

# MEDIA BINGE OVER “NOTHING SACRED”; CLINTON ASKED TO REPLY

When the Catholic League first registered its objections to the ABC show, “Nothing Sacred,” it had no idea that it would create such a whirlwind of publicity. Nor did it think that it would be asking President Clinton to make a statement regarding the show at a Rose Garden conference attended by league president William Donohue.

As media interest in the league’s protest grew, and as ABC itself struck back with a press conference responding to the league’s charges, it soon became apparent that this was an issue that wouldn’t die a quick death. Even Michael Eisner, the chairman of Disney (Disney owns ABC) attacked the league without provocation in an interview he did with *Business Week*.

The league was particularly pleased with the strong response from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. Father Gregory Coiro, the Director of Media Relations for the archdiocese, was unequivocal in his criticisms of the show. Father Coiro also defended the league’s position before the media.

Unfortunately, a number of priests reviewed the pilot favorably. Worse, some of the writers for the series are priests. The league, of course, always presses its independence by respectfully disagreeing with these assessments.

It was in late June that the league first learned of the fall show, “Nothing Sacred.” We spotted a piece in *Entertainment Weekly* and were sent copies of advance reviews in various newspapers by our loyal members. *Entertainment Weekly* described the lead character, Father Ray, as an “irreverent priest who questions the existence of God, feels

lust in his heart, and touches people's souls." The *Tampa Tribune* and the *Orange County Register* expressed similar thoughts.

We then tapped into ABC's website to see what they were saying; we also called the network and they faxed us over the promotional material. Here's is how ABC framed its remarks:

"It's tough being a priest in the '90s, just ask Father Ray (Kevin Anderson). In one morning alone, he has nearly been fired for advising a pregnant teenager to follow her own instincts. He has had to turn down a bribe in the confessional, even though he's desperate for money to keep his church afloat. His college flame has just walked back into his life and reignited old passions. And now his mentor is asking him to deliver a sermon proving the existence of God. How should he know if God exists?...he hasn't even read the book yet!"

On July 10, the league issued its first news release on the show, stating, in part, the following: "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."

On July 24, after watching the pilot to the program, William Donohue said that the show was "worse than expected"; here is what he said:

"There are two major objections to 'Nothing Sacred': a) the show promotes the most positive stereotype of Catholics who dissent from Church teachings while fostering the most negative stereotype of those who remain loyal to the Church and b) the show deliberately denigrates the official teachings of the Church by unfavorably contrasting them to the trendy positions of dissenting Catholics.

"The leading priest, Father Ray, comes from a dysfunctional

family, thinks of his vocation as merely a job, admits that he isn't sure of the existence of God, violates his duty as a confessor and rejects the Church's teachings on sexuality. But he loves the homeless, ponders a love affair with an old flame and tells his adversaries to 'go fax yourself.' Quite naturally, those Catholics who accept the teachings of the Magisterium are portrayed as cold-hearted, selfish and tyrannical persons.

"It is amazing to hear Father Ray tell his parishioners that it's time to 'call a moratorium on the sins of the flesh'; he then says that the Church's teachings on homosexuality, promiscuity, abortion and contraception can be ignored because the Bible says little or nothing about them. He boasts that he will no longer be a 'sexual traffic cop' and advises those who want such a priest to go elsewhere.

"This Disney/ABC show is nothing more than a political statement against the Catholic Church. 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. This propaganda is fodder for dissenting Catholics and anti-Catholic bigots alike. We hope that others will join with us in what is only the beginning of our protest.

"Disney/ABC would never put a positive spin on a priest who rejected the Church's teachings on welfare reform, nuclear war, immigration and the death penalty, for to do so would be to undermine their own politics. On the other hand, if they really believe that Father Ray is not offensive, then why not make him a black minister or a Jewish rabbi?"

The league's next step was to ask Michael Eisner to reveal the names of the five priests whom Eisner publicly said reviewed the pilot favorably. The response from Disney Vice President for Corporate Communications, John Dreyer, was to say, "I am sure that you will understand that we do not distribute the names, addresses or phone numbers of people with whom we

consult.”

It is interesting to note that when co-executive producer David Manson and another ABC official were to meet with Father Coiro, they declined the opportunity to do so once they learned that Donohue was going to attend. Manson said, “we are not prepared to meet with him.”

Things came to a head when the White House called to invite Donohue to attend a Rose Garden speech on religious liberty that President Clinton was scheduled to make on August 14. Donohue agreed to go, but he also released a statement to the press announcing his latest strategy.