

THE GODFATHER

Directed by Francis Ford Coppola

Produced by Albert S. Ruddy

Distributed by Paramount Pictures

Released in 1972

If Amerigo Bonasera believes in America, then Don Corleone must not. This undertaker became wealthy in a legitimate business, raised his daughter in the American fashion, and entrusted her attackers' fate to the criminal justice system. The Don scolds him, saying, in effect, *You should have known better—but you were too concerned about maintaining your status in society to consort with the likes of me. Remember, Bonasera: We're still the outsiders, and we must do what is necessary to preserve and protect our families. There is no higher law.*

In *The Godfather*, the burden of Family weighs heavy. Italians emigrating to America had little understanding of this foreign culture. They brought nothing but their kinfolk. In time these new arrivals adapted to society, but some, even with their great monies, found Americanization to be one luxury they could never afford. These few, Sicilians for whom the obligations of family necessitate the greatest of sacrifices, lived on the very fringe of society. Such families were governments unto themselves, wielding powers in stark contradistinction to those of legislatures and city halls. Having started down that treacherous path, to stray from organized crime would be perilous. As represented in *The Godfather*, the police and the judges want their cut of the action, and rival families constantly probe for weaknesses that, once found, are ruthlessly exploited. Just surviving requires an equal measure of ruthlessness. Most Mafiosi probably didn't value family as much as they valued themselves. Vito Corleone is something of a gangland saint. But even he can fight hard when tested. He's one ruthless grandpa.

Crime begets crime. And before long, malfeasance covers misdeed, sin covers sin, and guilt and death constrict the conscience. Here Michael finds himself trapped.

His father had steadfastly resisted drug trafficking; ambitious Michael takes such delusions of propriety to their logical extreme. He resolves to make the whole Corleone cartel legitimate. (He may have this notion because, for so many years he, himself, was legitimate, a decorated war hero and Ivy Leaguer. He figures a little family business won't turn him into a criminal.) Nothing spells legitimacy like V-E-G-A-S, so Michael begins shifting operations west. But Moe Green won't sell and the other families want Michael dead. Now what? Since it's purely in self-defense, Michael opts for a killing spree, eliminating his would-be assassins and the stubborn Moe Green. And as the cherry on top he has his brother-in-law, Carlo the repellant poseur, who conspired to kill Sonny, garroted. But for all Michael does to make the family more respectable, it only becomes more corrupt. With his father's incapacitation, this youngest son is thrown into the quicksand. He never sinks, but never finds his way out. Vito didn't want Michael to get involved—that boy was going to be Senator Corleone/Governor Corleone, not a crime lord. But Michael has to get involved if Vito will survive. Hence a love for family perpetuates the criminal heritage. And though Michael will never get there, with his

constant bodyguards and power over life and death, he can feel more like the president than the president himself.

Let's return to the ill-fated Carlo for a moment. Bitter in his rejection, Carlo set Sonny up. With Michael in Sonny's place as the new don, Carlo's fortunes start to improve, and Vito's edict forbidding any involvement of Carlo in the family business seems long forgotten. But Michael turns the tables on his brother-in-law, elicits a confession, and lets Clemenza practice his strangulation technique. (Michael remembers that a godfather takes a parent's place upon death, but forgets that he's not supposed to accelerate the process.) So now Connie hates Michael and Kay loses her last vestige of innocence. It makes for compelling cinema, but the whole sordid affair could have been put to rest before it started. If Vito doesn't trust Carlo enough to be part of the family business, would he allow *any* son-in-law to be involved? Would anybody make the cut? What's more important—his daughter's life or the business? Vito's behavior seems to indicate a preference for the latter, because he obviously has higher standards for business partners than for sons-in-law. If he doesn't trust Carlo enough for the business, perhaps he shouldn't have blessed their marriage. The family and the business are practically synonymous. Vito should have seen there was going to be trouble.

In the same way, Kay has to realize she is marrying The Family, and that Michael is not going to change. He will never put her first.

But Michael does a lot better job of compartmentalizing his life than Sonny does. Sonny constantly stalks about the house making threats and complaining. His bravado is interminable. In one of the film's best scenes, Sonny discusses their Harlem operations at the dinner table. Connie observes that their father would never talk about such things with the women and kids around. Carlo, sitting beside her, tells his wife to shut up. Sonny has words for Carlo, and Mama Corleone says, "Don't interfere." After a pause, Carlo mentions that he could be doing a lot more, and Sonny quiets him, saying that business is not discussed at the table. Thus, the generational divide between Vito and his ilk, the problems of Carlo and Connie, the schism between Carlo and Sonny, and the gray area between family and business are gracefully noted in a minute of dialogue.

This scene also enriches our understanding of the women of *The Godfather*. First up is Mama Corleone, who counsels Sonny to not get involved in another couple's squabbles. If Sonny had heeded this advice, he wouldn't have been shot on the causeway. However, she's implicitly supporting the idea that women should not speak up, and that a verbally abusive husband isn't necessarily bad. Sonny's wife, Sandra Corleone, also sits at the table, withdrawing into oblivion. Throughout her marriage she fears Mob retribution, and bristles at Sonny's affair with pleasantly-plump Lucy Mancini. And that's another woman who does nothing for the story; Lucy's happy enough with her role as a glorified whore. Clemenza's wife and Appolonia are also given short shrift. It's a man's world we're seeing. And so it's a man's movie, about men. Just as the film has a sheen of nostalgia for the good-old gangsterism of yore, so the women are viewed through a broken kaleidoscope.

But in at least one instance the paradigm of clouded vision is ruthlessly negated. Sicily seems golden and idyllic. We long for Michael to leave the shadows and destruction of America. We long for him to suck the marrow out of life with fair Appolonia. Sicily seems like paradise, but it's the fountainhead of death. Everything in the movie started there.

To the Corleone men, the family is all-consuming. Marriage is good for two things—children and adultery. And what does Kay make of all this? She is the outsider looking in, and through her eyes we are welcomed into this unhappy clan. She has a vague idea of what her husband does, but keeps such thoughts to herself and behaves dutifully, producing a strapping male heir. But then comes the baptism. She crosses the line by asking what happened to Carlo. Michael doesn't like questions about his business, but this is also a question about family. Who could blame her for at least being curious (if not downright suspicious)? Michael, taking his time to answer the simple yes/no question, decides on 'no.' Probably only because she couldn't bear the thought of what a 'yes' would entail, Kay smiles with relief and retreats to the bottle. But even as family and business intertwine with the murder of Carlo, now family and business are again delineated as separate interests: The door is shut on Kay.

She's more a slave than a wife, and though Michael takes pains to distinguish family from business, the movie's final image achingly conveys the truth Kay is loathe to recognize. Corleone men pay little mind to the nuclear family, and give everything they've got to the extended family. And soon the extended family is so distended by hoods, thugs, and hangers-on, you forget who's a Corleone and who isn't. The priorities of Vito's sons are backwards, and that's the real cause of their destruction. They should focus on their wives and their kids before their kin and their killings. Vito knew that a real man spent time with his family. But Vito was too busy with empire building to *instruct* his sons. He just played and talked, and threw their futures away. Vito's folly is apparent in his progeny. Of them, Michael is his greatest pride, and his greatest failure.

There *is* a higher law, the law of the Church. These Corleones lose themselves in its rituals and traditions, but their veins still course with ice water. All they have for God is contempt. And so contempt is all they feel for themselves.

This crooked business of extortion, rackets, and death, perversely designed to preserve the family, will actually destroy it.