“Michael,” asks Kay in Part I, as they leave the cinema where they’ve just seen The Bells of St Mary’s, “would you love me more if I was a nun?” He’s thinking about it, but we never know what his answer would have been, because at that moment he notices on a news stand that his father has been shot. It’s a serio-comic take on a central theme. The Catholic religion is always threatening to take centre-stage in The Godfather, but is always sidelined by things which seem to the protagonists more important. As with the classic definition of an Armenian – “A man who spends a million dollars building a church, and then never goes to it” – so with the Corleones. They know religion is important, but can never give it the undivided attention it deserves, and often seem oblivious to its teachings even as they observe its external rites.

As with religion, so with family life. “A man who never spends time with his children can never be a real man,” says Vito to Johnny Fontane (also in Part I). Vito will at least die in the presence of the youngest member of his family – a scene made wonderful by the fact that one person in it isn’t acting at all. But Vito’s assertion is belied elsewhere by the reality.

The family is central to the Corleones’ theoretical aspirations, but often subsidiary to their practical priorities. In one scene Michael even tries out on Mama Corleone the idea that it might be necessary to destroy one part of the family in order to save the greater part of it – “Did Pop ever think about that?” he asks her. But the idea is too complicated and paradoxical for her, and he has to desist. Eventually he kills Carlo, his brother-in-law, and Fredo, his brother, in order to save the family of which they’re all members. And he dies in the presence only of his dog. You love the family; you work for the family; but you’re also the family’s worst enemy. Not for nothing was / is The Godfather Saddam Hussein’s favourite movie. I wonder if they let him have the DVD set to watch in jail? He, after all, had his own son-in-law murdered.
The films are also terrifically popular with real American hoods. They use the characters as models for their own style – hugging one another, learning the traditional ways to cook pasta, practising authentic 1900s Sicilian dialect, and so on.

As a means of conveying all this, the films dramatise a number of religious and family celebrations, ceremonies, and rituals, some large, some small, where our attention is directed not to the seeming religious essence of the event, but at its real family and social context. In The Godfather, everything exists in two dimensions. You may enter a meeting with a friendly primary agenda, but you go also prepared with a secondary hostile agenda should the need for one arise:

I want to start with an examination of the way the films use the Sacraments, five of which are celebrated onscreen at different parts of the action.
Matrimony: the first sacramental ceremony in the trilogy is Connie’s marriage to Carlo Rizzi at the beginning of Part I. We don’t witness them exchanging vows – perhaps a good thing, given what happens to the marriage: he betrays Sonny to their rivals, and gets strangled by Clemenza, she gets embittered and isn’t reconciled with the family until Part III. But it’s a tradition, we learn, that on the wedding day anyone may feel free to speak to the bride’s father and if need be ask a favour of him. This gives the film the opportunity of showing us what’s really going on behind the celebration. We see the importunity of Bonasera, the undertaker who speaks the movies’ first and most important line – “I believe in America”. We meet Luca Brasi, “My most valued friend,” as Vito calls him:

Luca is only there to offer his good wishes: “… and may deir foist child … be a masculine child,” he grunts, having, it’s clear, learnt his speech by heart, lest nerves should render him speechless. He, unlike Bonasera the undertaker, has no ulterior motive. Unlike most of the company present, in fact, Luca’s only there from respect, and love.

Baptism: the most sensational sacramental celebration in the trilogy is the baptism of Connie’s baby at the climax of Part I, with Michael standing as real godfather as opposed to
Mafia godfather. Whether by chance or design we can’t tell, the noon of the baptism is also the noon on which Michael has decided to clear all his accounts with the other four of the Five Families of New York. And, as the priest prepares the various objects he’ll need, we cut repeatedly to various villains preparing the various objects they’ll need. We get so used to the way Coppola’s camera moves from gangster to gun, and from gun to gangster, and from priest to holy water, and from holy water to priest, that we eventually can’t tell which is which. As the ceremony progresses, we see the various assassins arriving at the killing-points; and, as the priest asks Michael, “Do you renounce the devil and all his works?” and as he says “I do renounce them,” hell breaks loose at his behest all over the city. Barzini is shot down on the steps of a law court by a hood disguised as a policeman. Moe Green has his glasses smashed and his eye shot out as he lies having a massage. Another Family Father is trapped in a swing door and shot through it; Tattaglia is killed in bed with his woman.

Michael would be upset if told he was a hypocrite. He’ll be a responsible godfather in the Christian sense, and a responsible Padrino in the Mafia sense. His love and his violence are twin, complementary aspects of his responsibility. Violence and murder are to him instruments of love. Eventually he will kill the father of the baby to which he’s godfather (see illustrations at top of previous page).

Confirmation: Part II opens with the party to celebrate the confirmation of Michael Jr. We see the boy, dressed in white, going up the aisle; but what the film’s more interested in is the way his father behaves afterwards. As with Vito at the start of Part I, so with Michael at the start of Part II. We see his interview with Senator Pat Geary, the outcome of which is to prove so fatal for the senator:

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1: The baby, as everyone knows, is played by the director’s now-celebrated daughter Sofia, even though the baby is a boy. Sofia Coppola’s thus the only person in the trilogy to play two parts. In fact she plays three parts – she’s on the deck of the immigrant ship which passes the Statue of Liberty in Part II.
The senator thinks he’s there to protect America from greaseball dago wops like Michael, and says so: but Michael rejects the dichotomy offered: “We’re two sides of the same hypocrisy, senator”. As the son becomes a voluntary Christian, the father admits his complicity with Satan. Later he tries to atone by investing in a Vatican-owned business concern: but finds that Satan is very familiar with the routines and byways of the Vatican.

Confession: this is the most moving of all the sacramental celebrations dramatised, and occurs in Palermo halfway through Part III. Michael, now in late middle age, has gained a Papal knighthood, but not found spiritual calm, so heavily do his sins weigh on his conscience. Cardinal Lamberto, who will be elected Pope soon and be as soon assassinated, suggests that Michael might find some solace in an act of confession. At first he’s dubious. “Father,” he half-chuckles, “It’s been so long. I’m afraid I’d take up too much of your time”. But the Cardinal insists he should try, and so, there and then, in the courtyard – where, he says, he often hears the confessions of his own priests – he hears Michael’s.

This is the only sacrament, the dramatisation of which is not undercut by a parallel act of villainy. All you have is Michael confessing, the Cardinal listening, and the unseen doves who inhabit the courtyard cooing, as if in ineffectual benediction. “I ordered the death of my brother … I killed my father’s son.” Michael almost chokes as he says it, perhaps putting into words for the first time the truth of what happened at the end of Part II. “Your sins are terrible,” the cardinal agrees; “and it is just that you suffer. Your life could be redeemed, but I know you don’t believe that. Ego te absolvo in nomine patris et filii et spiritu sanctu …”

It looks like a sign that for the first time in Michael’s life the two hitherto parallel lines are meeting, and that his religion and his life are running as a moral unit. But it’s a misleading sign.

The three other sacraments are neglected. Holy Orders: Tom Hagen’s son becomes a priest in Part III, but he’s not an important character, largely edited out, and we don’t see his induction into the priesthood. Extreme Unction: most people in The Godfather die too quickly and unexpectedly to receive Extreme Unction. Holy Eucharist: No-one is ever seen taking Communion in any of the Godfather films. For that you have to go to Bergman’s Winter Light.

But there are, besides the sacraments, many other ceremonies, rituals, social acts, social unions, and theoretically happy, convivial things by which we celebrate our common humanity, our friendships, and our family relationships. All are useful for drama, because they can be disrupted, and the presence of factors other than love, friendship and community demonstrated. It wasn’t only Stendhal in La Chartreuse de Palme who knew that there was nothing so dramatic as a pistol shot in a concert – “it’s crude, but impossible to ignore”. Shakespeare himself shows that if you’re going to have a feast in your play, you’ve got either to have a spectre at it, or be able to reveal to the main guest that she’s just eaten the flesh of her own children. If you’re going to put another play on stage within your play, you’ve got to have someone interrupt it; and it must never finish. A wedding must have something go wrong to prevent the couple getting married. A friendly fencing match must end up with someone dead. A funeral must have two mourners jumping into the grave and trying to kill each other. For their inspiration, Coppola and Puzo went straight to the top.
Let’s examine dinner, which is a daily ritual: the last thing you expect to happen while dining is that you’ll be shot dead. Captain McCluskey has frisked Michael (“I frisked plenty a’ young punks”); with complete confidence he allows Michael to go to the bathroom to take a leak; and he dies on Michael’s return, drilled through the forehead with a single shot, tucking his napkin into his collar as he does so, and falling face down into his pasta dish. The expression on his face is one of disappointment, as if he’d been looking forward to the meal.

In Part III, there’s a similar event, write large: the operatic heavy Joey Zasa invites everyone to a big banquet in a penthouse suite. Just as they’re tucking in, there’s a huge roaring noise, and an unseen helicopter sprays the union with bullets, killing most of the guests. Titus Andronicus was never as big-scale as this. But Michael escapes with his newly-found nephew Vincent (whose conception we witnessed in Part I), and they live to fight again.

Waking up is a kind of ritual. We normally get out of bed at the same time, from the same side of the bed, and normally do things in the same order: clean our teeth, have a pee, or whatever. What we don’t expect to find on waking up is blood oozing through our sheets and the head of a dead horse staring up at us. Jack Woltz the film producer finds just that. He’ll never go to sleep again, confident that he’ll be refreshed when he wakes up.

There’s the Easter procession in Part II. This and the christening in Part I are the two best exemplifications of our theme. It has crosses, girls dressed as angels, a band, priests, shrines, stalls and puppet shows set up along the way. The statue of Jesus has dollar bills pasted all over it. Down in the street, Don Fanucci, the bragart mafioso, the show-off, the man who thinks power lies in display, the big loser, walks along in his white suit and his overcoat across his shoulders, giving gifts to charity and receiving, as he thinks, the plaudits of the crowd.
Up on the rooftops, unseen by all, poorly dressed, Vito creeps, not, like Don Fanucci, taking part in the procession, but ignoring it, concentrating on his own single, separate purpose. As the camera follows Fanucci from right to left on the far side of the street from Vito, it follows Vito from left to right at rooftop level from Don Fanucci’s side. Now and again we get Vito’s powerful perspective on the weak Fanucci, from above Vito’s head. The band plays a lugubrious Italian slow march: it seems to be celebrating Christ’s resurrection, and, by reflection, the power of Fanucci. In fact it will always remind us of the first killing Vito had to make in his rise to Godfatherhood:

As Vito’s two bullets hit him, one in the chest and one in the cheekbone, Fanucci tries to rip open his waistcoat, as if by disrobing he might get at the slug which has killed him. Like McCluskey with his napkin, he dies attempting in vain to restore normality to his existence.

Having finished him off with a bullet through the mouth, Vito crosses the street, through the celebratory fireworks, to where his family are sitting on the steps of their tenement, and takes the infant Michael on his knee. The Nino Rota lullaby comes up on the soundtrack, and Vito murmurs, “Michele … tu’ padre ti vola ben’ assai … ben’ assai …” We know that, in that respect, he’s an excellent Christian father.

You travesty the happy public event by constructing a proximal private event which runs counter to its spirit. The effect is repeated in Part III, when there’s a street fair and religious procession, with white-hooded penitents bearing another statue of Jesus, not clad in dollar bills this time. One of the penitents reveals how impenitent he is by dropping Jesus, getting out his shotgun, and blasting away at Joey Zasa’s bodyguards. As Jesus crashes to the ground, Zasa ends up pressed against the glass door of a shop with two big chest-wounds seeping blood through his expensive overcoat.

A kiss is a ritual. We all know what it should mean. But in Mafia terms it can mean something different:
Fredo dies saying a Hail Mary.

Going to the opera is a ritual. It’s more special than going to the pictures or to the theatre. Even more so when your son is singing the leading part, and it’s his professional debut in a lead role. You may have wanted him to be a lawyer, but destiny and family pressure have decreed otherwise. There’s nothing you can do about it. Relax. Watch the show. Enjoy his singing. It’s his big night.

He’s a great success (he sings Turiddu in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, the greatest opera with a Sicilian setting). The audience love him, and you’ve taken the opportunity to pay off an old score while the show is on, by killing Don Altobello, your enemy. By now it’s an automatic reflex: take advantage of a big event which everyone will be focussing on, and do something violent and necessary so that no-one can see you do it.

It misfires. The opposition are in the building. You get your man – poisoned with some chocolates your sister has prepared especially for him – but their men nearly get you. As the audience leaves the theatre, they fire at you and miss you. You look down, puzzled, at your own body, for you felt the closeness of the bullet: but you’re unharmed. You turn round, and find they’ve got your daughter by mistake:
At last you realise in the most horrible way that something’s been wrong with your life and career from very early on: and that to separate the sacred from the secular in the way that you’ve been doing has been a serious mistake.

The greatness of *The Godfather* – it’s one of the greatest achievements of the cinema – is only in part derived from previous gangster movies, which are naïve and trivial by contrast. Nevertheless, Coppola is proud to be working within such a tradition, and pays small visual homages to it from time to time. In *The Roaring Twenties*, there’s a very brief scene where one of Cagney’s rivals guzzles spaghetti on a table with a checkered cloth, similar to that at which McCluskey and Salozo are eating when Michael comes in to kill them, with the gun he’s had sequestered in the toilet. Raoul Walsh, however, makes no dramatic use of the meal, which is over in a minute. Later there is another scene in a restaurant, where the same hood uses a fake meal to attempt an unsuccessful gangland ambush. In *The Public Enemy*, another hood takes a dive, rolling down the front stair of a courthouse, similar to but much shorter than the roll which Barzini takes when he’s shot at the end of Part I. Coppola asks his stuntman to roll much further than does William Wellman in the older film. Both *Scarface* (see below) and *Public Enemy* feature successful murder attempts carried out on patients in hospitals. Parts I and II each have one such, both of them, however, unsuccessful: on Vito in Part I, and on Hyman Roth in Part II.

In the earlier movies, the gangster’s mother often has to be there, either as a malign influence, like Cagney’s mum in *White Heat*, or as a sentimental counter-melody, like his mum at the end of *The Public Enemy*, who plumps up the pillows, carolling with innocent anticipation at the prospect of her son’s homecoming, not realising that he’s about to be posted through the door, dead. Coppola keeps Mama Corleone, Vito’s wife, to one side (the one brief scene, referred to above, apart), happy to be kept out of touch (“I don’t want his mother to see him like this”). Kay, Michael’s wife, refuses to be kept to one side: she must face her husband’s evil, and reject it at whatever cost. The old gangsters didn’t have wives anyway (that would imply that you could love them); unless, like Virginia Mayo in *White Heat*, they were tramps, in which case they deserved what they got:
Much of the iconography is rolled into one sequence in a very early film, *Little Caesar* of 1931 (one of the few to depict its villains as Italian-Americans). The sequence, strictly superfluous to the narrative, concerns a minor character, Tony, a driver who chickens out with an attack of conscience. He has a scene with his devout Catholic mum; tries to go to confession; but is gunned down before he reaches the priest by his erstwhile partners; and rolls down the steps of the church. These images become standard, and even Coppola forty years feels he has to include them.

*Little Caesar* also boasts the most extraordinary police chief, with a verbal delivery like a vampire under water. You really don’t know how to react to him.

Watching the old gangster movies, one’s surprised at how little violence they contain (*Scarface* is an exception). I should think more bullets hit Sonny during the ambush at the tollbooth on the causeway than are fired in the average thirties shootout. There’s one near-close-up of a corpse with its eyes open in *The Roaring Twenties*, and of course the climaxes to *Scarface* and *White Heat* are celebrated. But compare Cagney shoving the melon in Mae Clarke’s face with Carlo taking his belt to the pregnant Connie – and Sonny’s spectacular beating-up of Carlo as a result: you’re moving from an unfallen world to a fallen one.

*Scarface* is directed by Howard Hawks from a script by Ben Hecht, and thus we expect, and receive, more from it. Not only does it boast the only known gangster with a British public school accent (Boris Karloff, shot in a bowling alley while the skittles topple), but it has also the best-known example of an actor who really was a Mafioso (George Raft). It also has jokes, sibling incest, a gleeful attitude to its violence which must have made the Hays Office very uneasy, and an inventiveness which puts it apart from its poker-faced companions. What other gangster would go to a job unhappily, because he was at a performance of *Miss Sadie Thompson*, and wanted to know the outcome? Only Paul Muni’s mugging in the lead role spoils the effect somewhat.
Gangsters have in the thirties and forties to be surrounded with henchmen who are uniform and anonymous. You may recognise the faces from movie to movie, but you need know nothing about them:

Coppola, on the other hand, wants you to know them, and their lives. He wants you to know how they cook pasta, which movies they watch, what music they listen to, and so on. He wants to bring you into their culture. He wants you to love them – mostly. The wordless presence of Richard Bright (he plays Al Neri, who shoots Fredo at the end of Part II, and who shuts the door in Kay’s face in the last shot of Part I), is a blood-freezing exception, as is Amerigo Tot (sic), who plays the other wordless hit man, shot by the Cuban police while trying to kill Hyman Roth in the hospital in Part II. Luca Brasi is big, but almost loveable (as long as he’s on your side), to judge by the few words he stammers to Vito at the start of Part I. You share Frank Pentangeli’s impatience at the start of Part II when all the clarinettist at the party can play for him is *Half a Pound o’ Tuppeny Rice*. When Tessio is taken away to be shot for treachery at the end of Part (“Tell Mikey I always liked him”), you feel terrible. The Hays Office would have refused such stuff back in 1939. Gangsters must only be seen as people if they’re unsuccessful, like Cagney at the end of *The Roaring Twenties*. To humanise them in their triumphs – why, it might encourage ordinary people to turn to crime. Only humanise them when they try and redeem themselves, a Cagney does in both *Twenties* and *Angels*. By the 1970s such hypocrisy was no longer possible. “I believe in America.” And of course, the whole point is that the Corleones never triumph. All their successes are hollow.

There is, in the old films, a pretend dichotomy between good guys and bad: you have Robinson opposed to his dancing buddy, Douglas Fairbanks jr., in *Little Caesar* (Fairbanks
has a morally-inclined girlfriend, too). You have Cagney opposed to Edmund O’Brien’s impossibly professional stoolpigeon in *White Heat*; Cagney opposed to the squeaky-clean lawyer in *The Roaring Twenties*; Cagney opposed to, but finally joining, his buddy Pat O’Brien the priest in *Angels*. In *The Godfather*, there’s no such balance — if the family doesn’t own the police (and the judge, and the newspaper, and the film producer, and the senator) they just eliminate them. What is an accidental-on-purpose effect of the old films — give the scenario a good guy to please the Hays Code, but make him boring — is done more thoroughly by Coppola: the bad guys are good guys — dedicated family men. You love the bad guys, because you know they’re you.

At the end of *The Roaring Twenties*, Cagney tries this on Bogart:

> There’s a new kind of set-up that you don’t understand. Guys don’t go around tearing things apart like we used to! People try to build things up! … In this new set-up, well, you and me just don’t belong, that’s all!

His intended meaning is, that crime is no longer an acceptable way in America. Reading what he says in *Godfather* terms, what he really means is that the big guys are going legit.

To return to my main theme: religion has in the thirties to be kept antiseptic and sentimental. *Little Caesar* opens with a title quoting St. Matthew. The platitudes voiced by Pat O’Brien’s priest in *Angels with Dirty Faces* aren’t too far from the glutinousness of de Mille’s *King of Kings* and *Sign of the Cross*, religiose epics so unusually revolting in their sentimentality that, having watched them once, I refused to have them in the house, and erased the tapes which held them. Contrast Karl Malden’s priest in *On the Waterfront*, a real, gritty, committed Christian. O’Brien is, in *Angels*, filmed too often enhaloed with light, staring up at the sky. It won’t do.

Coppola takes three movies to summon up the nerve. The priest in Part I has no lines apart from those he speaks in the baptism. There are no priests in Part II. Then, in Part III, Coppola hits you with everything he has — the compassionate Cardinal who becomes Pope and is murdered, the priests who turn out to be assassins, the anxiety-ridden, chain-smoking Irish Archbishop who’s corrupt, the Immobiliare Corporation, the Vatican finances … the Church has fine people in it (here and there), but is as compromised and worldly as Satan himself could wish.

It’s not clear that sacraments administered by such a church are efficacious anyway.