

## **Doubt (2008)**

Set in 1964 at a Catholic church in The Bronx, New York, the film opens with the jovial Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman) giving a sermon on the nature of doubt, noting that like faith, doubt can be a unifying force. The next evening, Sister Aloysius Beauvier (Meryl Streep), the strict principal of the parish school, discusses the sermon with her fellow nuns, the Sisters of Charity of New York. She asks if anyone has observed unusual behavior that would inspire Father Flynn to preach about doubt, and instructs them to keep their eyes open should any such behavior occur in the future.

Sister James (Amy Adams), a young and naive teacher, observes the closeness between Father Flynn and Donald Miller, an altar boy and the only black student. One day during class, Sister James receives a call asking for Donald Miller to meet Father Flynn in the rectory. When he returns, Donald is distraught and Sister James notices the smell of alcohol on his breath. Later, while her students are learning a dance in the gymnasium, she sees Father Flynn placing a white shirt in Donald's locker. She decides to report her suspicions to Sister Aloysius.

Under the pretext of discussing the upcoming school Christmas pageant, Sisters Aloysius and (to a lesser extent) James voice their suspicions that Father Flynn's relationship with Donald may be inappropriate. Several times, Father Flynn asks them to leave the matter alone as a private issue between the boy and himself, but Sister Aloysius persists. Finally, he is pressured into admitting that Donald had been caught drinking altar wine, and he had promised Donald not to tell anyone about the incident. Having now been forced to break that promise and reveal the truth, he will need to dismiss Donald as an altar boy, which he had been trying to avoid. Before leaving, Father Flynn tells Sister Aloysius he is displeased with her handling of the situation. His next sermon regards gossip and how it is easily spread.

Initially, Sister James is relieved and convinced of Father Flynn's innocence, but Sister Aloysius' belief Flynn has behaved inappropriately with Donald is unshakable. Later, Sister James asks Father Flynn about the shirt he put in Donald's locker, an observation she had hidden from Sister Aloysius. Flynn discusses his relationship with the boy. Flynn offers a winding explanation about love and Sister James who has just received a letter from her sick brother appears to interpret Flynn's love for Donald as fraternal.

Sister Aloysius meets with Donald Miller's mother regarding her suspicions. Mrs. Miller (Viola Davis) shocks Sister Aloysius with her lack of interest in the alleged misconduct on Father Flynn's part. As far as she is concerned, Donald need only last to the end of the school year, as graduation from a prestigious church school would increase his chances of going to a decent high school. It is hinted that Donald is homosexual and revealed that his father is abusive, with the dialogue between them indicating that the father's anger is fueled by his son's effeminacy. Mrs. Miller begs that Sister Aloysius drop the matter, feeling that Father Flynn is a source of inspiration to Donald and a shield from the abuse he receives at home. She becomes angry when Sister Aloysius refuses to compromise and threatens to throw Donald out of the school. Mrs. Miller believes that Donald would be punished for a thing of which he was not the cause.

Despite having no evidence and no support from anyone, Sister Aloysius again confronts Father Flynn and demands that he tell her the truth; otherwise, she will go to the Bishop. Father Flynn is adamant that there is no illicit relationship, but Sister Aloysius claims that she has learned that he has a history of problems, having moved to three different parishes in the last five years. She tells him that she has contacted a nun from one of his prior churches (she refuses to say whom), who corroborated her suspicions. Father Flynn is furious that she has contacted a nun rather than the church's pastor, which is proper church protocol. Sister

Aloysius tells him he doesn't deserve to wear the collar, and asks for his resignation. Unable to stand up to her, he succumbs to her demands.

### Cast

Meryl Streep	as	Sister Aloysius Beauvier
Philip Seymour Hoffman	as	Father Brendan Flynn
Amy Adams	as	Sister James
Viola Davis	as	Mrs. Miller
Joseph Foster	as	Donald Miller
Alice Drummond	as	Sister Veronica
Paulie Litt	as	Tommy Conroy

### Memorable quotes (with notes on difficult vocabulary)

Father Flynn: A woman was gossiping with her friend about a man whom they hardly knew – I know none of you have ever done this. That night, she had a dream: a great hand appeared over her and pointed down on her. She was immediately **seized** with an **overwhelming** sense of guilt. The next day she went to confession. She got the old parish priest, Father O' Rourke, and she told him the whole thing. "Is gossiping a sin?" she asked the old man. "Was that the hand of God Almighty pointing a finger at me? Should I be asking your absolution? Father, tell me, have I done something wrong?". "Yes" Father O' Rourke answered her. "Yes, you ignorant, **badly-brought-up** female. You have **borne false witness against** your neighbour. You **played fast and loose with** his reputation, and you should be heartily ashamed". So, the woman said she was sorry, and asked for forgiveness. "Not so fast" says O' Rourke. "I want you to go home, take a pillow upon your roof, cut it open with a knife, and return here to me".

So, the woman went home, took a pillow off her bed, a knife from the drawer, went up the fire escape to her roof, and **stabbed** the pillow. Then she went back to the old parish priest as instructed. "Did you **gut** the pillow with a knife?" he says. "Yes, Father". "And what were the results?" "Feathers" she said. "Feathers" he repeated. "Feathers everywhere, Father". "Now I want you to go back and gather up every last feather that flew out onto the wind". "Well" she said, "it can't be done. I don't know where they went. The wind took them all over". "And that", said Father O' Rourke, "is gossip!"

**To seize:** (qui) essere colti da; **overwhelming:** schiacciante/opprimente; **badly-brought-up:** maleducata; **to bear false witness against someone:** dire delle falsità riguardo a qualcuno; **to play fast and loose with**

**someone/something:** (qui) giocare con qlcs/non trattare qlcs col dovuto rispetto; **to stab:** pugnalarlo; **to gut:** (qui) fare a pezzi.

Sister Beauvier: You are a very innocent person, Sister James. William London is a **fidgety** boy. If you do not keep right on him, he will do anything to escape his chair. He would set his foot on fire for half a day out of school.

**fidgety:** irrequieto, agitato.

Father Flynn: I want to tell you a story. A cargo ship sank one night. It caught fire and went down. And only this one sailor survived. He found a **lifeboat**, **rigged a sail**... and being of a nautical discipline...turned his eyes to the Heavens and read the stars. He **set a course** for his home, and exhausted, fell asleep. Clouds rolled in. And for the next twenty nights, he could no longer see the stars. He thought he was on course, but there was no way to be certain. And as the days **rolled on**, and the sailor **wasted away**, he began to have doubts. Had he set his course right? Was he still going on towards his home? Or was he horribly lost... and **doomed** to a terrible death? No way to know. The message of the constellations – had he imagined it because of his desperate circumstance? Or had he seen truth once... and now had to **hold on to** it without further reassurance? There are those of you in church today who know exactly the crisis of faith I describe. And I want to say to you: doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone.

**lifeboat:** scialuppa di salvataggio; **to rig a sail:** alzare una vela; **to set a course:** tracciare una rotta ; **to roll on:** (qui) succedersi; **to waste away:** deperire/indebolirsi; **to be doomed:** essere spacciati/condannati; **to hold on to:** aggrapparsi a qlcs (fig.).

Sister Aloysius: Well, thank you, Father, for making time for us. We are **at our wit's end**.

Father Flynn: Well, I think it's an excellent idea to rethink the **Christmas pageant**. 'Cause last year's effort was a little **woebegone**.

**to be at one's wit's end:** essere a corto di idee; **Christmas pageant:** recita di Natale; **woebegone:** triste.

Father Flynn: You have no right **to act on your own**! You **have taken vows**, obedience being one! You answer to us! You have no right to **step outside** the church!

Sister Beauvier: I will step outside the church if that's what needs to be done, 'til the door should shut behind me! I will do what needs to be done, though I'm damned to Hell! You should understand that, or **you will mistake me**.

**to act on one's own:** agire in modo indipendente; **to take vows:** prendere i voti; **to step outside of something:** (qui) oltrepassare i confini/andare oltre; **to mistake someone:** sbagliarsi riguardo a qualcuno.

Sister James: How can you be so sure that he is lying?

Sister Beauvier: Experience.

Sister James: You just don't like him! You don't like it that he uses a **ballpoint pen**. You don't like it that he takes 3 **lumps of sugar** in his tea. You don't like it that he likes **Frosty the Snowman** and you are letting that convince you? Of something that's terrible... just terrible...

Sister James: Well, I like Frosty the Snowman! And I think it would be nice if this school weren't run like a jail! And I think it's a good thing that I love to teach history and that I might inspire my students to love it, too! And if you judge that to mean that I'm not fit to be a teacher, then so be it!

**ballpoint pen**: penna a sfera; **lump of sugar**: zolletta di zucchero; **Frosty the Snowman**: canzone natalizia tratta dall'omonimo film Disney.

Source:

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