

Film explores the 'real' King

David DiCerto/CNS

NEW YORK — The final five years in the life of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. are explored in "Citizen King," a documentary by Orlando Bagwell airing Monday, Jan. 19, 9-11 p.m. EST on PBS.

As part of the series "The American Experience," the first hour of the program weaves personal recollections and eyewitness accounts to create an intimate portrait of one of the most public figures of the 20th century.

What distinguishes Bagwell's documentary from the plethora of other similarly themed programs is that it paints Rev. King as a religious leader rather than a political activist. Early on, William Gray encapsulates the show's spiritual thesis by stating bluntly, "In order to understand Martin Luther King you must start with the fact that he was a minister. You try to take him as a civil rights leader or a political leader, you will miss the real King."

The program proceeds to examine Rev. King's understanding of suffering as a fundamentally creative and redemptive force — an invitation to follow Christ by taking up the cross.

Framing his life in this spiritual context, the show contends that Rev. King's involvement in the civil rights movement led him inexorably to Birmingham, Ala., where he was arrested on Good Friday in 1963 for protesting the city's segregated eateries. Seen by the filmmaker as one of the defining moments in Rev. King's ministry, his protest and consequential imprisonment take on transcendental dimensions in the



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The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. is pictured in an undated file photo.

eyes of those who knew him best. According to those interviewed, Rev. King was resigned to the fact that his actions would result in being jailed — a fate he neither ran to nor fled from, but one which he embraced as the cost of remaining true to his calling.

Bagwell constructs a picture of Rev. King as a Christ-like suffering servant, willing to accept the bitter cup offered him by God. Like another "King," he would not be dissuaded from his appointed task, despite protestations from those closest to him. As interviewed author David Halberstam explains: "He always understood that this was not a course to be charted. It had been charted for him. But it wasn't what he sought and he would do it."

Rev. King's humanity comes across most clearly in his response to death, especially in his grieving for four little girls killed in the bombing of a Birmingham Baptist church in 1963. He felt partially responsible for their deaths since the targeted church had been one of his bases of

operations and feared that a growing — though minority — criticism of his boat-rocking among African-Americans in the region would place accountability at his feet. He was also greatly shaken by the assassination of John F. Kennedy, which, according to one close confidant, drove home the sobering realization, "(if) they take out a president, they can take out Martin."

As a historical aside, the program offers some notes of interest, including a taped phone conversation between Rev. King and President Lyndon Johnson, as well as a colleague's reminiscences of some last-minute tweaking of Rev. King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

While many other productions have chronicled Rev. King's central role in the history of the civil rights movement, what makes "Citizen King" so engaging is that it pulls back the curtain of his larger-than-life persona in order to allow glimpses at the flesh-and-blood man behind the myth. Far from disrupting his rightful place of honor among the pantheon of true American heroes, by shedding light on his private fears and apprehensions the public courage exhibited in his protesting injustice is magnified all the more.

While "Citizen King" contains some ugly racist images, the overall tenor of the program is educational, inspiring and spiritually edifying, making it suitable for all but the youngest viewers.

DiCerto is on the staff of the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

'Monk' back for 7 episodes

Gerri Pare/CNS

NEW YORK — Monk, the phobia-filled detective, is back for another seven episodes, one of which airs Friday, Jan. 23, 10-11 p.m. EST on the USA cable channel.

The series has gained a loyal following thanks in large part to Tony Shalhoub's endearing and subtly comic portrayal of an exasperating former San Francisco police detective. Monk is undeniably brilliant at solving crimes, but his neurotic cleanliness drives his former boss, Capt. Stottlemeyer (Ted Levine), to near fits of the screaming meemies.

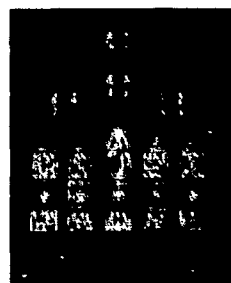
Since the unsolved murder of Monk's wife, he has needed the constant calming presence of nurse Sharona (a saucy Betty Schram) as he consults with the department on homicides.

In this exceptional episode, Sharona is startled to get an urgent phone call from Monk's brother, Ambrose (John Turturro) — since Monk always claimed to be an only child. Ambrose is convinced his next-door neighbor has been murdered by her husband.

Monk is hostile — but realizes his brother's instincts are right and justice must be served. The apparent homicide is daunting, however, as there is no body, and no evident evidence against the husband. Shrewd Monk, however, wonders why the prime suspect is so madly determined to track down three cherry pies his wife made just before her "disappearance."

The audience will learn some of the unfortunate Monk family history that predisposed both sons to develop peculiar social interactions. The mystery itself is also mildly intriguing, although it is the characterizations and the gentle comic touches that keep audiences tuning in.

Pare is director of the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.



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