

"Invictus" Film Discussion Guide

Film length: 2hrs. 12 minutes

Film rating: PG-13

Director: Clint Eastwood

Genre: Historical Narrative

Synopsis:

The main action of this film takes place after the dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s. While the descendants of white settlers were in the minority in South Africa, the legacy of colonialism had allowed them to continue an oppressive racial system when South Africa became an independent nation in 1910. After many decades of oppression, the formal structures and laws of modern Apartheid began in 1948. The majority of South Africans, whose ancestors had spent millennium in the region, were denied citizenship in their own country, were herded into impoverished living areas and suffered many violations of their human rights.

The protagonist in this film is Nelson Mandela (played by Morgan Freeman). After serving 27 years in a small prison cell for his work to end Apartheid and to bring civil, political, social and cultural rights to his people, Mandela is released in 1990 after worldwide pressure on the then all-white government of South Africa. Once free, Mandela worked with South Africa's white president, F.W. de Klerk, to dismantle the unjust structures and systems of Apartheid.

Three years after his release from prison, Mandela and de Klerk shared the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts. The African National Congress party, recognized after being banned in 1961, elected Mandela as

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Themes to Engage Through the Film:

- The legacies of injustice and the harm of apartheid
- The strength of the human spirit
- The importance of making difficult choices for the common good
- The great challenges of reconciliation and the power of forgiveness
- The potential and power of symbols
- The possibility of growth despite a painful past and difficult future
- The potential and power of solidarity to contribute to this growth



- **This film is the true story excellent tool to exp**
- **This film is an excellent tool to explore and examine moral and ethical issues as well as social justice themes.**
- **This movie illustrates the importance of working for the common good and reveals the power of vision and moral leadership.**

Web Links:

Official movie site: "Invictus"
<http://invictusmovie.warnerbros.com/>

Bishops' Conference review:
www.usccb.org/movie



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its president. Nelson Mandela won South Africa's presidential election in a landslide in 1994, becoming the country's first black president.

Nelson Mandela was a human being whose spirit had grown wise in his years in prison, and he recognized that his country needed to heal through reconciliation between white South Africans and black South Africans. He declared that "I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony, and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for, and to see realized." Mandela not only hoped for this ideal but he actively pursued sometimes difficult strategies to bring this ideal into reality.

Thus Mandela engages with Francois Pienaar, the captain of the Springbok rugby team; played by Matt Damon, Pienaar also grows wiser as he struggles to cooperate with Mandela and to capture the 1995 Rugby World Cup.

Mandela believed that uniting black and white South Africans through a common, nonthreatening goal would move his reconciliation agenda forward. But convincing both the black and the white citizens to jointly support a struggling rugby team was not an easy task. The movie captures the personal and political gambles of the two main characters, each of whom has to deal with reluctant team members and face many difficulties and challenges as a new South Africa is taking shape. **The final victory for them is not just a rugby championship, but a new sense of the possibility of unity across race and class.**

Catholic Social Teaching Connections:

The Life and Dignity of the Human Person:

- Racism and hatred on both sides of the divide in South Africa is shown to challenge and undermine human dignity and human rights.
- The human dignity of the two main characters is challenged in various ways; they both realize, in their own unique journeys, that they must keep sight of their own dignity if they are to help others.

Structural Sin:

- The film *Invictus* illustrates some of the legacies of structural and systemic injustice in South Africa.

Rights and Responsibilities:

- Mandela challenges all the people of South Africa to respect each others' rights and to take on their joint responsibilities in nation building.

Solidarity:

- The film demonstrates the often difficult path to solidarity, and the emotional as well as political power solidarity can have.

The Common Good:

- The movie demonstrates Mandela's belief that both the white and black communities must work together if the common good is to be attained, a good necessary in order for the new South Africa to truly move forward.



Supporting *Education for Justice* Resources:

- **Backgrounder on Structural Sin**
<http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/2906>
- **The Principle of the Common Good**
<http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/329>

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Questions for Discussion:

- 1 What legacies of Apartheid does the film *Invictus* reveal, directly and indirectly? Why has race been such a divisive issue in so many countries?
- 2 In a popular song, singer/songwriter Tracy Chapman declares "All you have is your soul." How is that concept related to Nelson Mandela's years of imprisonment and his behavior afterwards?
- 3 What did Nelson Mandela risk by promoting reconciliation between black and white South Africans after he was elected president?
- 4 Why did Mandela take risks to bring all the citizens of South Africa together?
- 5 How is the relationship between Mandela and Pienaar portrayed? Do both characters gain from this relationship?
- 6 Matt Damon's character, Francois Pienaar, took many of his own risks after first meeting Mandela. What were they and what was his motivation?
- 7 What scenes stand out as pivotal to the development of Pienaar as he struggles with the many challenges he faces? What is revealed about Pienaar through these scenes?
- 8 How do different factions in South Africa begin to come together as the movie proceeds?
- 9 What relevance did the icon of the Springbok, a gazelle native to South Africa, have in the movie? Why are such symbols so important to people?
- 11 What was the significance of Mandela wearing the green and gold jersey and matching cap of the Springbok rugby at the end of the film? Why was it so important to his strategy?
- 12 See the poem "Invictus" (in box). How does this poem relate to the movie, and why was it used as the title for the movie?
- 13 The poem talks about an individual facing challenges, and yet the movie is about individuals working together, eventually in solidarity. Is there a contradiction between individualism and the common good? Can one balance the pull toward individual struggle and survival with the call to solidarity? What does the film *Invictus* imply about this question?
- 14 Fifteen years after the events in this film, South Africa faces many problems, including great poverty; centuries of injustices have left their mark on this nation. Is there a value of celebrating the potential of South Africa through a film such as *Invictus* at this later date, with so many challenges remaining for this African nation?
- 15 Discuss if art, such as poetry and film, and sport, such as rugby and soccer (this year's World Cup in soccer is being held in South Africa) can have a role in the ongoing work of justice and peace; use examples in your discussion.

"Forgiveness liberates the soul. It removes fear. That is why it is such a powerful weapon." -Nelson Mandela



Movie Title:

The title of the movie comes from the fact that Mandela had the poem, “Invictus” written on a scrap of paper on his prison cell while he was incarcerated.

Invictus

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

William Ernest Henley



Perhaps his biggest political gamble, in which Mandela expended considerable political capital, was to throw his personal weight against the move to scrap the Springbok as the emblem of South African rugby. Perhaps only Nelson Mandela could have preserved this symbol, loved by white rugby supporters and loathed by the ANC. That he also turned up for the final wearing the green and gold jersey and matching cap of the Springboks, was a display of political courage that is difficult to appreciate outside this beloved but bedevilled country.

Mandela’s gamble paid off, at least in the short term. There’s little doubt that the Springboks, who had only recently returned to the international rugby scene, were outclassed underdogs whose game was raised by the ‘Madiba magic’. So South Africa won the Rugby World Cup and there was a moment of glory that was shared across the racial divides. There’s a touch of mawkishness about how this is portrayed in the movie, but in my own memory, that’s actually how it was – rather awkward, sometimes a little corny, but underlaid by a genuine desire to reach out to the other.

Whether the 1995 Rugby World Cup had any long-term effects will have to be judged by history. But as John Carlin (on whose book *Playing the Enemy* the film is based) points out in a recent article in the local newspapers, after fifteen years South Africa has not fallen apart, people generally treat each other with respect, and there are certainly more deeply divided places in the world.

This film (which takes its title from a poem by William Ernest Henley that Mandela used to read on Robben Island in his darker hours) appeals to us today because it portrays a quality of magnanimous leadership, which the last decade has somewhat lacked. The stories one hears from those who have actually met the man match the portrait painted in the movie, and thus it provides, in a popular genre, an authentic glimpse into the personality of the first president of a democratic South Africa.