

CONTINUED...

Sacred

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A controversial pilot

The pilot that aired outlined the daily struggles of its central character, Father Ray, pastor of an inner-city parish also staffed by two other priests, one younger and one older than Father Ray; a woman religious who wants God to be called "Mother" as well as "Father"; and various lay people.

The first episode depicted Father Ray as tempted to leave his vocation by lust, doubts about the existence of God and conflicts with church authority.

For example, Father Ray considered, then rejected, reigniting a love affair with an old flame who had married.

However, the priest declared at Sunday Mass a "moratorium" on the confession of "sins of the flesh" in his parish — abortion, homosexuality, promiscuity and contraception.

"I was not ordained to be a sexual traffic cop," he said.

His declaration was rooted in his discovery that a penitent had taped his counsel to her — when she confessed she was thinking of having an abortion — and then passed that tape on to his bishop. The tape discloses that Father Ray didn't explicitly tell the woman the church condemns abortion, but instead, implied that she should follow her own conscience in deciding the matter.

The show notes that the bishop turned off the tape as soon as he realized it was made in a confessional. However, a diocesan official warns Father Ray that the bishop "heard enough" of the tape to state that the pastor is endangering his career by soft-pedaling church teaching on sex.

Father Coiro said he found this particular aspect of the pilot most objectionable.

"No bishop receiving a taped confession would consider it in the first place,"



he said.

That point was echoed by Henry Herx, director of the U.S. Catholic Conference's Office for Film and Broadcasting, in a phone interview from his Washington, D.C., office.

"Basically, the clearest problem with the show is the taped confession, which gives the impression that the seal of confession is quite porous," Herx said.

Herx did say the show portray priests as human beings, and he called the show a "mixed blessing." But he added that viewers should watch with "prudence."

In addition to showing Father Ray's own conflicts with the church, the premiere of "Nothing Sacred" also portrayed him battling local "yuppie scum" (as the priest describes them) who despise his ministry to the neighborhood poor. A zoning board, over the opposition of the urban professionals, approves Father Ray's debt-ridden soup kitchen.

The opposition strikes

Much of the opposition to the show has been voiced by the New York City-based Catholic League for Religious and Civil

Rights, a national lay organization devoted to defending the church against anti-Catholicism. The league has released several statements against the show since it became aware it was being produced.

"This ... show is nothing more than a political statement against the Catholic Church," the league said in the September edition of its monthly newsletter *Catalyst*. "The goal is to put a positive spin on Catholic priests who prefer Hollywood's libertine vision of sexuality to the moral teachings of the Church."

According to Edward Madson, a league official, the league has also organized a petition drive that has collected 500,000 signatures asking Michael Eisner, chairman of Disney, which owns ABC, to pull the show. The league has also pointed out that Disney owns Miramax, which produced the controversial film "Priest," a few years back that was also accused of unfairly portraying the church.

"The last time Disney portrayed the Catholic clergy was in its Miramax production 'Priest' and now it appears that it is picking up where it left off by providing viewers with another sick look at priests," the league stated in *Catalyst*.

In Rochester, Mike Macaluso, vice president of the Western N.Y. Chapter of Catholics United for the Faith, a lay organization, said all 2,500 families and individuals on his chapter's mailing list were sent copies of the league's petition.

On Sept. 19, the Catholic League issued a press release detailing its next course of action against advertisers.

"Twenty-seven organizations, representing millions of Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims, have pledged to boycott (22) sponsors of 'Nothing Sacred,'" the release read. It listed the Jewish Action Alliance and the Muslim Coalition/Peace Press Association among the league's allies.

The league's release stated the organization would particularly target Glaxo Wellcome, maker of the medicine Zantac 75; Unilever U.S., makers of Wisk and Surf detergents; and Sears, all of which "have recently been rated by the American Family Association as among the top five sponsors of sex, violence and profanity on TV ..."

Mixed reviews

Not every Catholic who watched the "Nothing Sacred" pilot agreed with the Catholic League's view that the show is beyond redemption. In fact, the show received a glowing review in the Sept. 13 edition of *America* magazine, a Jesuit publication. Reviewer James Martin urged TV viewers to disregard criticisms of the show.

"(J)udging by the pilot episode, 'Nothing Sacred' looks like the best television series ever produced about the rich and complicated lives of American Catholics," Martin wrote.

At the *Courier's* request, Loy arranged a viewing of the pilot episode at WOKR prior to the Sept. 18 debut. Of several people the *Courier* invited, four were able to attend: Father Robert Ring, diocesan director of the Department of Priest Personnel; Father Kevin McKenna, diocesan chancellor; Mary Ellen FitzGibbons, diocesan media center librarian; and Art Benvenega, a parishioner at St. Bridget/St. Joseph

Church in East Bloomfield.

Benvenega had already circulated the Catholic League's petition against the show in his parish. It garnered about 60 signatures, according to Father John J. Philipps, pastor, who'd given his permission for the drive.

After the screening, the group gave both written and verbal comments about the show.

Father Ring, who voiced the greatest praise for the show in his written comments, stated it "deals effectively with multiple complex themes."

In the group discussion, he added that he thought "Nothing Sacred" suffered from some technical inaccuracies. But he said that it was accurate in its portrayal of Catholics obsessed with sexual sin to the exclusion of such other sins as stealing.

"That's all you hear in the confessional," he said of sexual sins. He added that "Nothing Sacred" may spark some interest in the church among younger people disenchanted with Catholicism.

"I could see somebody watching it and wanting to be a priest," he said.

Father McKenna was far less enamored of "Nothing Sacred," and he echoed Father Coiro's comments when he wrote that the show "seemed to create caricatures of characters." He added that the show evidenced a "lack of any spiritual dimension, except pejoratively or as a throw-away."

On the positive side, Father McKenna noted that the show did try to deal with such contemporary issues as the use of gender-inclusive language in liturgies. He added that a scene of Father Ray anointing a teenager hurt in a car accident was "powerful," but that, overall, the series' credibility could be hurt by its lack of attention to technical accuracy.

"If (viewers) want to see some insights in what the church is about today, I'm not sure they're going to be any farther ahead watching it," Father McKenna said of the show.

FitzGibbons praised the show for dealing with contemporary issues in her written comments, and noted that the show stressed that "the sacramental life of the church was important."

Benvenega wrote that the show was "ordinary," and that the priest seemed inauthentic. However, he added that the show was not as bad as the Catholic League had led him to believe.

"I don't think this is going to hurt the church," Benvenega said. "I expected something with much more controversy."

Nonetheless, Benvenega said he still supported the Catholic League's petition drive against "Nothing Sacred," if only to let Hollywood know it's being watched for possible anti-Catholic productions.

"This could be a vehicle to prevent other (shows) from coming that are more elaborate, more dangerous," he said of the league's petition.

Regardless of one's viewpoint, FitzGibbons and Father Ring may have summed up best what "Nothing Sacred" means for both Catholics and people in Hollywood who seek to portray their lives.

"(Nothing Sacred) is certainly not 'Going My Way,'" Father Ring said, recalling the sentimental 1944 Bing Crosby film.

"But this isn't 'Going My Way' time," FitzGibbons added.

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Special examines priests

ABC-TV has scheduled a show about priests that isn't likely to inspire potential boycotts of its advertiser by disgruntled Catholics.

On Sunday, Oct. 12, at 12:30 p.m., WOKR-TV Channel 13 in Rochester, will broadcast "Answering God's Call: The Experience of Priesthood."

The one-hour documentary focuses on Father Patrick Smith, an enthusiastic African-American pastor working in rural southern Maryland, and Father

Mitch Rozanski, a priest who runs two parishes in downtown Baltimore.

"Answering God's Call" was produced by the U.S. Catholic Conference as part of the Interfaith Broadcast Commission's "Visions and Values" series. In addition to the USCC, members of the commission include the National Council of Churches, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the Southern Baptist Media Technology Group.