

Retirement

Catholic comic continues quest for chuckles

By Tony Staley
Catholic News Service

GREEN BAY, Wis. — For Bob Newhart, being funny includes meeting an ethical standard that years of Catholic education and upbringing instilled in him.

It means "being clean" when it would be far easier to get the quick laugh from off-color material or by attacking others.

"It's hard, but more rewarding to work clean," Newhart said. "I'm glad I did."

He recalled how once during his 1970s "Bob Newhart Show," his TV wife, Emily, was to say that she and Bob had lived together before marriage. Newhart rejected the line.

"That would be saying that's OK and I don't want to be put in that position of saying that it's OK," he said.

Newhart, in an interview with *The Compass*, Green Bay's diocesan newspaper, said that with "The Bob Newhart Show" and his 1980s sitcom "Newhart," he

resisted pressures to break down society's rules.

"I think in both shows there was an underlying ethic that wasn't just shared by me, but by the other people in the cast. We felt that we had a responsibility. We were influencing people. When you're on TV, you're a role model, and with that comes a certain responsibility," he said.

The Chicago native graduated from St. Ignatius High School and Loyola University there. He credits the Jesuits with "the somewhat distorted way I have of looking at life. You could say I feel somewhat indebted to them."

He has incorporated some Catholic experiences into his act.

"I do have a bit on what it was like growing up Catholic, going to confession, learning the commandments," Newhart said.

"I used to listen to my Jewish comedian friends talk about what it was like being Jewish and decided maybe I should talk about what it's like being Catholic. It's gone over well, not just among Catholics, but among non-Catholics, too."

While he and his wife often attend St. Paul Church near their Hollywood home, like many Catholics they "float" around to different parish churches.

"You can get turned off by a certain parish and then start going somewhere else," he said.

"We were going to one church

where the pastor preached fire and brimstone. We were uncomfortable with that, so we went to a different parish where we felt more comfortable. I talked to the pastor, and he said that was common."

How did Newhart, whose degree from Loyola was in accounting, become a stand-up comic?

"First of all, you're presuming that I was a good accountant," he said with a laugh. "I was not particularly good at accounting, nor did I enjoy it. But there is a certain logic to both accounting and comedy. Maybe in ways the two were somewhat complementary. I was an accountant for only 2½ years."

He still does 30-40 shows a year. In between, he plays golf and gets together with friends.

"I'm just beginning to learn to slow down," he said. "There comes a time when you say, 'What are you trying to prove?' and start kicking back."

While the 66-year-old comic says he can't imagine performing into his 90s like the late George Burns, "I can't imagine not performing. Maybe I won't do as much, but aside from a physical disability, I can't imagine not doing comedy."

He's also about to become a grandfather for the first time.

"There might be some material there," he said. "All I ever hear is how great it is to be a grandfather. I'm about to find out."

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