

Local News

No local furor over comedy cancelled in Chicago protest

By Lee Strong

A crotchety old Irish pastor, a newly ordained priest and a sharp-tongued housekeeper inhabit the rectory of St. Jude's Parish, circa 1951. The relationships of the three — and their interactions with the varied and sometimes eccentric parishioners — form the basis for the British situation comedy "Bless Me Father."

The show has been broadcast on 48 public television stations across the country, and is currently being shown Saturdays at 10 p.m. on WXXI-TV21 in Rochester. In addition, segments of the show have been incorporated into a videotape the Catholic Church in Scotland is now using to attract vocations to the priesthood.

As of February 5, however, the show can no longer be seen in Chicago. Following protests from two Catholic groups — the Catholic Action League and the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights — Chicago's public television station, WTTW, cancelled the show after airing only four episodes.

"It's a replay of white Amos and Andyism — well-written, well-acted, but it pokes fun at a segment of the population in a way that's demeaning and offensive," explained Eric Stephen Bower, executive director of the Chicago chapter of the CLRCR.

According to Bower, the show "panders to an anti-Irish, anti-Catholic viewpoint." The pastor of the parish, Father Duddleswell, is depicted as "tight-fisted, money-grubbing, even dishonest," he noted, adding that the housekeeper refers to the priest as "Shylock Holmes."

Bower also said that the show uses "sacraments and sacramentals as props for gags in insensitive ways." As evidence of these claims,

he cited incidents from two episodes. In the first, the pastor baptizes a wealthy woman's pet bird in hopes of obtaining a donation from her. In the second, when a new public address system is installed in the church, Father Duddleswell inadvertently takes the wireless transmitter into the confessional and broadcasts a penitent's confession throughout the church.

"The sacraments are not fair game to use for gags," Bower remarked.

In addition, he claimed that the show conveys a subtle, but offensive, message. "The one message that comes out clear is that we have an ignorant and superstitious laity that will simply follow the clergy — many of whom seem to think it's all a joke."

Andy Yocum, WTTW's director of corporate communication, said the station decided to cancel the show after reviewing the objections voiced by the two groups. "We were being told by people we considered to be sincere and thoughtful Roman Catholics that the show was hurting them," Yocum explained. "Enough people contacted us that we decided to take (the show) off rather than go on hurting people."

Yocum noted that if the show had been a documentary or had provided a critical public service, the station would have considered keeping it on. But because it was a relatively unimportant entertainment series, the station's managers decided to cancel it.

WTTW had worked with CLRCR before in a similar situation, Yocum said. In 1986, the station began to receive complaints from Catholics about another British comedy show, "Dave Allen at Large." At the station's request, the group reviewed the show and compiled a

30-minute videotape of objectionable segments. The station edited these and similar segments from the program's subsequent broadcasts.

The station again contacted CLRCR after receiving complaints about "Bless Me Father." While the group was reviewing the show, the Catholic Action League began a separate action to protest the show through a boycott of the station's fund-raising drive.

Richard Freeman, president of the Catholic Action League, said his group became involved after several league members contacted him to complain about the program. He viewed the show and felt the humor "crossed way over the line of good taste. It seemed to be a lot more than just good-natured kidding."

According to Freeman, the league will send a press release to Catholic newspapers across the country describing its successful effort to get the program taken off the air. In addition, he plans to encourage other chapters of the league — which he claims has 40,000 members — to mount similar campaigns wherever "Bless Me Father" is shown. "We'll give others inspiration and more ammunition," he remarked.

Elizabeth Teall, director of promotion and public relations for Rochester's WXXI, was surprised to learn of the protests and of the Chicago cancellation. According to Teall, the show — which was originally broadcast in Rochester in 1984 — was brought back in the fall of 1987 by popular demand. "We got a lot of notes from viewers thanking us for bringing it back," she said.

Teall was not aware of any complaints about the program, but noted that Nielsen ratings taken in November indicated that 16,000 people watched the show — making it one of the

more popular programs broadcast on WXXI.

One of those regular viewers is Father Paul J. Cuddy, who enjoys "Bless Me Father" so much that he has even recommended it in his column in this newspaper.

Like Teall, Father Cuddy was surprised to hear about the protests. "(The program) presents the Church lovingly," he said. "I don't see why they made such a fuss. Any Catholic I've talked to about the show has enjoyed it."


Father Cuddy noted that the man who wrote the series — Peter De Rosa — is a former priest who based the show and a series of books on his own experiences as a curate in the early 1950s. In fact, the young priest's name, Father Neil Boyd, was the pen name De Rosa used in writing the books.

Father Cuddy did not agree that the show was anti-Catholic or anti-Irish, nor did he find the characterization of Father Duddleswell offensive. The pastor, he said, is "a man of strong faith and wisdom — he had the wisdom of the world."

The only episode Father Cuddy found at all objectionable was the one involving the confessional. "That I didn't like," he acknowledged. "When you come to confession, you must tread very lightly." However, he said the episode was more "indiscrete" than sacrilegious.

When told of the popularity of the show in Rochester, Freeman responded sharply. "You could get excellent ratings if you had a public execution," he said. The fact that some Catholics enjoy the show is "symptomatic of the state the Church is in," he remarked.

"(Catholics) have become desensitized," Freeman explained, adding, "The revolution to resensitize is beginning here in Chicago."



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No two people react in exactly the same way to the death of a loved one! Some people do well by plunging into old routines or setting up new ones. Others need time to adjust to life without the deceased. They need time to express feelings, to learn new ways of doing things and to put affairs in order. The critical matter is that the grieving person be aware of and willing to deal with the changes death has created. Activity solely for the purpose of escaping feelings and running from the pain will not work. On the other hand inactivity can further depression. The newly bereaved should take time to deal with feelings and then begin the tasks necessary to make life meaningful.

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