in only 165 theaters nationwide. (The first-ranked film was released to 3,183 theaters.)

"Bella" recounts a 24-hour period in the life of the two main characters, José (Eduardo Verástegui) and Nina (Tammy Blanchard), a period in which tragedy, hope and joy intermingle in their lives. Both have experienced a tragic sorrow. Both have difficult decisions to make. And they make the right ones. The lead actor, Verástegui, is a heart-throb from Mexican soap operas and from his role with Kairo, an award-winning Mexican singing group. In the movie, José loses the opportunity to play professional soccer because he is convicted of manslaughter in the death of young girl. The tragedy causes him to withdraw from life,

become morbidly introspective, working as a chef in his brother's restaurant. Nina is a waitress in the restaurant, who finds herself pregnant and abandoned by the father of the child. She is fired for coming late to work. Feeling alone and despondent she confides to José that she is going to abort the child. The movie narrates one day in their lives during which they both find hope and resolution of their dilemmas.

This movie is a testimony to the religious faith of Eduardo Verástegui and his closest collaborators. A few years ago, Verástegui went through a painful discernment. He wondered about what kind of impact he was having on his world with his "Latin lover" portrayals and their immoral lives. The final jolt came, I have read, when he was at a party at which a young man entered into a conversation with him. The stranger told Verástegui how much he admired him and how "cool" he was. He then began telling him how he had been led to start doing drugs because the actor portrayed in his films men who were into the drug scene.

Verástegui dropped out of acting and public life for three



In one of the scenes from "Bella," José, played by Eduardo Verástegui, shares a few moments of unconditional love with a very special young lady in his life.

years, spending time thinking about his future. He returned to the practice of his Catholic faith and even thought seriously about becoming a missionary to the Amazon Indians. When he talked it over with a priest friend, the padre told him that he would waste his talents in the Amazon and that Hollywood was a jungle that needed missionaries just as much as the Amazon Indians. Providence then brought him in contact with two other Catholic men in the cinema industry. They formed the "Metanoia" film company and began the project

that produced "Bella."

The film is a remarkable portrayal of Hispanic culture in America today. It shows the exuberance of the people, their love of family, their values.

If this film is successful, the actors and the executives of Metanoia plan to produce more films that reflect basic moral values and the importance of the family. I recommend that you run out to see "Bella" if you haven't done so.

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