

The Pope's Toilet

El baño del Papa

Cert 15 Uruguay/Brazil/France/
Spain 98 mins

Credits

Directors	Enrique Fernández César Charlone
Screenplay	Enrique Fernández César Charlone
Cinematography	César Charlone
Editor	Gustavo Giani
Art Director	Inés Olmedo

Cast

Beto	César Troncoso
Carmen	Virginia Méndez
Silvia	Virginia Ruiz
Valvulina	Mario Silva
Nacente	José Arce
Tica	Henry de León
Luna	Alex Silva
Capt Alvarez	Baltasar Burgos
Maleyo	Nelson Lance

Synopsis

Melo, Uruguay, 1988. Beto and his friends scrape a living by smuggling goods across the Brazilian border to and from nearby Acegua, risking confrontation with either customs men Alvarez and Luna, or mobile patrolman Meleyo.

There is much excitement in Melo when it is announced that Pope John Paul II will visit the town as part of a tour of Latin America. The local media predicts a crowd of between 30,000 and 200,000 wealthy Brazilians. Beto's friends and neighbours plan to set up catering stalls and cash in on the expected bonanza. Beto wants to earn enough to buy a motorbike, and decides to open a public toilet and charge visitors for its use. He begins building it in his front yard, and trains his wife Carmen and daughter Silvia in its operation.

Abridged from Sight & Sound, August 2008



Reviews

A harsh admonishment of organised religion is wrapped up in one of the sweetest films you're likely to see this year in the unfortunately (but appropriately) titled *El Baño del Papa (The Pope's Toilet)*. Dazzlingly directed by Fernando Meirelles's regular DoP César Charlone alongside first-timer Enrique Fernández, this charming and colourful work documents the wavering fortunes of a deprived Uruguayan family at the announcement of a 1988 visit by the Holy Father to their poverty-stricken village of Melo. Scraping together a meagre existence by smuggling contraband on a push-bike from a Brazilian border town, family patriarch Beto (César Troncoso) – with thinking-cap firmly in place – decides to cash in on the potential flurry of pious activity by building a first-class latrine into which the congregants can pay to relieve themselves.

As the on-screen hysteria mounts, so do our hopes that Beto's hare-brained scheme will come to fruition. As we're rooting for this lovable fool, we begin to realise that this man is not just placing his family's future in needless jeopardy, but is being forced into doing so by years of abject poverty (which the Church seems blind to) and the desire to offer his daughter a better life. There are some rough edges, notably a hastily sketched sub-plot involving Beto's dealings with a bullying customs officer, but these are quibbles in what is overall an emotionally rich and tender film, beautifully played, with heart and head in massive abundance.

David Jenkins Time Out London 31 July 2008

El Baño del Papa is a realistic peasant comedy in the neorealist manner that translates as *The Pope's Toilet*. This title may have some politico-scatological meaning suggestive of the wretched of the earth being shat upon from a great height by the rich, powerful and patronising. Specifically, however, it refers to the ambition of a small-time smuggler in Melo, an impoverished town in northern Uruguay, who plans to strike it rich by building a lavatory for the use of the thousands of Brazilians expected to cross the border when the Pope makes a brief visit in 1988.

Everyone else in Melo is going into debt to set up food stalls to exploit this expected bonanza and the hopes that unite them and the greed that divides them are well observed. The dreaming hero's wife and daughter, both stronger and more realistic than he is, reluctantly co-operate with his scheme and we know from the start that no one will get richer and few will get wiser. Newsreel of the papal stop-over is cleverly worked into an enjoyable, honest film. Like the breeze-block privy of the title, it's a ramshackle, handmade construction rather than the proverbial brick shithouse of my northern childhood.

Philip French The Observer 3 August 2008